

PASTOR'S NOTES. A Self-Denying God?

He called the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become My followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for My sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."
(Mark 8:34-35, NRSV)

If you're like me, whenever you read this passage, you shrink back because you realize how unworthy and cowardly you are. But lately I've looked at the passage from another angle. When Jesus says this to His disciples, He is not only issuing a stark challenge, He is highlighting an important part of His ministry. Jesus Himself will take up a cross, Jesus will deny Himself for the benefit of the rest of us. He is not challenging them or us to anything that He is unwilling to do Himself.

Further, Jesus insists not only that this is His way, but it is the way of God the Father as well. Consider these passages:

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on His own, but only what He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves (phileo) the Son and shows Him all that He Himself is doing; and He will show Him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished."
(John 5:19-20, NRSV)

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know Me? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own; but the Father Who dwells in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; but if you do not, then believe Me because of the works themselves."
(John 14:8-11, NRSV)

"As the Father has loved (agape) Me, so I have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. I have said these things to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."
(John 15:9-13, NRSV)

Note that the word for LOVE in the John 5 passage – phileo – means family or brotherly affection, while in John 15 it is the word agape – the love that puts others ahead of ourselves. Jesus calls us to put others lives ahead of our own, but also says that He loves us in this way and it is the same way that the Father loves Him.

I grew up with this idea that God was this stern, unemotional, unchanging Creator, and Jesus was the compassionate one. I remember preachers who said that God wants to punish sin and would condemn us, but Jesus intercedes by taking our punishment. A casual reading of the Old Testament might well lead us to believe that God was just about losing all patience with us.

In the early centuries, many called the idea of *patripassionism* – that the Father suffers just as the Son suffers – a heresy, because they saw God the Father as different than God the Son and believed that the Father could not suffer. But in my reading it appears that the New Testament authors were less concerned about how Jesus was different than God, and more wanted to show that somehow, Jesus is God and is fully God.

Jesus insists that He is the reflection of the Almighty God. So I can't help but think that God Himself is suffering when Jesus suffers. When we remember the passage:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.”
(John 3:16, NRSV)

It might sound like God is sending someone *else* to do His dirty work, but this cannot be the case. This love that Jesus insists is the nature of God cannot make someone else take the fall. Remember that the language of Father and Son was never meant to be an exact description of the relation of Jesus to the Almighty God – it was just the best way we could think of to describe what is to us humans a mystery. If Jesus really is God, then God Himself chooses to put His creation ahead of Himself.

This is a unique claim about God. No other religion has ever insisted that the ultimate force of the universe, the source of all life, is pure agape love – willing to lose its own life in order to fully live it in love with creation. Perhaps what I am saying is nothing more profound than what you might have heard before: that religions are the human quest to reach up for God. Christian faith, however, realizes that this is impossible. We can never reach God on our own, but instead God reaches down to us in Jesus Christ.

For most of the people around us, God (if they believe in a God at all) is either uninterested in human lives, or the accusing voice that reminds us that we are losers. We can get caught up in the unfairness and pain in the world and lose sight of the beauty. If we saw the world as God sees it, we would be overwhelmed by the continual tokens of love from the creator to His creation that are happening every moment. Saint Paul puts it this way:

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...
I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us...*

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:1, 18, 31, 38-39, NRSV)

So my prayer for us all is know this God...

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Rami'.