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Love in *Philosophical Crumbs*

In *Philosophical Crumbs*, Søren Kierkegaard asserts the idea that Christian faith rests on the unequivocal acceptance that the eternal God's temporal appearance in lowest human form was purely an act of love. Acceptance of this fact has the power to transform those who are able to both grasp and set aside its sheer implausibility. Is it possible, however, for one to understand and accept God's love—the fundamental premise of Christianity—and thereby effect the transformation of faith without experiencing human love as a precursor? I will argue through the lens of Kierkegaard that no, it is impossible to know what it means to be loved by God unless one has experienced love manifested in human relationships.

Before making the argument that experiencing human love is necessary for accepting God's love, I will first discuss the nature of love, its goal of achieving understanding, and its role in Christianity using Kierkegaard's expositions in the *Crumbs*. Human love, or the love we feel toward other individuals, is complex and exists in various forms depending upon the unique relationships we have with those individuals. We may be social beings that desire companionship as a general rule, but we are also subjective beings, unique in our existence and encased in our own experiences, which color our individual impressions and beliefs of the world and make us who we are. Fundamentally, love is an expression of need that arises as a result of the differences that surround individuality. Unlike an external need (like a hunger produced by the body's lack of food), it is an internal need, or produced solely by subjective feelings and the immaterial,

spiritual component of the mind. As subjective individuals, we can only have direct access to our own inner, subjective experiences, yet we are instinctively compelled to know others' subjective experiences in order to connect with others. Our relationships are built around this dynamic, particularly those of friendship and romance. When two people are attracted to particular qualities in each other (qualities that make a person who they are and no one else), they wish to span the gulf that exists between their inner subjective experiences by uniting themselves in shared understanding. This is the very goal of love, according to Kierkegaard: to achieve understanding through equality or unity (101). Thus, love paradoxically springs from difference *and* seeks to destroy this difference.

The gulf between two individuals is huge, however, for one is simply unable to gain direct access to the other person's thoughts or feelings. Certain levels of understanding (in the sense of both comprehension and empathy) may be achieved, however, through two things: contact and recognition. Contact must be made in the first place in order to enable communication in any form, whether direct or indirect, verbal or nonverbal. Recognition, on the other hand, allows us to know what is being communicated, and relate it to our own subjective experiences. In general, the scope of what we've faced throughout our lives reflects our capacity for understanding; we tend to most readily grasp what we've experienced before. We can only know what it is like to have been a victim of systemic oppression is, for example, if we've encountered some form of it (racism, sexism, ableism, etc.) leveled against ourselves. Understanding is thus dependent upon the ability to convey ourselves via words or action, as well as the ability to relate to experiences outside of our own. *Love* drives us to achieve understanding through contact and communication, but whether it can succeed in bringing two

individuals into a happy union, however, depends upon just how reconcilable their differences are.

Love— *divine* love— is central to the proposition of Christianity, which states that God was born into this earth in human form, lived, suffered, and died for us at a specific time in history. He did all of this solely because He loves us, and that is precisely the assurance that enables Christian faith. The cause (God's love of humanity) and effect (God's appearance in time in human form) cannot be severed according to Kierkegaard; God's appearance on earth is directly indicative of His love. But what is the nature of God's love, such that it would move Him to reveal Himself to us in human form at a historical point in time?

According to Kierkegaard, human love may function as an imperfect analogy of the love that God bears for us as well (120). So too does God's love stretch across difference, only in this case it is the *absolute* difference, or the difference between temporality and eternity, between limited subjectivity and all-knowing omniscience, and between human imperfection and divine perfection, that renders us apart from God. If God's love transcends the boundary of absolute difference, human love can only be a mere, humble reflection of it.

And indeed God's love is unlike ordinary human love. As superior to human beings, He must confront the painful consequences of loving beings unequal to Him and with whom He can barely hope to achieve communion. Through His omniscience, God sees our humble lives play out and knows the misery, loneliness, and self-doubt that afflict us in our flawed and meager state. Because He loves us, our pain gives him pain, and He is compelled to express His love to us so that we might know the comfort of being loved in spite of our faults. And yet, it is no easy feat for Him to love and for us to feel loved in turn. Kierkegaard relates the difficulty of the

situation in the *Crumbs*:

He is the god and yet his eye rests with concern on the human race, because the tender shoot of the individual can be crushed as quickly as that of a blade of grass. What a life, sheer love and sheer sorrow: to want to express the unity of love and yet not to be understood; to fear for everyone's damnation and yet to be truly able to save only a single soul; sheer sorrow, even while his days and hours are filled with the sorrows of the learner who trusts in him. Thus the god is on earth like unto the lowest through his omnipotent love (107).

As edifying and self-affirming as God's love is, human beings do not gravitate naturally toward it. Our self-doubt gets in the way, as we question how God (if there is a God), a perfect, all-powerful being, could really love our flawed, imperfect, ignorant, impotent selves. Our dependence on external, human affirmation also interferes with our acceptance of God's love. The validation that we seek from other people reduces our feelings of innate self-worth—we feel we must act a certain way or have certain qualities in order to be accepted by other members of society, and if we do not meet these standards, then we simply are not lovable. Our inability to believe that God could love us unreservedly thus seemingly amounts to a rejection of that love. It is in that sense that we have turned away from God, and are “lost” to him through our own fault.

God *could* force enlightenment on us, the “learners,” by revealing Himself in full-fledged form, but he chooses not to, for that would deprive us of our free will and ruin the whole dynamic of the relationship. Due to the absolute difference between the flawed and finite learner and God's perfect infinite being, revealing Himself would erode the learner's confidence, “without which understanding and equality are lost and the love unhappy” (104). God alone feels the sorrow of knowing “he can repel the learner, can do without him, that the learner is lost through his own fault, that he can let him sink...” and yet despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation, the vital fact still remains that God loves the learner unconditionally (104, 103).

So if it would seem that we are separated from God irrevocably in understanding, how is a union to be brought about between ourselves and God? God's love is the reason that He does not forsake us. It grounds His "eternal resolution" to unite with us, serving as the motive behind the occasion of His coming. As Kierkegaard states, "The god's eternal resolution must stem from love...The love must thus be for the learner, and the goal must be to win him, because only in love are the different made equal, only in equality or unity is there understanding..." (101). By appearing in time and descending to our level to live among us as a servant, God has chosen to communicate Himself in such a way so that even the lowest-ranked among us might have a chance of understanding Him as an equal— a mortal human being made of flesh and blood, capable of suffering just like us. And suffer He does, says Kierkegaard:

...the servant form was not a costume. The god, therefore, must suffer everything, endure everything, hunger in the desert, thirst in anguish, be forsaken in death, absolutely equal to the lowest— behold the man! It is not the suffering of death that is his suffering, the whole of this life is a story of suffering, and it is love that suffers, love that gives everything, which is itself needy. Marvellous self-denial, even if the learner is the lowest, still he asks anxiously: Do you now really love me? (107).

What would move God to perform this ultimate act of empathy, and experience the slings and arrows suffered by mortal humans? Only a love so strong that it compels Him to relate to us, in the hope that He might receive our love as well— *not* for being "the omnipotent one who performs miracles," but rather for being "the one who lowered himself to be equal to [us]" (108). The entire point of God's suffering is to enable His authentic communion with us. To shun the sacrifice on His part, or even to protest against it, would be tantamount to a gross devaluation of God's love and a failure to understand Him. Ultimately, it is God's desire that we come to accept the gesture of His love for us and in doing so, experience the joy and relief that comes from

knowing that no matter how flawed and imperfect we are in comparison, God does not hold it against us. His love is wholly unconditional.

Now that we have a clear picture of what Kierkegaard believes is the pure and undiluted message of Christianity, we can proceed to determine the necessity of experiencing human love for understanding and acceptance of *God's* unconditional love. As a reflection of God's love, it would appear that human love is significantly less profound, and yet, just like the Socratic idea of "glimpsing the beautiful itself" by "looking beyond beauty in its scattered forms," it seems intuitive that we must have experienced human love in order to recognize God's sacrifice as an act of love in the first place (106). Likewise, it is conceivable that the absence of love in a person's life can alienate them from the understanding that God is love. Having no "scattered forms" of love to look beyond, how could they ever arrive at the absolute paradigm which is God's love?

Kierkegaard uses what he calls the paradox of romantic love as an imperfect analogy for describing what must take place on our end in order for us to come face to face with God. The paradox occurs when "the individual lives unperturbed, sufficient unto himself, but then the paradox of self-love is awakened through the love of another, the one desired...The lover is changed by this paradox of love, so that he hardly recognizes himself" (112). Kierkegaard uses the paradox of romantic love to illuminate the shift that occurs when a person's self-sufficiency is afflicted and they suddenly attain a passionate need for *another* self, with whom they are completely smitten. The overwhelming desire or need to be with that person whom they adore gives birth to feelings of insecurity and utter dependence on that other, idolized self. Such is the agony and the ecstasy that comes with being in (romantic) love.

When we extend the analogy of romantic love to our meeting with God, *He* becomes the exalted object of our need, and the low self-worth and inadequacy that we feel in comparison to His greatness translates to *sin-consciousness*. Once the learner is driven to the brink of overwhelming despair by their sin-consciousness, the moment arrives in which the learner meets God and is struck by His divine love. The learner gravitates toward Him finally because by this point, His love is the only thing that can save them. Accepting that the weight of their shortcomings has no bearing on God's love for them transfigures their despair and anxiety into a "happy passion" known as *faith* (128).

Although Kierkegaard solely focuses on romantic love as the best analogy for the passionate, inner struggle which must come before the transformation of faith, I argue that it takes experiencing other kinds of love in order to fully understand what our faith entails. Of all the varieties of love found in human relationships, the best approximation of God's unconditional love may be given by parental love, or the love that parents ought to have for their children. Ideally, parents are disposed to love their children no matter what they might do, whether they share different values or commit a crime. Their love has no conditions and is solely borne of the unique bond that exists between parent and child. The sacrifices that parents make for their children's well-being abound, whether it's changing their diapers, cooking them food, buying them clothes, or paying for their education. And in many (not all) cases, parents will choose to do this even if they were to get nothing in return. Children who grow up with the knowledge that their parents love them unconditionally are instilled with the concept of such love, which allows them to more readily accept that God loves them and that they deserve this love, when they are introduced to the idea. Kierkegaard acknowledges the power of this love to

foster a belief in God in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Crumbs*: “Father-love and mother-love cling so tightly to the child, embrace it so tenderly, that the piety discovers, as it were of itself, what after all is taught: that there must be a God who looks after little children” (498).

If one has *not* experienced sacrificial love from one’s parents or guardians, I would argue that it is infinitely harder to understand that God’s sacrifice is a communication of love. Even if the individual were to accept this statement as an objective fact, it would still be difficult to apply it subjectively to themselves and feel that the sacrifice was made *for them*, if they had never received any indication that they deserved such love from other human beings.

And yet, there is hope that the learner, despite not having had the experience of being loved, may come to understand the nature of God’s love through experiencing a love for others, psychological effects permitting. It is often the case that individuals who have suffered abuse or neglect at the hands of their caretakers are unable to form emotional attachments to other people as a result. But if a person with these experiences should still be able to form emotional attachments—love another person such that they would freely sacrifice a great deal for them at their own expense—then it seems likely that they would be able to develop a sufficient concept of love that they could relate to God.

Finally, let us not underestimate the value of friendship as a way of understanding God’s love. The love between friends is a love that strives to unite two different people through mutual understanding. It contains the passion that wills one to seek communion with the other, yet lacks the possessiveness and sexual desire that corrupts romantic love. In ideal friendship, there is equality, empathy, and above all, a loyalty that decrees that friends both stick up for and stick by

each other in the best and worst of times. While the love between friends tends to not be as strong as that between parents and children, the strongest friendships are indeed characterized, just like parental love, by sacrifice on the part of one for the other's behalf. If we can experience, through friendship, a love that equalizes two people through mutual understanding, then we might more readily come to accept that God's decision to live and die with us on earth is proof of his infinite love for us.

Through the lens of Kierkegaard, I have unfolded the nature of both human and Godly love, applied it to Christianity, and come to the conclusion that experiencing human love is a requisite for understanding God's love. It seems natural that it be so, for Christianity is very much a religion tailored to humanity in that it acknowledges and avails us of our human need to feel loved.