

When I was in grade 8 I remember very clearly my bible teacher teaching me very large words about God. They were these:

Omnipresence. All present

Omnipotent. All powerful

Omniscient. All knowing

These descriptions of God can be helpful. They can give us comfort. But the thing is, when we highlight certain images of God, they tell us something.

If we are made in the image of God, what does staring at this image of God (all powerful, all knowing, all present) tell us about ourselves and invite us into?

The church has highlighted these descriptions of God at the expense of many others and that hasn't served us well...

the author of Hebrews does say:

Yes, God is always the same.

Yes, God is always present.

Yes, God is always seated on the throne.

Yes, God is always powerful to bring about a different kingdom.

But the author of Hebrews, more than focusing on these particular pieces always goes back to God's suffering with us, for us, and on behalf of us. Jesus' weakness, his dying at the hands of sinful men, the Jesus' need for endurance and perseverance, the shame experienced, the cost of Jesus' faithful living, the cost Jesus paid for doing what he did, the weakness Jesus took on, the injustice he knew in his body. Jesus being tempted in every way as we are.

The way Jesus becomes human, takes on weakness of his own choice, and suffers with and for and on behalf of us.

And this theme. It's not simply something we see in Hebrews. It's weaved all over scripture.

There's a word in the Old Testament. In Hebrew it's HESED. This word translated into steadfast love. but it's more than that...comes from "come together for aid", loyalty, mercy, etc. Walter Brueggemann says this about the word HESED:

Hesed—tenacious solidarity.

(Solidarity: unity, loyalty, come together for aid)
(Tenacious: firm hold of something, clinging, adhering closely,
fiercely committed)

We see this all over scripture:

God committed to the people of Israel, committed to the church, to the creation, to the covenants.

Committed to being with us. coming through on promises come what may
Which ultimately means that God, through Jesus suffers with and for us.

(Like a mother or a father, who cannot do everything, fix everything
make it better, but is committed to being there....wiping the baby's
bum, cleaning up your throw up, hurting when that person hurts you.)

God suffering with and for us.

This is solidarity.

I wonder if we see a God like this, and we are made in this God's
image, what does this tell us about ourselves and invite us to?

Our passage from Hebrews is answering this question.

This list of invitations in chapter 13 can seem like something tacked on, an
afterthought.

But I don't love that so much, nor do I think that's what is going on.
You see.

Throughout Hebrews we've been staring long and hard at this Jesus who is in
tenacious solidarity with us.

After looking at just how much Jesus was willing to suffer with and for, he
ends, not with just an addition stamped to the end, but something that comes
from fixing our eyes of Jesus

What are we, the image of God, invited into when we stare long and hard at this
image of God?

This: let mutual love continue.

And we are told: let mutual love continue.

First continue....he's saying: it's already happening, but let it keep growing.

WE see mutual love happening already. Many rallied at the beginning of COVID, Beirut disaster, hurricanes. We know of field being used in our community for hunger....amongst other smaller things.

So let it keep going! Let it continue!

Second: he gives us a few examples of mutual love.

Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers for some have entertained angels without knowing it.

This is referring back to the time Abraham and Sarah in Genesis had some travelers over, prepared a bit feast and it turned out they were angels. They took them in without the typical recommendation that came when travelers came through to assure the one who hosted them that they were stand up guys.

And you know what happened. They got a gift they weren't expecting, a promise, some good news that caused joy.

It's a reminder to keep your heart unlocked and remain open to the possibility of goodness received from a person you did not expect. (If you were the stranger, what would you desire and need?)

Then he says: Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

A few years ago I came across an empathy museum online.

Seems you go up to the desk, tell them your shoe size, put on a pair of someone else's shoes and some headphones and walk a mile in their shoes while hearing their story and life through their eyes.

I love this. But the thing is....the way of Christ makes us go further than empathy that allows us only a feeling. It requires the same tenacious solidarity with others, as Jesus did for us: Suffer with them, as if it were you.

You might remember the story of the good Samaritan in Luke 10. Which is a reflection from: love your neighbor as yourself.

A man gets beaten and robbed, left for dead in the ditch.

A priest sees the guy and crosses the street.

A faithful religious person walks past and does the same.

Another, saw to his injuries, brought him to a place he could rest and heal, and paid for his stay out of his own pocket.

The man who helped him loved him as if he were suffering himself.

He seemed to ask: if I was suffering, beaten, lying in the ditch—how would I want to be treated, how might I be helped, what could someone else do that would bring me healing?

This person took Jesus' teaching and life of solidarity with us to heart.

Love your neighbor. As if he/she were you. Not more than you, not less than you—as if they were you.

It's as easy and as hard as that.

So let mutual love continue.

It's a call to turn away from individualism toward tenacious solidarity with those who are suffering, with those in need. To be a faithful presence suffering with and for and behalf of others....

And yet what about prisoners? What about those who feel they are prisoners—to addition, elderly in a home? People living in homes that are full of pain and dysfunction? Those who've experienced abuse, torture and destruction? What about the refugee or the migrant worker? If you were in their place, what would you want and need?

We know we are already doing it in your daily lives, caring for your next door neighbor, dropping food off at the senior's you know, visiting and welcoming the person you know is lonely, being stable adults in the lives of kids and young adults who really need that faithfulness right now, caring for your coworker who needed a listening ear, or a few extra dollars, generosity of your extras.

But what if the church together would seek the same thing....What justice would we seek if we learned to suffer as if we were suffering? What righting of wrongs would we work for? What resources would we make sure showed up in our city and county?

The author of Hebrews doesn't allow us to love only those in our safe bubbles, in our families or churches—it means we cannot let our love become ingrown...like an ingrown toenail—stuck inside the toe, but must be like a healthy toe nail, spilling over the edge.

Besides: who wants to be called church of the ingrown toenail? NO one.

This is not easy. It is demanding. Of course. It is costly. It is discouraging. It is difficult. It is scary.....our own fear must be confronted, our own weaknesses.

Honoring, respecting, seeing, faithfulness to one another is hard.

And yet we fix our eyes on Jesus who endured the cross, its shame, hostility from sinners.

Or as Hebrews 13:12-13 says:

Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. Because we are looking for the city that is to come.

In doing this we become signs of Jesus' tenacious solidarity. Signs of a kingdom that is here and is coming.

Following Jesus will hurt, require suffering and dying to ourselves.

Third. This is what the next verses are about: examples of what we must die to because it stops mutual love from continuing and keeps us more like ingrown toenails.

He says this: Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have.

He's pointing out that these things can get in the way of mutual love. In both sexual pleasure that isn't staying committed to the promises they made to love their spouse in word and deed, and in loving money which allows us to seek our own security, survival or comfort. We are forgetting to let mutual love continue.

They are desires pointed in the wrong direction—inward, toward ourselves, it's turning us toward individualism. Rather than taking into consideration what mutual love might require of us, rather than tenacious solidarity. It is also a reminder that mutual love must flow not just in big ways elsewhere, but in our homes and the things we keep private.

It's clear keeping the marriage bed pure and our lives free from money will be costly. To not let your desires simply serve ourselves is costly means we say no to things from time to time, despite how much we want them. It's especially costly when much of the culture we swim in which says from time to time: seek your own pleasure, you do you, what harm will it do? Saying no, directing our desires toward mutual love is hard.

It might mean we suffer, it might mean a sacrifice.

But we do it because we have stared long and hard at a God who loves us in the same way.

The author says, we love these things because we are afraid.....

Afraid that God is not faithful to us, willing to suffer with us and for us.

Afraid that there will not be enough for today.

We've seen these fears in action haven't we....

You might remember the fear of not enough toilet paper, rice or flour.

When we work for our own security and protection, our own pleasure, our own comfort without considering what mutual love might require of us, the solving of our own concerns over someone else's,

we, says the author, are forgetting or perhaps not even trusting the God who is the same, yesterday today and forever.

Or that other people's faithfulness will be like God's faithfulness to us. That other people will suffer for us like we would for them.

We are afraid of that there will not be enough. rather than trusting the God who has promised tenacious solidarity and who we see act this out on the cross. Bearing it and suffering with and for us.

And when we love the wrong thing: our own security, comfort, protection: this gets in the way of our mutual love continuing, of turning away from individualism toward the tenacious solidarity that Jesus shows us is at the very heart of God.

This is what dying to ourselves means. Not to put ourselves on the back burner necessarily, but to die to that in ourselves that keeps us from mutual love continuing.

Of course, this happens by accident sometimes. Our desires accidentally and mistakenly get pointed in the wrong direction. And we must die to them, or be converted from them.

We do this because we've stared long and hard at Jesus who is in tenacious solidarity with us. who has suffered with and for and on behalf of us.

So let mutual love continue.

Let it continue.

Let welcoming the stranger. Suffering with others as if you were suffering continue.

In your homes and private lives and in your counties.

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Time of reflection:

How might you stare long and hard into this Jesus?

What action of mutual love might you or the church be invited into?

What must we, yourself or the church, die to in order for mutual love to continue?