

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

April 14, 2017

**“Did the Father Turn His Back on the Son?”**

*Good Friday Community Service, Church in the Hills*

Matthew 27:33-50

If you had to choose between three things: darkness, pain, and loneliness, which would be the worst? If it is dark, usually you can find a light. And pain can usually be treated. In my opinion, loneliness is the worst of the three. It is hard to “fix” your heartache when you feel abandoned.

Jesus faced all three of these things on the cross, but I want to specifically address loneliness. I’d like to tread some theological water tonight, if that’s all right with you. My question is this: Why did Jesus say, “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46) Did God the Father turn his back on Jesus the Son? Did God in fact abandon Jesus on the cross?

Some would say, Yes, God did abandon Jesus, at least momentarily. Their argument goes something like this:

The Bible tells us in several places that God is holy. For example, Psalm 5:4 declares, “You are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.” The prophet Isaiah, in his great vision, heard the angels proclaim, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3) One of my Old Testament seminary professors taught this simple statement: “Holiness is everything, and sin is nothing.” At its core meaning, to be “holy” means to be separate, set apart. In God’s case, holiness is simply who God is. God is perfect in every way. By comparison, humans are flawed and imperfect. Some argue: God cannot tolerate sin. God’s very presence casts out and destroys

sin, and therefore they conclude, God and sin cannot be present in the same place. This is the theory, anyway.

So far, I think you're following me, and I don't think I've said anything blasphemous. My colleagues haven't made any moves to kick me off the stage yet, anyway.

So here is the second part of the argument. God is holy. And when Jesus died on the cross, he took upon himself the full weight of the world's sin. This, too, is supported by many bible verses, especially 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:21, which reads, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That's a great thought. What a deal for us! Jesus became a sin offering, and we became righteous. Fantastic. Isaiah says something very similar in Isaiah 53:6: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Somehow, through the mystery of salvation, God's plan was for Jesus to carry our sin to the cross.

Regardless of your biblical background, and I hope you see where these two arguments collide. #1 - God is holy. #2 - Jesus became sin. Therefore, the "logical" conclusion is that during the moment that Jesus was our sin, God, in his holiness, had to abandon Jesus, because God hates sin, right? And, therefore, our theologians smugly conclude, God turned his back on the Son at the cross. A neatly wrapped package of theology. Tie a nice bow and share it with someone else. My work is done here.

Except...I don't believe it. I am now treading dangerous waters. Even my respected Harper Collins Bible Commentary, my go-to for almost every sermon I

preach, says this about the moment Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46)

“[The] three hours of darkness at noon indicate to Jesus that God has now abandoned him, an apparent necessity for his death to be the ransom that would establish a new covenant. His so-called cry of dereliction quotes Psalm 22:1 in a way that simultaneously affirms his continued commitment to God (“My God”) and his continued confusion as to why this abandonment to death is necessary (From HCBC, page 899.)

If I were a published theologian, people would have to listen to me, right? But here is the beautiful thing about theology. None of us ever gets the last word. Not Mark Allan Powell, who wrote the chapter on Matthew in my commentary, nor even Eric Max Falker, Local Licensed Pastor of the Bellaire Community United Methodist Church...I shall use my full title to compensate for my insecurity. But allow me to add my voice to the conversation, and honestly and respectfully refute Mr. Powell and maybe some others who hold this belief that God abandoned Jesus.

I do believe that sin works to break our relationship with God, but that does not mean that God is absent. In fact, I believe it's quite the opposite. Let me give you a practical example from my own life. When my daughter Emily was two years old, she became very sick with the flu. Bless her heart, I sat with her on the recliner in the basement all night long, holding her and a bucket, and watching her suffer as she puked. As a father, what would I have given to trade places with her! But I could not. It was her illness to work through.

Have you ever watched your child suffer and not stood by them? God no more abandoned Jesus than I my daughter. God's love is perfect. The Bible tells

us in several places that God is one – most notably in Deuteronomy 6:4. In the Christian Church, we affirm the doctrine of the Trinity – that somehow, through a mystery, the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit are intrinsically, relationally, and perfected linked. No part of the Trinity is ever forsaken or forgotten or diminished. In fact, we have several examples of God the Father affirming the Son. At Jesus' baptism, and again at his transfiguration, a voice declares from the clouds, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love!" (See Matt 3:17, 17:5; Mark 1:11, 9:7; and Luke 4:22, 9:35) Further, Jesus himself declared in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." There's no division. No disunity. My daughter is always going to be my daughter, and I will always be her father. And that goes for my sons, my parents, and any other family relationship I have inherited. Circumstance cannot change our relationship. The same holds true for God.

Then why did Jesus say, "God, why have you forsaken me?" Why did Jesus pray in the garden, "Father, if it is possible, take this cup from me?" (Matt 26:39 & 40) I simply see this as affirmation of the human side of Jesus. We believe Jesus is the incarnation of God – God in the flesh. And that means that Jesus lived, breathed, ate, slept, felt, and bled just like any of us. When he experienced darkness, pain, and loneliness, they were real, just like they are for us. But Jesus knew that the plan of salvation required him to feel the full effect of his death. He refused to drink the wine laced with gall, a narcotic to ease the pain of crucifixion. (Matt 27:34) He refused to submit to the temptation of his mockers – to prove he was the Son of God by coming down from the cross. (Matt 27:40, 42) Why? Because he loved us, and he knew his death alone had the power to save us from our sin.

So back to my original question: Why did Jesus cry out those terrible, haunting words, “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” Because they were, in fact, an expression of hope. Jesus was quoting directly from Psalm 22, which when read in its entirety, is an expression of hope in the face of the worse pain and suffering imaginable. Listen to verse 24: “For [God] has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one, he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” Jesus, in spite of his pain, was expressing the truest of his feelings. I would put Jesus’ words this way: “God, it feels right now like you are not there. This really, really hurts. Yet, I am trusting in you to complete your plan in my life.”

So what does this mean for us? Simply this: God will no more abandon you than He did Jesus. When we read in the Bible that God promises “I will never leave you nor forsake you,” that is a promise for us. (*Deut. 31:6 and 8, Joshua 1:9, Hebrews 13:5, Isaiah 41, and Jesus in Matt. 28:20.*) God loves us. And the truth is: love does not prevent pain; love endures pain. Let me say that again. God’s love will not prevent pain in your life. God’s love will help you endure it.

God does hate sin. But more specifically, God hates the effects of sin: death, brokenness, selfishness, dysfunction, lies, distrust, hate, anger and pain. Yet God loves us, even when we sin. If God were to abandon us every time we sinned, there would be no hope for us. Instead, God calls us out of sin into eternal life. He paves the way through Jesus’ death. Through God’s grace, we are transformed. No matter what we face, we should never feel that God has abandoned us. We can cry out to him, as Jesus did, in our worst hour, and know that God is there, listening. That is a cry of faith, not abandonment.