

Sunday, June 16, 2024 The Work of Grief and Failure

Today is Fathers' Day. Fathers, and all men, are often expected to be strong, to be protective, to be effective in their work and recognized as successful. God is presented in the Bible as a Heavenly Father who has all of these qualities. We might think that we would need to be successful in order to experience the companionship of Almighty God. And yet it is God's grief at the condition of the human heart, God's sorrow at the reality of human society, and the patience, mercy and faithfulness of God which show God to be truly great.

Genesis 6:5 is a crisp summary. "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." Can any of us dispute this description of the depths of our heart? Genesis 6: 6 continues with God's sorrow at this outcome. "The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain."

This is the same thing that happened when Adam and Eve turned away from trusting him—God called out for their companionship and they hid themselves, full of shame. (Genesis 3:8-10) God had summed up His six days of work this way: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Gen 1:31a) God's enjoyment of His good and beautiful world was short-lived, however. Humans did not trust God's wisdom and generosity and were expelled from the Garden of Eden. (Gen 3:24) We learn the mystery that God's work is good, and also that the world as we know it is not the way that God created it to be.

The Bible reveals the presence of a tempter who hates God and wishes to destroy humans through disobedience to God's goodness. The Bible also makes it clear that evil rises out of our own hearts and welcomes the temptation. We are held responsible for our choices. When we are delighted by trying to get away with something, we are not experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit in Christ. When we pass over into life through God's mercy in Christ, we experience the agony of the struggle between the sin in ourselves and the life of God that we are promised. Paul writes, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." (Romans 7: 15, 18b)

We might certainly expect that in that agonizing struggle, God would shun us until we can overcome evil. However, it is precisely in that struggle that we live and breathe in the presence of God. We know that God is working in us, when we want to obey and follow God, even though we cannot do so by ourselves. And although the Spirit of God is sent to us to teach us and empower us to obey and follow, as long as we are in this world, we are never free from

sorrow and suffering because of sin in ourselves and in others. This is the human condition, struggling to hear and obey God despite the urge to pull away from God.

There is mystery here, for in the Revelation of John (13:8), we even read that the Lamb of God, Christ, was “slain from the creation of the world” in order to write in the Book of Life the names of those who belong to Him. It might seem that sin was part of the created order. But God as revealed in the Bible cannot be, and is not, the creator of evil. That God created free will, despite knowing all the possibilities of the human heart, is one of the “secret things” that “belong to the LORD our God,” not yet revealed to us. (Deut 29:29)

Speaking from traditional views, men are expected to be successful and to lead and to handle by themselves without help, difficulties as they arise. Can we not learn from the Heavenly Father that grief and sorrow are entirely appropriate and necessary in leadership? With the acknowledgement that God’s purposes will always stand true, we can say that things do not go as planned even for God. God created men and women like Him, with free choice, which permitted the possibility of evil, but evil was not His will.

If the world was a disappointment to God Himself, can we not expect disappointment in our own lives and work? Why would we demand what we see as complete success, why would we try to conceal or deny those things that did not go as we planned or wished?

God himself knows neither sin nor folly, and therefore his suffering is not for any wrong in God’s being or thoughts or actions. That makes God’s suffering very different from that of ourselves. Yet, in entering into our hearts and our world, God shares in suffering from evil.

For fathers, for men, and for every person, God Himself knows disappointment and sorrow. God himself saw that things are very different from what He intended originally. God himself finds a way to show mercy and be patient for very long periods of time. God Himself does not alter His purposes when He is not honored or given proper glory. The flood and a new start with Noah’s family did not change the intentions of the human heart. Through long ages, God continues to work out His purposes without faltering although He is full of sorrow.

When in need, we often choose the company of persons who are tempered by grief and disappointment. The patience, maturity and generous heart that come from faith within sorrow are a reflection of the heart of God. The prophecy about the Messiah in Isaiah 53:3 is that the Christ is “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” And this is the aspect of God which I would like to bring to our attention today as a guide for our own lives.