

God Hidden In His Grieving People; His Grieving People Hidden In God

In his essay, *On The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Sasse presents divine mystery and truth at once: “*And just as the revelation of God in Christ is at the same time God’s hiding in the human nature of Christ, so the Holy Spirit of God is deeply hidden in the means of grace.*” (Sasse, *We Confess The Church*, p. 25) And these means of life are then imparted into Christians. What then? If God would hide Himself to be worshipped as a baby, if He would hide Himself through unimpressive elements, what of His *modus operandi* after the reception of such means? What of the children themselves?

They too are the unimpressive and certainly unattractive; they are by new nature diametrically opposed to the outward show of strength the world admires. They are opposite of stiff upper lips and positive attitudes. We may now purchase wall displays of fish that sing, “Don’t worry! Be happy!” The ditty is one of the world’s catch phrases. It is pragmatic, popular and positive. Let’s face it, it is much easier to be around someone who is bubbly than someone who is in sorrow and bereaved; it is more pleasant to be around people who celebrate discovery (perhaps over the latest MTV awards or x-sport for injuring children all over the country or other latest “drug” or drug), than it is to be around people who mourn loss (of health, of spouse, of youth, of vocation, of life).

And yet, our hidden God and gracious Shepherd was precisely impressed and attracted to those the world casts away. I’m probably being repetitive at this point in quoting these Scriptures: “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*” (Matthew 5:4); “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” (Matthew 11:28); “[God] comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.” (2 Corinthians 1:4-5)

It would be easy to understand the psychological accusation that we appear to be cousins to sado-masochists. We’re not saying we take pleasure from pain, but it sounds awfully like we’re saying we take comfort in midst of pain. To the world, if this is not considered non-sense, then it is certainly at the very least, quite simply, hidden. Here is a more technical summary of the verb “to grieve” (*lypeo*):

“[It] is an integral part of the Christian life. Conversion involves a godly [grief], which is essential to the ongoing life of faith (2 Cor. 7:9ff). The consequent break with the world exposes Christian to [grief] which they now regard, not as a hindrance, but as an opportunity for growth in the power of Christ’s death and resurrection. Acceptance of [grief] is acceptance of the cross (Gal. 6:14; Phil. 3:10-11; 2 Cor. 4:8-9). In John Christ’s departure plunges the disciples into the [grief] not merely of mental sorrow but of vulnerability in the world (Jn. 16:6-7, 20ff). They must experience this if they are to know the true meaning of belonging to Jesus. Yet this [grief] is the source of their joy (16:21-22). The very isolation from Jesus brings out the significance of fellowship with him and the resultant victory over the world (Jn. 16:33).” (Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of The New Testament*, pp. 541-542)

Not surprisingly, Luther had picked-up on this. While in the *Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article IV, Luther lists the five means of grace that include the fact that “*the Gospel...offers counsel and help against sin...through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren.*” (Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, p. 310) [I add the fifth means because it is a good example of how God’s people are both hidden *and* active], it is elsewhere that he describes how “*holy Christian people*” are recognized. This is a list not of five, but of seven and here is number seven by Luther:

“Seventh, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord’s Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God’s word, enduring this for the sake of Christ...” (Luther’s Works, American Edition, Volume 41, pp. 164-165)

We are therefore led not to attitudinal adjustments, not to pep talks and admonitions to “cheer up,” not to time-lines for mourning, not for any kind of human manipulation (perhaps the most subtle form of works-righteousness) which would be too eager to replace tears with forced declarations that life will go on. The Word of God and the Holy Spirit will not allow for that! Instead, we are led to live in Christ, whose splendor was hidden in flesh; we are led to water, bread and wine, where the Comforter remains hidden to this day; and we are led to our own “holy possession of the sacred cross” where God is hidden in His grieving people and His grieving people are hidden in God.

This does not deny the joyful ministry of Christ who came “[to] provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” (Isaiah 61:3) However, note that in the case of every one of these blessings, they must follow the grief, the ashes, the mourning and the despair. In all of this, however, we are simply made to be like our Savior. He cried on His cross before His resurrection; we too grieve while attached to our crosses, but we are more than familiar with what follows the storm, and our rainbows are guaranteed!

How does this hiddenness play out in the parish? Here are the highlights:

First of all, it plays out by God hiding Himself in His grieving people. This must begin in the divine service. No innumerable research projects in comparative paradigms for ministry needed here. It is so basic and so simple that our sinful nature invariably makes it very hard. Despite this temptation, however, let us simply hold fast to the sacred tradition past down to us. It is time-tested and utterly reliable. It also calls for faithful pastors and a faithful priesthood.

Again, we are speaking of the divine service; we're speaking of worship. If we come as those who grieve, then we will for example necessarily cling to the Invocation. We attend a funeral every Sunday as we return in a corporate setting to our baptism "*in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*" [of course to attend the funeral is to attend also the resurrection which is what Sunday ultimately signifies as eighth day]. However, we begin as the bereaved, so that we may become in the process of Christ coming to serve, those who rejoice. Attached also to our divine service beginning is confession and absolution. Once again, we confess our grief, that we may receive His crown, oil and garment.

I'm sure you see where this is headed. Being faithful in *Gottesdienst* avoids losing God's service to the bereaved, we are to avoid replacing *God's Service* with man-centered worship; the power of God exchanged for the efforts of man. We will want practical examples of what I mean: One way to appreciate what I am saying is in regards to the sermon. Perhaps our best form of evaluation on preaching is to ask ourselves, "*Is it Gottesdienst/God's Service OR is it leading me to serve myself?*" [I'm mindful of the latest *Reporter* sharing Barna's finds in regards to what Americans believe, and that 53% general and 68% of "born again" adults agree that the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves.].

God's Service preaching, however, is faithful to God speaking Law and God speaking Gospel; it is proclamation that convicts of sin and consoles for salvation. In other words, it does not tell you what to do to fix your life (the world's way of coping with grief in 5, 7 or 12 steps), but puts upon the hearts and minds of the grieving the reason they grieve and God's covering for that grief announced and applied while you sit in your pew to be waited on by the Great Physician Himself. Thus, *God's Service* preaching does not attempt to teach you how to stop grieving, but brings Christ who joined sinners in their sorrow and who Himself wipes their tears. Not telling them how to stop grieving, but loving them while they grieve.

Incidentally, I was asked to include in this talk congregational involvement, and in this first point, the "work" of the priesthood is gigantic. They are called to be Bereans, they are called to "test the spirits," they are called to be faithful in what I have just described. If the pastor would lead them elsewhere, then they need to speak up, but more importantly, if the pastor would be faithful, then they need to join in. This is the best work, to put oneself on the receiving end of divine service. There is nothing better for the grieving to do even as I have recently been witnessing two Christians sitting side-by-side in a pew, holding hands while grieving and yet receiving comfort and encouraging one another to do so more and more.

With this starting point, we may move on to the next movement wrought by the Holy Spirit: God's grieving people hide and are hidden in Him. This is the both the result *and* the response of God hiding Himself in us, and here the life of Christ in His people is active indeed! Here are some of the ways:

- Hiding themselves in prayer. Not only lifting up those who grieve by name in the divine service, but keeping an active prayer chain which seeks to respond to needs as soon as they arrive.
- Hiding themselves in care-giving. Establishing “peer-support” service not for counseling or “cheering up,” etc., but for simply “joining in.” Here the direction of Romans 12 is priceless: “*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.*” (vs. 15). The counsel is vital. Never go in to change a person, that is not our call. Again, we *join* the person and represent that God is faithful to His promise that He will never forsake us. For us at St. Paul’s we look forward to our deaconess and spiritual care elder working closely to equip as many members as possible to participate in this effort.
- Hiding themselves in service and support. The bereaved are confronted with a sense of loss, but are encouraged when they are presented with God’s provision. Setting up schedules for food delivery has been a simple and yet effective way to show real signs of *receiving* after *losing*.
- Hiding themselves in support of the ministry. Not only by receiving divine services, but by facilitating God’s servants into the homes and hospital rooms of the bereaved. Brothers and sisters watch out for one another and will take initiative for those who are paralyzed by their grief when pastor and/or deaconess is not aware. We encourage our people to be active go-betweens.
- Hiding themselves in private confession and absolution. Not allowing this Lutheran practice to die in a culture which considers it archaic, but to take advantage of it. This is where grief is laid bare and then covered with Christ’s holy absolution.

As children we would hide for fun. In finding a really good hiding place we also discovered a profound sense of safety and even joy. Now as children of God who certainly know grief, it seems however we have found the best hiding place of all.

