

Sermon July 4, 2021 The Spirituality of the Cross Part VI The Hiddenness of God (cont'd)

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Suffering is by far and away the toughest subject to handle when we are thinking about God. Some people take the presence of so much suffering in the world as incontrovertible evidence that there is no God. Others, based on the suffering in their own lives, become convinced God has abandoned them, is punishing them, against them, or worse. Matters get confounded even more when Christians take the position that as believers they are no longer subject to the ravages of sin and can rightly expect a life of personal gain, health, and relative ease, despite experience and common sense. We need an authentic, practical theology of suffering sourced and powered by the Word and Spirit.

In the last sermon I showed how for Christians it is not a matter of “if” but “when” we must bear our cross. Another important point here is that we do not decide what crosses we get to bear. We may give up certain foods during Lent. That food restriction may cause discomfort and longing. That is not a true cross. True crosses are given to us by God. Heroic feats of self-control like being exposed to the elements, laying on a bed of nails or walking across hot coals are never crosses that strengthen faith and dependence upon God. We might choose those crosses because we want them. It is our idea. The same can never be said of the true crosses delivered to us by the hand of God. As Dr. Veith points out in his book,

“Rather, bearing our cross has to do precisely with the suffering that we do not choose for ourselves, the trials and difficulties that are imposed on us from the outside, that we have no control over whatsoever.”

Crosses work especially well for one thing: bringing trials. Crosses include any time the events and situations in our lives take us from physical and emotional pleasure to pain and discomfort. For Luther, the most important matter with bearing crosses was to understand them as struggles with God. While going through the physical and/or emotional pain, it’s important to always be asking God, “Why?” Why is this happen to me? What is the purpose of this? Why is this being allowed? What good can come from this? Why? Why? Why?

Jesus asked this very question when he was literally bearing his cross. He cried out to the father, “My God, my God, WHY have you forsaken me?” Right then and there Jesus was experiencing the worse of all crosses one can bear – crosses that cause us to wonder if God has indeed totally abandoned and forsaken us to the forces of evil. Martin Luther believed such crosses were (thankfully) reserved for only the utmost of saintly people.

What do we do when we experience the discomfort and agony of a cross? We are directed squarely back to where God promises he may be found - the Word and Sacraments of God. We hear again God’s promises that he has not and will not abandoned us. There is nothing we have done that has separated us from God’s love. God is still leading our lives according to his purpose and is aware and involved in the details of everyday life. We remember God’s work in our baptism where he claimed us as his own, forgives us all our sins, and granted us the gifts of his Spirit. We receive the Lord’s Supper where we have the promise that God meets us in our crosses with the fruits and blessings of Jesus’ cross.

We walk by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7

We can’t see everything God is doing in the Sacraments. Neither can we see God’s exact footprints and direction in our lives. We have no other option than to just believe God’s promises and reassurances, despite where our feelings and emotions may lead us. That is building on the solid rock of faith. It’s easy too believe in a good and gracious God when things are going our way. To continue believing when the wind is against us in our trials stretches and strengthens our faith and makes it stronger. This is the main purpose of those trials. Our prayer life also takes on a more fervent character. We pray for God’s blessings upon the members of our family. When one of them gets cancer, our prayers grow stronger. When we are the one who receives the diagnosis, our prayers reach right down to the core of our souls. Trials also stretch, strengthen and deepen our life of prayer. God hides himself from view in our daily crosses. When we apprehend him there with the eyes of faith, we are living in the spirituality of the cross. This is the way God intends and insists that we live.

One last thing about all this hiding business before we move on to the next topic. God is hiding from our earthly vision. But he is not the only one who is hidden. God also hides us from plain view.

You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Colossians 3:3-4

Anyone who is at all serious about living the spiritual life cannot help but notice the duality of it all. Our nature from below pulls us toward selfish ways and pleasures. The nature from above pushes us toward self-denial and selfless acts of God's justice and grace. The old nature is fairly easy to spot. The new one is somewhat illusive. Popping out here and there. Then back into hiding. We were born again of water and the spirit. However, not even we know much about the new life God has planted within us. It's like being in a classroom with fifteen preschoolers and trying to figure out what each child is going to be when they grow up. We are the preschoolers. What we are really going to be like when we get to heaven is very much hidden from plain view. What future work and purpose does God have prepared for each of us? We do not know. Again, we walk by faith.

There's one great thing about being hidden away with Christ in God. Nothing can touch us. Our Christian life is safely hidden away from condemnation, and we are outside of the reach of anything that might tear us away from God. We belong to God forever. All of us. It's good for us to remember that when we are around other believers. They might not seem that great, but just like us, their true selves are hidden in God. We may never know how great of saints we have been among, talked too, worshipped with, served with, sat next to at a potluck dinner. We cannot judge by mere appearances. That is the way of the spirituality of the cross. Recognizing that God's greatest works do not shine forth in glory for all to see and admire. His best work is hidden in his son and in Jesus' disciples, God's holy people. Amen.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him.
Amen.

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