

The Humiliation of God

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Texts: John 19:26-27; Hebrews 10:10

“And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb 10:10).

Two television commercials help us understand the cross.

We are stunned and spellbound at the cross by the spectacle of the suffering of Jesus and by the fact that His suffering was for us. Even so, God has work for us to do at the foot of the cross. The word of Christ to the disciple whom He loved, is also His word to us: “Here is your mother.” And here *is* our mother. *With* our mother and *for* our mother the Church, it is our responsibility to *know* the meaning of the crucifixion and to *announce* that meaning and to *live* that meaning.

This work began on the day of the crucifixion and continues through today: what does reconciliation mean? What language can we use to express what we believe it means? I propose that a good way to understand the meaning of the crucifixion is through three words.

The first word is “Silence!” There’s a funny Allstate good drivers commercial: a young woman and a young man are in a restaurant, and the young woman says, “Remember when you said that men are superior drivers?” She pulls a check from her purse and her voice changes to that of a deep bass voice as she explains how this check from Allstate proves she *is* a good driver. “But it could be a misprint,” she says, holding the check up to his eyes. “Does it look like a misprint to you?” When he tries to object, she cuts him short in the deep bass voice: “Uh-uh. Silence!”

With God and us, it’s a matter of a noun and a verb. The noun is on God’s side and the verb is on our side. The noun is something like “standard” and we can use that word or something like “relational desire” or “expectation” or “righteousness” or “acceptable behavior” or even “quality benchmark.” The Bible typically uses the word “Law” but by that is meant not just the Law of the Old Testament, but the overall standards that God has for human beings. Like all good standards, these standards are based on something objective, namely, His own character.

The verb, like the noun, can have many names: “failing the standard” or “being ruined” or “missing the mark” or “sin” or “errors of judgement” or “ruin” or just plain old “mistakes.”

The noun is what God establishes for a standard; the verb is us failing that standard.

We might want God to grade on a curve. But He doesn’t. God can’t grade on a curve because grading on a curve always involves compromise of principles. For example, in a class, a score of 80% on the test this year is an “A” because this year’s students are not quite as smart or as hard-working as last year’s students, where it took a 90% to get an “A”. There’s something wrong about that—at least we can agree that this year’s grading is a compromise compared to last year’s. We want God to use a curve but God can’t compromise His principles because it’s against His nature.

Like some students with teachers, we *do* want to argue with God. We want to explain why there are mitigating circumstances—everyone on earth wants to explain that there are mitigating

circumstances--but to all of us God responds, "Silence." As Paul says in Romans, "[W]hatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (R 3:19).

Makes us uncomfortable. We think we're nice people. Well, nice enough. The Allstate commercial, then, is like a parable showing how we come to Scripture, ready to argue, ready to explain, ready to justify ourselves and God through Scripture responds, "Silence."

The first word for this Good Friday, therefore, is "Silence."

The second word is "Exchange." As we mentioned, we keep wanting to justify ourselves before God. And it's difficult for us to grasp how *bad* things really are for us, in terms of our failures. But grasping that is simple compared to the next work we have to do. We have to get our heads around the inconceivable fact of *Exchange*. That God puts *Himself* in our place.

So we have to talk a little bit about the very uncomfortable subject of *punishment*. For God to free us without punishing us would be like a judge who says, "Delores, you *are* guilty of murder, but I won't punish you." "Sam, you're guilty of assault, but I won't punish you because you've had a lot of tough breaks." "Alfred, you're guilty of fraud, of deceit, of cheating, stealing, but I won't punish you because I like you—in fact, I *love* you. I'm a loving judge." A judge who would do that is not a true judge.

And while we might want to get by with, say, just probation or maybe six months of community service, the combination of God's standards on one hand—remember, He can't compromise His nature—and our ruin on the other hand is not a combination that works in our favor. As the book of Ezekiel says, "The one who sins is the one who will die" (Ez 18:20).

But God *put* Himself in our place. He does not abandon us. He makes *our* misery, *His* misery. He wants to solve the problem of our ruin Himself, *without* any compromise on His part. He wants us to be saved, but the trouble is, so great is our error that to solve it involves Him *surrendering Himself*. While we gaze at the terrible specter of Jesus dying in torment on the cross, let's not for a minute forget that in that act God is surrendering Himself for us. He is cursed for us. He is dead for us. He is buried for us. Christ descends into a place of being excluded from God, for us.

He does this, not *despite* His righteousness, His holiness, His standards but *in* His righteousness.

Part of our work to understand reconciliation is to take our understanding of the New Testament from the Old Testament and not only from our own sense of what happens in a courtroom. And here we have to take a brief but a hard look at the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. The tenth chapter of Hebrews is our guide. The sacrifices in the Old Testament are not really about the perfect righteousness of an aloof God who is a judge who comes in from her chambers, hears a case from the bench, pronounces judgement and punishment and then returns to her chambers. The sacrifices in the Old Testament are God's way of making things right between Himself and humankind. It's a work *God* has set up to bring us back to Him. Imagine that the judge comes down from the bench and says to the guilty person, "You've got problems. But let's work together to make things right. I'll *help you* do restitution," for example. "I'll help you get a job and maybe some counseling."

So righteousness is not just God deciding and pronouncing, but God hard at work for the one who is guilty. That's how the sacrifices functioned. They were God hard at work to reconcile the nation of Israel to Himself.

The trouble with "God hard at work," according to the book of Hebrews, is that it doesn't fully deal with that imbalance—God's perfect standards on one side and our perfect ruin on the other side. The sacrifices have to be repeated over and over and the judge has to come down from the bench over and over. The same offenders—you and me—keep showing up in her courtroom! Finally, the Psalmist, in Psalm 40, which is quoted here in Hebrews 10, says, "These sacrifices aren't working. What is needed is some *perfect* sacrifice that happens once and *completely* deals with the punishment. You need a sacrifice of someone with a perfect will. The ruin is so great that only a *perfect* sacrifice will really take away all the guilt."

And yet it is still the nature of God to want to be hard at work for us. So, one last time, the judge comes down from the bench and says, "You've been in my courtroom again and again. You've got problems. You've got a lot of punishment coming your way. But *I'll* deal with the punishment by sacrificing myself. I will exchange *myself* into your place. Jesus Christ, the Son, at once true God and true man, the Son in the far country, carries out God's will by exchanging Himself with us. What *we* should suffer, He suffers. When Ezekiel says the one who sins is the one who will die, Jesus says No. He sins; I die. She sins; I die. As the writer of Hebrews says, "by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Heb 10:14).

"Silence" is the first word we have to work to understand; "Exchange" is the second.

And the third word, is "Humiliation." In this exchange, God is *humiliated*. As Paul says in Philippians, in Christ God makes himself nothing and humbles Himself "by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:7-8). As Jesus says in the Upper Room, "This is my body given for you; this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Lk 22:19-20). It is the *humiliation* of God.

Such is glory of God that He can be 'selfless' and remain true to Himself. And the greatness of that glory is that it can hide in its sheer opposite—in rejection, in misery, in death, and in humiliation. God proves Himself to be God by emptying Himself of His Godhead without ceasing to be God. God proves Himself to be God by emptying Himself of His Godhead without ceasing to be God. We ask, God, show yourself! prove yourself! Well, He has. No other god can do this. This is proclaimed in no other belief system, whether it's a religion outside us or a religion inside our hearts. In all other religions there is striving, striving by God and by gods and by prophets and by people—striving for knowledge, striving for virtue, striving for illumination, striving for compassion, striving for ministry. In all other religions a god shows humankind the way. In Christianity, in the gospel, God empties Himself of His Godhead and takes our place in the punishment and takes our curse—all without ceasing to be God and all without compromising His standards. There is no striving—there is *humiliation*. This is the deepest thing about God that can be known. His *glory* hides in His rejection.

The best illustration I know to understand this is through another commercial, this one for the Navy Federal Credit Union. This one begins with a tough soldier is looking into the camera and describing some sort of crisis, which we assume is part of a combat condition: "I stood outside, assessing the situation," he says. "I knew it could be rough in there, but how rough... there was no way to be sure." It turns out he is describing his trip home to his new house, where he comes into his daughter's bedroom to see that his daughter and his wife are painting the room *bubble gum*

pink. This is not a military color. At first he is overcome by all the color and by his daughter shouting out, "Daddy, it's pink!" Some pink paint even gets on his fatigues. But after he explains about the good mortgage he got from the credit union, the commercial ends with him saying, "So she's a princess. You got a problem with that? Hoo-rah!" The point is that by emptying himself of his masculinity and taking on ultra-girlyness of his daughter, he loses no masculinity but demonstrates how masculine he is. His masculinity hides behind her femininity without ever ceasing or affecting his masculinity.

Those are our three words, and to get our heads around these three words is the work that God is calling us to do here at the foot of the cross. "Silence"—to recognize the judgement of God without trying to weasel our way out of it. "Exchange"—the inconceivable fact that God surrendered Himself to sacrifice Himself and restore our relationship with Him, all without compromising His standards. "Humiliation"—God's glory is revealed in that He can empty Himself of His Godhead without ceasing to be God.

And our part is to know this. For the person alone understands what sin is, who knows that their sin is forgiven" (Barth).