

An Invitation into a “Bright Sadness”

By: Gutterball

As we flipped the calendars to March, many of us may feel relieved as we find ourselves on the other side of Winter. With the turn of the calendar, we also entered into another season according to the Liturgical Calendar. The season is known as Lent, which began March 2nd on Ash Wednesday (March 7th for Eastern Orthodox). Not being a native to Western PA, I quickly learned that the fish fry is a popular way Pittsburghers celebrate Lent. Like many of our holidays and traditions, we lose touch with the significant meaning and spiritual implications of such celebrations the further we are in time from their origins.

Traditionally, Lent is the 40-day period leading up to Holy Week culminating in Easter. The 40 days represent the duration that Jesus spent in the desert being tempted by Satan and fasting. Thus, many traditions celebrate this period by fasting from particular kinds of food or abstaining from something of value or meaningful. The purpose is to acknowledge one’s sin, repent, and mortify the flesh in preparation for the celebration of Christ’s resurrection on Easter. This makes lent a solemn observance marked by grief as a result of the recognition of one’s depraved state.

I really appreciate how the Eastern Orthodox Church views Lent. This faith tradition calls Lent a season of “bright sadness.” These two simple words joined together have significant meaning. At first glance, the two words appear to be incongruent, in fact, paradoxical. How can sadness be bright? The Greek translation of this compound word provides us with a meaning equivalent to: an “affliction that leads to joy.” Do your afflictions lead you to joy? This suggests that there is some process in the way we handle our afflictions that can lead us to an experience of joy. But it will require honestly facing our depravity. This is the invitation of Lent—taking the time to consider the impact of my own sin and depravity. We can often gain awareness of our depravity by noticing how we respond to pain, hurt, heartache, struggle, disappointment, obstacle, brokenness, mental illness, trauma, addiction, temptation, chronic illness, betrayal, or perpetual sin? Have you experienced joy as a result of these?

It seems like in order to have an experience of joy, we must broaden our capacity to sit with two opposing feelings/parts of self at the same time. We must condition ourselves to broaden our capacity to sit with ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty. In other words, we must learn to live with dignity and depravity and the tension in which these two parts produce. Dignity is the innate worth and value that God provides just because He says so. God instills dignity, worth or value within us automatically since we are creatures created in His image—the theological term is *Imago Dei*. Depravity is our sinful nature that leads us to act out according to our sinful nature—giving into temptation, not fully living up to our potential, not acting in loving, graciousness, or God-honoring ways.

Bright sadness reminds me of two other paradoxical words that were joined together by theologian, John Wesley. These two words are “Holy” and “Love.” Wesley unifies holy love together in a manner that can only exist in God. Kenneth Collins [Wesleyan Theologian] explains that God’s holiness creates an eternal distance from any touch of sin or evil (This means that we cannot be in God’s presence without the sacrifice of Christ). Conversely, love is other-directedness that reaches out and embraces (This is only possible through the sacrifice of Christ). It is important to keep in mind that God’s divine love should not be confused with human notions of love that can be fickle or indulgent. Collins expresses that God’s “. . . holiness must ever be understood in terms of the divine, a love that is energized in a freely chosen outward movement, that stoops down, as it were, and draws, makes contact, and establishes fellowship” (20-21). Divine grace is the element that binds holy and love together making it a reality for the coexistence of these two attributes within God. “Holy love is unmitigated grace that allows the indwelling Christ to transform a person from brokenness to wholeness” (Janvier 2022).

So, you may be asking, what does all this exactly mean and how does it apply to me? It means that we are totally accepted and invited into the fellowship of the Triune God even though we still struggle. It means that our brokenness coexists with God's love, grace, and acceptance of us. Do you experience God's Holy Love? How do you experience God's grace, peace, and joy in the midst of your sadness? If this is a challenge for you, I invite you consider what are the barriers that prevent you from fully experiencing this depth of God's love for you. This is the invitation of Lent. It does not mean sitting in our depravity to wallow in it or to be overwhelmed by guilt or shame, but to fully receive and experience the joy that can be produce by God's Spirit within us through our brokenness. I invite you to consider what "bright sadness" means for you during this Lenten season.

Works Cited

Collins, Kenneth J. *The theology of John Wesley: Holy love and the shape of grace*. abingdon Press, 2011.

Janvier, D. (2022). *Lusting after god: Sexual struggle as a catalyst to spiritual intimacy and healing*. Dissertation. Manuscript in preparation.