

Don't Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth



My Ethics professor in seminary was Stanley Hauerwas. He called himself “white, East Texas trash” (his words, not mine). He was clearly brilliant, but he was also brash and rough around the edges, frequently cussing in the midst of a lecture. The first week of class he was talking about how humans, deep down, don’t really like to receive gifts. Why? Because then we feel indebted to the giver and don’t rest easy until we’ve paid them back. We don’t trust, or understand, the kind of grace that comes with no-strings-attached gifts. There’s gotta be a catch. So while we might, on the surface, smile and act appreciative, deep down we’re suspicious and grumbling, and immediately strategizing ways to even the score. So, in the midst of this reality, what does God do? Gives us the very *life* of his own SON! How the hell are we supposed to pay THAT back? The son of a bitch ... (again, his words, not mine!)

I was recently reminded of that class experience from long ago while reading a devotion based on this week’s lectionary text. It included a quote by Voltaire: “*In the beginning God created humans in God’s own image, and we have been trying to repay the favor ever since.*” I wonder what Hauerwas would have to say about that.

The Voltaire quote intrigues me. Is his tone sarcastic/annoyed/even angry, perhaps echoing a more Hauerwasian state of mind? “Gee, thanks a LOT, God! You’ve made us like you? YOU?!?! You’re **God**, for crying out loud! How the hell are we supposed to repay *that*?! Boy, am I going to pay you back for that little stunt! You just wait, you son of a bitch!”

Sadly, that argument has some potential proof, considering much of human behavior over the millennia. This week’s lectionary passage was on what could be called the crux of the whole Bible: Love God with everything you have and are AND love your neighbor as yourself. I once heard a biblical scholar remind us that if a law or commandment got codified and was an officially taught rule or expectation, it’s because the *opposite* behavior was being exemplified enough to require the corrective. So there’s that ...

Or is Voltaire saying that we humans are so grateful for this divinely embodied honor that we have striven to do everything in our power to live up to that godly image? I mean ... clearly, we *haven’t* ... but perhaps Voltaire was trying to manifest a self-fulfilling prophecy among all who would encounter his words. That’s a lovely thought, and certainly a carrot worth dangling.

It's a little like my favorite Sufi tale that encourages humans to remember that we're all created in God's image by imagining that every person has a little town crier that precedes them everywhere they go calling out, "Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God!" It would be a difficult reality to forget if every single person had such a constant—and grand—preamble to everything we said or did, including something as innocuous as strolling down the road. Might that help us remember to love those people, our neighbors, like ourselves? Of course, this implies that we're loving *ourselves* first. So maybe the first thing we need to do is imagine that town crier in front of ourselves alerting not just bystanders but us as well, that WE are created in the image of God. That *I* am created in the image of God. That's a gift we could all give ourselves—with no paybacks required!