

God's Unconditional Love

An article by Ronald Rolheiser

Recently I had lunch with a former student of mine, a very idealistic young man who teaches religion in a Catholic High School. He shared with me about his struggles in trying to teach young people about God. One of the major problems, as he sees it, is that his students' idea of God invariably contains too much of the notion that God is a petty tyrant, that God can easily be offended, that God is threatened by our joys and successes, and especially that somehow we have to earn God's love by being good.

He, for his part, tries to correct these notions by presenting a picture of God as a God whose essential countenance is that of blessing and not of frowning, a God who is an extravagant, unconditional lover, the father of prodigal son, who cannot be put off by human infidelity. Among other things, he likes presenting Julian of Norwich's picture of God as "sitting in heaven, smiling, completely relaxed, his face looking like a marvellous symphony." However, when he tries to present this idea of God the response of his students is inevitably something to this effect: *"Then why be good? If God loves us no matter what we do, then why keep the commandments? If we are not to be punished or rewarded for our efforts, then why make sacrifices?"*

Why indeed? Why be good and try to keep the commandments if God loves us anyway? Simply put, we don't try to be good so that God loves and rewards us. God loves us no matter what we do and heaven is never a reward for a good life. Are these glib statements? No. God's love, as Jesus assures us, is always both unmerited and unconditional, nothing we do can ever make God love us, just as nothing we do can ever stop God from loving us. God loves just as God does everything else, perfectly. God loves everything and everybody perfectly. In fact, part of Christian belief (a dogma in fact) is that God's love is what keeps everything in existence. If God stopped loving anything, it would cease to be. This (as the American theologian, Michael Hines, is fond of pointing out) raises an interesting question: If God loves everything and everyone perfectly, does God then also love Satan? Indeed, does God love Satan as much as he loves Jesus' mother, Mary?

The answer can only be "yes", God loves Satan as much as God loves Mary. The difference is not in how God loves them, but in how they, each in turn, love God. God loves each of them in the same way, namely, perfectly. But obviously Mary's response is very different from Satan's. In that difference we see what creates hell, a certain attitude in the face of love. However notice that in neither case is the love either merited or deflected. God just loves us, pure and simple. God cannot be offended. God's love cannot be driven away. God does not reward or punish us on the basis of whether we have been good or bad. God simply loves us.

Then why be good? Why keep the commandments? What difference does our response make?

Our response makes a big difference, but not in terms of giving God offense, driving God away, or making God punish or reward us. It makes a difference in how we stand and feel in the face of love. We cannot offend against God, but we can offend against others and ourselves. We can, like Satan, live in bitterness and unhappiness right within love itself and we can deeply hurt others. The spiritual and moral precepts of the faith, all of them, including the ten commandments, are therefore meant to do a couple of things:

First, for anyone who is mature in the faith, living out what faith and morality asks of us is in fact a natural response of gratitude for being loved and a natural expression of sensitivity to others. The desire to be good and to keep the commandments, as Martin Luther once said, follows from genuine faith and love the way smoke follows fire. The intent is never to earn love or reward, but to respond properly to them. This is true in the case of mature love and faith. However, for those of us who are still struggling to be mature, the spiritual and moral precepts of the faith are meant as a discipline – precisely as a discipleship – that helps teach us what it means to be a spiritual and a sensitive human being. Trying to be good should still not be an attempt to somehow earn love or heaven, but rather an acknowledgement, a humble one, that one still needs a lot of help in knowing how to live in the face of love.

Why be good if God loves us anyway? For the same reason that an artist doesn't deface a masterpiece and a lover doesn't violate his or her beloved. Ethics follow naturally when truth, beauty, and love are properly appropriated.