

Studies in Christian Living

Soren Kierkegaard: Knight of Faith

Philippians 2:12-18

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you – ¹⁸and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

In the mid-1800's, Soren Kierkegaard wrote a parable about two robbers who entered a jewelry store and did something very strange: they switched all the price tags! They didn't steal anything. They just took the high-priced tags off the expensive jewelry and put them on the costume jewelry. Then they took the bargain price tags off the costume jewelry and put it on the really expensive stuff. The next day when the jewelry store opened for business it was business as usual. In fact for the next several weeks no one noticed that folks were buying \$10,000 rings for a few dollars, and that others were buying \$39 necklaces for thousands of dollars. Kierkegaard's point is obvious, isn't it? He was saying that the people of his day had no ability to discern the truly valuable from the virtually worthless. And he wasn't talking about jewelry, but about that in life which really matters. What about us? Are we able to distinguish between the priceless and the commonplace, between that which counts from that which doesn't matter?

Soren Kierkegaard was a very unusual man whose writings literally changed the landscape of philosophical and theological thinking. So let me briefly fill you in on the skeletal structure of Soren Kierkegaard's life. Soren was born in May of 1814, of a distinguished father who, while growing up in poverty, made a fortune in Copenhagen, Denmark, and retired at age 40. His father, Michael, was a sternly religious man, Lutheran as were all Danes, but greatly influenced by the Mennonites. Michael's house became a "host house" for the intelligentsia of Copenhagen. People like Hans Christian Anderson, J. L. Heiberg who led the city's literary elite, the great scholar Hans Martensen and various philosophers would gather at their house, creating an atmosphere Soren loved. Soren was a

brilliant child and was sent to a Latin School. The school still has a student exercise book of his which showed that he didn't follow the rules. He would write pages of Latin words with Danish endings and, when criticized, he then would write Danish words with Latin endings! He excelled, but they could not well motivate him. He went on to graduate from the University of Copenhagen in a time when the great intellectual currents in Europe flowed through that city. He became part of the circle of intellectuals in downtown Copenhagen during that electric time. His father's wealth served him well when he was 21-22, a time he said when he "lacked an idea for which I can live and die." He lives the life of what he calls the "aesthete," living fairly high, running up large wine bills, buying new clothes from England, wearing a large top hat an inch higher than anyone else. He liked good Cuban cigars.

So young Kierkegaard lived the life of a dandy. But his Journals show something deeper, rich and thick. By 1836, Soren published his first book, criticizing a work of Hans Christian Anderson that he thought was wrong-headed. It brought him to the center of Copenhagen's literary world and people thought that he would become a critic or journalist, but he was already studying law and theology, settling on theology as the arena of deepest concern. He begins to think of himself as one who wants to be a Christian, but he does not tell others about this.

There were many things going on in Kierkegaard's life at this time: he had an ongoing, tumultuous relationship with his father; he was engaged to be married to a socially prominent young woman, Regina Olson. Soren loves her very much but when he would try to share his intellectual struggles with her, she would downplay them or suggest they take a walk together. He writes that Regina's spiritual struggles can be resolved by a box of candy or a bouquet of flowers and wonders if he is perhaps "a century too old for her." He breaks off the engagement, basically because he knew that she would never cope with his immense inner tensions. Breaking an engagement just "was not done" and he tries to make it easy for her by acting like a cad, going to the theater nightly, buying new clothes. Regina, to her credit, saw through this act, as did many of his friends. So he leaves Copenhagen and goes to Berlin. In the intense atmosphere of Berlin, Kierkegaard begins to write as if floodgates had been opened within him. He writes 35 volumes in only nine years, between 1842 and 1851. He died when he was only 42.

So much for the externals of Kierkegaard's life. I knew from the start that attempting to preach the gospel as it shines through the life of Soren Kierkegaard would be one of the greatest challenges I've faced as a preacher. I'm regret to say

that I was right! Soren Kierkegaard is one of the trickiest, most difficult-to-describe Christians ever to live. “Kierkegaard is one of those rare men of reflection – he is too many-sided ever to be a founder of a school of thought.”^[1] He is difficult to describe because he was not a system-building, philosophical thinker. He thought the great philosophical systems of his day utterly misrepresented and missed the point of Christ. Hegel was the great systematizer of that time and his thought pervaded everything. Kierkegaard wrote of Hegel that reading him was like reading from a cookbook to a starving man! He said that Hegel was full of great thoughts, but none of them could feed a man or woman’s soul or help them change how they live. And that, thought Kierkegaard, is the only truth that matters.

It would be easy for me if Kierkegaard had an organized system of thought that I could describe to you, but his concern was with how people live in the world. His point of focus is always on us as individuals living out our lives before God. So he did not write in direct philosophical terms, he did not try to translate Christianity into a great system of theology that is easy for one to state. Instead, he wrote stories set within stories as told by a fictitious writers. That is, he would create a person with an obviously made-up name like Johannes de Silentio, Judge Wilhelm, or Johannes Climacus and through them he would tell stories depicting the different modes of existence. Each pseudonymous author is the embodiment of a particular mode of life, and we learn about the possibilities and limits of that life through that author.

The religious and philosophical worlds, he said, are victims of a monstrous illusion that all matters of truth will be settled by scholarship, by science, by slowly accumulating facts. But truth, said Kierkegaard, can not be stated through an accumulation of facts, rather it must be stated indirectly in such a way that caused us to reflect upon how we are living our own lives before God. To that end, he wrote parables, stories, just as we see in the New Testament, because we discern the pattern of our lives in those stories. “The crucial thing,” he cried, “is to find a truth which is truth for me, and to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die. Subjectivity is truth!”

So Kierkegaard wanted to point people back to the New Testament, and his life is given with great enthusiasm to Christian things. He saw himself as a prompter, who did not want us to look at him, or at “big thoughts,” but is trying to get us to pay attention to what is happening on the stage. The true stage is what God is doing in Christ. Kierkegaard is not a 19th century inventor, who dreams up philosophies and systems, rather he came to see himself as one who was under the

tutelage of God in Jesus Christ. In his many writings, he attempts to address the cultured people of his society in order to show them where they truly are.

And here is where Kierkegaard's thought may strike very close to how you and I live. While passionately striving to be a follower of Jesus Christ, Kierkegaard hated the church in Denmark. He saw a marked distinction between Christianity and Christendom, between a "cultural Christianity, good for everyone," and passionately following Christ. Let me tell you what he loathed.

The church in Denmark was (and is) Lutheran. It is a "State Church" in which all Danes are born Lutheran and thus, without a choice on their part, are automatically "Christians." Danish citizenship and membership in the Church were the same thing. Kierkegaard alleged that this reduced faith to nothing, and did away with radical conversion to Christ. The Church, he felt, transformed the sacred economy of God into a profane state religion. Kierkegaard felt that "Official Christianity", or Christendom, had departed so far from the Christianity of the New Testament that it needed to be torn down and rebuilt – not simply reformed! I want to stress that Kierkegaard did not attack the Christianity of the New Testament, but the "State-run Church" or "Christendom." His attack was unusual, since he attacked the Church from within, as a believer. He died in the midst of this heated battle.

His great insight was that his country was considered 100% Christian, but in reality they were Christian in name only. They were really very secular, and the demands of Jesus Christ did not touch them at all. They lived a comfortable, easy, pleasure-filled life which contained no challenge to sacrifice or discipleship. Hence his story about the "thieves" switching the price tags in the jewelry store. Kierkegaard believed that his society had lost the ability to discern the truly valuable from the virtually worthless – and he would say the same about us. We label ourselves Christian, but we do not pick up the cross, and do not attempt to passionately follow Christ. He declared, "This generation will die not from sin, but from lack of passion!" He believed that we need to see our true condition, like a sea captain who sees a great storm coming in the distance, realizing that this very night our life might be required of us, and we then begin to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, realizing how far we have drifted away from Christ. Kierkegaard declared war upon the state-run church of his day, attacking how the church accommodated the New Testament to mediocrity, denouncing the privileges of Bishops and even the practice of having "family Bibles." He attacked "Christendom" in the name of Jesus Christ – and he became notorious because of it.

Now, if you've followed me up to this point on Kierkegaard, I applaud you. If you have become lost, I beg your forbearance. I know I'm up against the limits of my descriptive abilities. Nevertheless, I want to attempt to describe Kierkegaard's understanding of "stages of life" or "modes of life." His writings seek to show us that there are different ways of living. These modes of living organize and orchestrate our behavior, our hopes, needs, passions, desires and thoughts. Happiness and freedom and love are all defined differently in each stage. These stages are possibilities for all of us and to understand them is very helpful in helping us make what he calls the "leap of faith" to place our lives in God's hands.

The ground-zero, necessary, first stage of life is the aesthetic stage. It is the stage of "seeking pleasure" in any of countless ways. It is simply our ongoing attempt to seek pleasure and avoid pain. There is no choice involved in this mode of life. We simply refine our pleasures. It may be eating chocolates, or the enjoyment of eating food, or the cultivation of one's taste in wine, or the enjoyment of reading a good book, or the enjoyment of having others depend on you, or the pleasure you take in helping others. The "aesthetic" stage of life is the stage of enjoying your pleasures, no matter how refined and cultured they become.

The best way to see the aesthetic form is from the perspective of the Ethical stage of life. The Ethical stage of life is characterized by willing, by making hard decisions about your behavior. The aesthetic stage of life has no willing. The choices in the pleasure-seeking mode reflect no commitment or investment, the choices there make no difference. But in the Ethical stage, one becomes aware of the difference between good and evil and you realize that you have a choice. When one moves into the Ethical, you start to fashion a self because your decisions make a difference. Attempting to do good and avoid evil achieves something! And something is eliminated each time we choose and something else is gained.

In the Ethical mode, happiness is not mere pleasure. Happiness is not dependent upon wealth or weather or luck. If our happiness depends upon "externals," such as beauty, or money, or youthfulness, then it's not real happiness – because if one of these changes, our happiness dissolves. In the Ethical mode, we are motivated by the choices we make out of love, mutual respect, and concern for the other. We are born into the aesthetic, pleasure-seeking mode, but the Ethical and other stages are attained.

But there is one other stage of life: it is the religious mode of existence. This is the stage which is the hardest to grasp with our minds. Kierkegaard wrote that a true believer must be willing to leave everything for the sake of Christ and accept the consequences of his calling. This means that he must follow the truth no matter where it leads. He takes note of the rich young man who asks Jesus what he must

do to inherit eternal life. The discussion is ended when Jesus tells him “Go and sell all of your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, and then come, take up your cross and follow me.” The religious element is not the giving away of everything to the poor – that would be an ethical move – rather it is the command to “take up your cross and follow me.” This is not “cultural Christianity”! This is the call to surrender all and to take the absurd “leap of faith” into the sphere of God.

The person who is in the Religious mode of life, Kierkegaard calls the “Knight of Faith.” The Knight of Faith is one who makes the sacrifice without the expectation of reward. He does what is right because it is right. More than that, though, he does it because his Lord asks it of him.

Externally, the Knight of Faith is no different in appearance – he or she looks just like everyone else. The difference is, that this person has heard Christ’s command to follow him, and thus has made the immense leap of renouncing the world. And in this resignation he or she discovered the bliss of the infinite, and discovers a freedom previously unknown, and discovers that everything she had renounced is hers again in complete freedom, and can be truly enjoyed for the first time. The Knight of Faith lives no longer for this pleasure or that. The Knight of Faith does not act out of duty or mere moral law. The Knight of Faith is that person who finally transcended the “fear and trembling” of working out their salvation, who has surrendered all to Christ and thus found true freedom, passionate purpose, and true joy.

Kierkegaard wants us to reflect upon our lives, to see where we are, and to ask the essential questions that lead us to God. And I invite you to be in prayer, as we think on these things before God May we pray?

– Have the price tags on the important and unimportant things in my life been switched around?

– Do I understand the choices I have for how to live? Am I living only to find things to enjoy? Am I beginning to grow dissatisfied with pleasures and seek a more fulfilling life?

– Am I committed to an idea about Christ – or am I willing to follow him anywhere?”

[1] Dr. Paul L. Holmer, from my lecture notes, Readings in Kierkegaard, Yale Divinity School.