



# Engaging Our Imagination, Empathy, and Angst: How TV Shapes Community

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I have relatives who have not watched television in over thirty-five years. At times, I envy them. They spend their evenings reading books that nourish their souls, while I am engrossed in the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*, *Girls*, *Mad Men*, or one of the many *Seinfeld* reruns of which I never tire. At other times, especially in conversation or family games, I am aware that their avoidance of TV actually distances them from the rest of us. There is rarely a family gathering when we do not play charades. I drew an easy card a number of years ago—Michael Jackson. I moonwalked across the room and looked eagerly at my TV-avoiding relatives only to see blank stares. At family meals, when we are shooting the breeze and comparing this year's contestants on *American Idol* or when someone refers to a *Seinfeld* episode in our story telling, these relatives are left out. They wouldn't know Kramer if he barged through their front door and raided their refrigerator.

These experiences reflect the degree to which television shapes our relationships today. We gather around the TV for nightly family time; we talk with friends at work about the latest developments on our favorite shows; our discourse is laced with TV references. In these and many other ways, television mediates community.

*Television shows can engage our imagination, empathy, and angst in such a way as to shape our life together. When interpreted theologically, these shows may inspire relationships characterized by koinonia. They may move us beyond our limited circles of friendship into larger communal ties through empathetic, parasocial interaction.*

It provides a point of connection among those who are alike and different, those who are near and far from each other.<sup>1</sup>

As it mediates relationships, television sometimes projects a vision of community that resembles, at least in part, the promise of God's kingdom. Television shows can challenge our notions of otherness and practices of exclusivity by inviting us to encounter those who seem different and separate from us. But TV can also engage the distress and ambiguity that come from living in communities that fall far short (sometimes egregiously so) of God's reign. Considered theologically, these depictions of community may point toward, or witness to, the reality of *koinonia*, our ontological connection to God and one another in Christ, which is characterized by intimacy, integrity, and love.

### IMAGINING A JUST AND PEACEABLE COMMUNITY

For the past forty years, *Sesame Street* has been a staple of American television. The children and grandchildren of baby boomers have been raised with and educated by this television show that, from its inception, sought to "exemplify and create an egalitarian and more tolerant community both on screen and in actuality."<sup>2</sup> The show has depicted an inner-city, predominantly African-American neighborhood marked by justice, equality, and well-being. It has sought to educate young children who live in these settings and consequently lack the economic resources and social capital needed to thrive in society. It also has promoted compassion, tolerance, and care in a pluralistic, multicultural world.

In many ways, *Sesame Street* initially was ahead of its time—anticipating the change in American demographics that would require an entire country to expand its identity from white, middle-class, European, and Christian immigrants to a conglomeration of white, black, Hispanic, and Asian persons who practice a variety of religions in one another's presence. In other ways, *Sesame Street* embodied the ambiguities of its time. As Jennifer Mandel describes, producers quickly became anxious about the role of women in the show and actively sought to "defeminize" it by adding more male actors and relegating women to more traditional gender roles in its early years. This gave rise to criticism from both sides of the culture war over gender. Similarly, those working for equality and justice argued that *Sesame Street* glossed over the intractable problems of racism. It presented a somewhat utopian vision devoid of struggle and thus detached from real life.

From a theological perspective, *Sesame Street* has portrayed certain dimensions of the *koinonia* community. *Koinonia* refers to the multidimensional union and communion that Christians experience with God, one another, and the world through Christ and on account of Christ's reconciling work. *Koinonia* on the hu-

<sup>1</sup>Introductory paragraphs adapted from Theresa F. Latini, "TV as Mediator of Community," *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 25/10 (2010) 19–22.

<sup>2</sup>Jennifer Mandel, "The Production of a Beloved Community: *Sesame Street*'s Answer to America's Inequalities," *The Journal of American Culture* 29/1 (2009) 3–13. I am indebted to Mandel's analysis for the following description of *Sesame Street*.

man-to-human plane looks a lot like the beloved community of *Sesame Street*. In *koinonia*, there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female, black nor white. As we are united to Christ, so we are united to one another. This means that *koinonia* is not manufactured or created on the basis of socialization patterns or affinity groups. We don't get to choose the other to whom we are united, because *koinonia* is God's work. It is created on the basis of God's election of all humanity in Christ. As the letter to the Ephesians so eloquently begins: "[H]e chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph 1:4–6).

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***Koinonia on the human-to-human plane looks a lot like  
the beloved community of Sesame Street***

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As critics of *Sesame Street* point out, this beloved community is not yet realized in human existence. *Koinonia* is an objective reality for humanity in Christ, but sin and suffering remain in this life. We are *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time, justified and sinner). The fullness of our reconciliation with God and one another is an eschatological reality; it is the future for which we hope and pray. It also is the future that breaks into our existence in the here and now. Jesus Christ lives! And so do we. Thus we participate in Jesus' ministry of reconciliation in the world as a natural outflow of our justification. Put another way, our vocation is participation in Christ's *koinonia*-creating ministry of reconciliation through the power of the Spirit, which involves the hard work of witness and solidarity.

**EMPATHIZING OUR WAY TOWARD A DIFFERENTIATED UNITY**

Television ushers us into relationships with both fictitious characters (as in sitcoms and dramas) and personae (as in reality shows and news programs) with whom we interact emotionally. In terms of the former, we anticipate and participate in the weekly unfolding of their lives, setting aside regular time for them as if they were good friends. Well-crafted story lines and cinematography draw us into empathetic relationship with them. Regular viewers gain a sense of the personal histories of these characters. We watch the trajectory of their lives for years at a time. Flashbacks, flash-forwards, and flashes sideways in shows like *Six Feet Under*, *Lost*, and *Mad Men* reveal the complex interaction of these characters' past, present, and potential future experiences.

Media and cultural studies refer to the relationship between the TV viewer and TV characters as a parasocial relation—"a type of intimate, friend-like relationship that occurs between a mediated persona and a viewer."<sup>3</sup> I would add that

<sup>3</sup>Rebecca B. Rubin and Michael P. McHugh, "Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 31/3 (1987) 279–292.

empathy is the dynamic that establishes and maintains these relationships and challenges the “insider vs. outsider” mentality that pervades much of our social existence.

Empathy is an innate capacity and an intentional practice. Studies in neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology demonstrate that the human brain and body are wired for empathetic relationships. We are able to attune to and resonate with others. In attunement, our state of mind is aligned with the state of mind of another person or persons. When we are attuned with others, they “feel felt” and so do we. A sense of emotional and spiritual resonance lasts after an empathetic encounter. This resonance sustains our connection with others even when we are absent from them. They become a part of us, and we become a part of them through participation in their mental, emotional, and spiritual lives.<sup>4</sup>

In watching TV, we frequently attune to and resonate with particular characters and personae. We internalize their life stories. We bond with them in their ups and downs. We laugh at their foibles. We feel amazed by their resilience. We recognize the absurdity of the institutions in which they work. Sometime we rail against the injustice they experience. Why? Because we know what it is like to feel sorrow and joy, to experience unfulfilled longing and hope for the promised future, and to find ourselves living in and unable to change systems that fall short of God’s good intent for humanity. Neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni writes:

Why do we give ourselves over to emotion during the carefully crafted, heart-rending scenes in certain movies? Because mirror neurons in our brains re-create for us the distress we see on the screen. We have empathy for the fictional characters—we know how they are feeling—because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves. And when we watch the movie stars kiss on-screen? Some of the cells firing in our brain are the same ones that fire when we kiss our lovers.<sup>5</sup>

Empathetic interaction is particularly transformative when we encounter characters that represent groups and people whom we identify as enemies. Developing parasocial relationships with these characters humanizes our attitudes toward those whom they represent in the real world. In this way, TV may help us see past our prejudices to recognize the common humanity of those whom we may have categorically judged and rejected.

*Will and Grace* (1996–2005), the first and most successful sitcom with a gay principal character, is frequently cited as an example of this dynamic. One cannot prove a causal relationship between this sitcom and the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in our culture, but a significant portion of regular viewers—60 percent—reported that the show encouraged them to think more positively about gays and lesbians.<sup>6</sup> In other words, emotional engagement with the life story of a gay

<sup>4</sup>Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others* (New York: Picador, 2008, 2009) 4.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg, and Dean E. Hewes, “Can One TV Show Make a Difference? *Will & Grace* and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 51/4 (2006) 15–37.

character on TV fostered increased openness toward viewers' homosexual friends, neighbors, and coworkers. When combined with gay and lesbian TV personalities, such as Ellen Degeneres, it is hard to imagine that there is no correlation between TV watching and shifting attitudes toward gays and lesbians in church and society.

Parasocial relations can contribute to the expansion of communal relations. Our perceptions of insiders and outsiders, those who belong to us and with us and those who don't, can change profoundly as a result of regular, empathetic interaction with TV characters. However, it is also true that empathy toward TV characters is not synonymous with empathy in face-to-face relationships. In fact, in the latter, empathy as an innate capacity is not enough for long-term interpersonal relationships. Empathy, if it is to transform our interpersonal and communal relations, must also become an intentional practice between persons and groups.

In practicing empathy, we place our attention squarely on the particularity of

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the other's experience. As we attune to the other, we stay cognizant of their irreducible uniqueness. We know that we may have similar feelings and needs, but we do not know what it is for this other person to experience these same feelings and needs. We cannot get into the other's skin, because (s)he is simultaneously open and closed to us. When we fail to understand this other, we persist in empathy. For this reason, empathy has been identified as an essential practice in a pluralistic, multicultural world.<sup>7</sup> It enables us to build bridges with others who are different from us without subsuming them into our own experience.

Considered theologically, the capacity for and practice of empathy point toward God's compassion for all creation revealed to us in the incarnation. In life and death, Jesus Christ exemplified compassion. Compassion "was central to his mission. It defined him in the depths of his being....It described a way of being, a lifestyle, if you like, in which he was present for others in such a way that they were made whole."<sup>8</sup> Jesus' compassion knew no bounds and thus negated and transformed social structures based on an insider/outsider mentality. His fellowship with and healing of lepers, demoniacs, women, tax collectors, Samaritans, and religious leaders alike created a new community comprised of sinner-saints who stand on an equal plane before God and one another.

Again, this is not merely a past reality. Jesus Christ lives today in the power of the Spirit through a diverse body of sinner-saints. This body lives from and on the ba-

<sup>7</sup>See Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2009).

<sup>8</sup>Andrew Purves, *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989) 39–40.

sis of God's compassion for all creation. Comprised of those who weep with one another, carry one another's burdens, and pray for one another, this body, the church, is sent into the world as a differentiated unity capable of diverse forms of loving service.

Love is a defining characteristic of the church's identity and mission. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The church fulfills its vocation as it lives in solidarity with the world, adopts a hospitable and generous posture toward the world, and witnesses to the love of God for the world. It exists "only in the most genuine attachment to the world,"<sup>9</sup> speaking God's no to sin and oppression and speaking God's yes to reconciliation. Of course, the church needs to hear this double message as well. Perhaps television shows that support empathetic interaction with those who are marginalized can become one means through which God's Spirit chastens the church and urges it to live more faithfully in light of *koinonia*, both in and beyond its own walls.

#### INVITING US INTO OUR ANGST

Television shows may instigate the transformation of our personal and communal identity by inviting us into the heart of our own angst. When we acknowledge and live in the midst of (or indwell) our most profound personal perplexities and pain, we create space for transformation. New ways of understanding the world and ourselves may emerge as we wrestle with seemingly unanswerable questions and intractable intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts. Paradoxically, possibility may spring from impossibility precisely as we experience the angst of it.<sup>10</sup>

As mentioned above, one of the criticisms leveled at *Sesame Street* was its failure to convey the difficulty and complexity of creating a beloved community. The same criticism could be made of another television series, *The Avengers*. Airing in the 1960s, *The Avengers* presented the first truly feminist character to British and American audiences. Dr. Cathy Gale, an anthropologist, expert in firearms, and judo master, arrived on the television scene (1962–1964 especially) just as June Cleaver was signing off (1963). For female viewers, Gale presented a role model—one who broke free from traditional gender roles (she was neither housewife nor mother) and demonstrated physical, intellectual, and moral strength. Decades later, as part of a research project, women viewers testified to the powerful impact Gale had on their own personal and professional aspirations.<sup>11</sup> Yet the realities of sexism and its impact on the female psyche and entire communities have not dissipated. Glass ceilings still exist in church, government, education, and business.

<sup>9</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962) 776.

<sup>10</sup>Here I am drawing upon James E. Loder's interdisciplinary theory of transformational knowing. See James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).

<sup>11</sup>Robin Redmon Wright and Jennifer A. Sandlin, "Popular Culture, Public Pedagogy and Perspective Transformation: *The Avengers* and Adult Learning in Living Rooms," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 28/4 (July 2009) 533–551.

Gender awareness has not, in and of itself, yielded the kind of mutuality, reciprocity, and freedom that *The Avengers* presented to the public.

In the most recent news, debates rage about gender and sexuality, that is, about women's bodies, birth control, and gay marriage. Along with attempts to stifle women who challenge traditional ecclesial structures (for example, in the Roman Catholic church), this has been diagnosed as a cultural "war on women."<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, a new slate of high-profile television shows—for example, *Girls*, *Mad Men*, and *Game of Thrones*—vividly illustrate these conflicts on both cultural and personal levels. The female characters in these programs bear the cultural realities of sexism in their own bodies and souls. Viewers who connect empathetically with them may participate in a parallel process—a journey into their own angst. In this journey, they may become painfully aware of their own internalized sexism. They may wrestle with their own inner conflicts as they try out life-giving new ways of relating to others.

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*Game of Thrones*, the HBO series based on George R. R. Martin's bestselling books, presents a surprisingly long slate of women who find voice and establish power in their worlds, but not without severe limitation and searing ambiguity. Their diversity demonstrates multiple ways to be a woman in a man's world. There are queens and whores, princesses and poor outcasts, young girls who want to wield swords and mothers who have no choice but to do so. From Brienne, a tall, strong, friendless hand of the king (think: fierce warrior) who declares, "I am no lady!" to Daenerys, a young, orphaned, and exiled princess who declares herself "Mother of Dragons" and future ruler of the realm, these women demonstrate the beauty and poignancy of an indomitable spirit hemmed in by indomitable external forces. Perhaps most vivid is the sexual power wielded by men in their lives—a reality that three generations of consciousness-raising have hardly eliminated in Western culture.

*Game of Thrones* creates some psychological distance from the harsh realities of sexism and exploitation, because it is set in a fantasy world—both like and unlike ours. It gives viewers a bit of breathing room, so to speak, to interact empathetically with female and male characters alike. *Girls*, however, gives viewers (or at least white upper-middle-class viewers) no such space. The lead characters look like us, our sisters, and our daughters—three 20-somethings trying to make their way in work and love. In the first three episodes alone, Hannah, the lead character played by writer Lena Dunham, has trite and dismissive sex, contracts a sexually transmitted disease, and is sexually harassed at work. She tries to procure

<sup>12</sup>See "War on Women," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War\\_on\\_Women](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_on_Women) (accessed May 15, 2012).

kindness and love, physical well-being, and respect (mostly self-respect), but she is entangled (externally and internally) in a set of contradictory messages and expectations that keep her from full realization of these values. This is precisely the kind of inner conundrum we experience in times of social upheaval.

The AMC series *Mad Men* is set in the 1960s and fits the genre of historical fiction. As the show has progressed, civil rights and women's rights have slowly (or not so slowly) influenced character development. The authority and the privilege of white men are questioned again and again. As gender roles shift in the direction of egalitarianism, many of the male characters are flummoxed, disoriented, and even angry. Their existential angst breaks through the surface of their successes in business. In order to maintain some semblance of psychological security and relational stability in a rapidly changing world, they have to reconstruct their personal and professional relationships on more democratic, communicative bases.

In essence, these three television shows do not confront the sinful shortcomings of our social existence by portraying an alternative, hoped-for community. Instead, they invite viewers into the angst of these realities in their own lives through empathetic, parasocial interactions. As such, they may become a transformational impulse in personal and communal identity. From within our own inner conflict, transformation often comes. Jesus Christ encounters us precisely in the midst of these conflicts, smack dab in the middle of the personal sense of anxiety, shame, doubt, and failure that mirrors that of our sociocultural context. His work of transformation in us, with us, against us, and always for us takes the shape of *koinonia*. When we encounter Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit in the midst of our own perplexity and pain, our lives become conformed (again and again) to the intimacy, integrity, and integration (the pattern of *koinonia*) that exist in the very being of God, in God's relationships to us, and our relationships with one another.<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, television shows can engage our imagination, empathy, and angst in such a way as to shape our life together. When interpreted theologically, these shows may inspire relationships characterized by *koinonia*. They may move us beyond our limited circles of friendship into larger communal ties through empathetic, parasocial interaction. Perhaps the Spirit of God uses the richly textured narratives of TV characters as a means of opening our hearts and minds to see real people as God sees them. Poignant awareness of our own complicity and entanglement in dehumanizing processes and structures may then lead us to participate in God's work of transformation and prayerfully wait for the promised fullness of *koinonia*. ☩

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<sup>13</sup>For a more expanded theology of *koinonia*, see Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small-Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).