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Kierkegaard Re-contextualized Part III: Love versus Death?

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This is the third in a three-part series examining the theological ideas of Søren Kierkegaard through the work of three contemporary church critics. Readthe first part[1] andthe second part[2].

In a lecture [3] to a group of teenagers, theologian Stanley Hauerwas retells one of Søren Kierkegaard's last parables to illustrate how most Christians think of the resurrection. In the story, a prince is one day riding through his fields when he sees a beautiful peasant girl. Being of noble birth, he is careful not to overwhelm the girl with his power and riches and decides to masquerade as a peasant in order to fairly win her love.
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We may imagine, Kierkegaard says, the many dramatic ways the prince might one day reveal his princeliness to the girl. However, this moment never happens for Christ. Jesus is not God masquerading as a human. He is simultaneously all human and all divine. He could not escape death. Neither, Hauerwas emphasizes, can we.

While the love present in the Trinity is self-evident, Hauerwas argues, it is death and not love that dominates the Christian experience. If the love of God were at question during Christ's time, he said, there would be no reason for Jesus to suffer and die.

"God, in such a faith, becomes the great OK who tells us we are OK and, therefore, we are taught we should tell one another we are OK," he says.

Instead, Hauerwas argues, Christ's suffering and death for the sake of a community alternate to the world are the central Christian message. True Christianity does not bring necessarily acceptance or a renewed purpose of life -- indeed, it might bring rejection and hatred.

The faith journey instead is about forsaking those goods for an eternal life of a wholly different character, one represented by the revolutionary politics of Jesus.

"Christians have no fantasy," Hauerwas says, "that we may get out of life alive."

No doubt, Kierkegaard would feel at home with Hauerwas' emphasis on the centrality of death to Christian experience. The fear of death, he argues, is really a fear of the idea of eternity and the "weight of inwardness" such an idea brings. Both Kierkegaard and Hauerwas hold that the idea of eternal life advanced by Jesus Christ is a very different, and at times disconcerting, idea indeed.

However, Kierkegaard and Hauerwas seem to contextualize love quite differently. Meditating on the Good Samaritan, Kierkegaard argues Christ "has thrust romantic love and friendship from the throne, the love rooted in mood and inclination, preferential love." The love shown by the Trinity, which Hauerwas recognizes, is love of a sort much different than we're accustomed to, but it is love.

Kierkegaard sees Christ both as the herald of a new kingdom and as an exemplar of a new mode of relating to other human beings while we are alive. The Gospels, Kierkegaard argues, teach both anticipation of eternal life

and a radically different approach to the current one: "Christ does not ask for a higher love in addition to praising friendship and romantic love. No, Christian love teaches love for all people, unconditionally all."

Hauerwas too understands the Christian mortal life as a morally different one, of forgiving, suffering and sharing. Still, this way of life, which Hauerwas describes as a politics offering an alternative to violence, seems to lack a personal element.

The model of selfless suffering explains how we might relate to our government, to its enemies, to the poor; it does not provide as much framework to explain our relationship to friends, family and colleagues.

The difficult love Kierkegaard acknowledges is about fully understanding the equality between self and neighbor. "Neighbor is eternity's mark, a mark found on every human being."

This mark -- which Kierkegaard thinks of as the commonality among human beings amid all their differences -- is ironically the one that also marks us for death. Just as Christ's death was an inevitable outcome of humanity, so, too, are we indeed destined for death.

Neither concept is mutually exclusive. Contained within the call to live as Jesus did is the opportunity to cherish life, reject greed and violence, practice unconditional love and acknowledge the certainty of death, all at once. To do so is, in some sense, the exercise of appreciating both the human and divine elements of Christ -- that which is mortal, and that which loves.

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