

“God Is Love”

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I John 4:7-21

John 15:9-17

[Jesus said,]

‘No one has ever seen God.

But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is truly in our hearts.’

I John 15:12

Let us pray...O God,

Help us to live up to that great commandment to love you and to love others
even as we ought to love ourselves just as you love us.

Amen

Remember alphabet pasta?

It would be in the same vicinity of supermarket shelves
as pastina and orzo pasta.

It was great for kids as the kind of food they could play with by spelling words –
and great for arts & crafts projects.

I remember going to a vacation Bible school-type activity when I was about 5 or 6
and making something out of popsicle sticks for my mother –
kind of a desk ornament of some kind.

It was sort of like a raft with these flat sticks laid side by side
across 2 pieces underneath and there was an angled part at the top
and another piece that went across – sort of a flat birdhouse.

And the purpose – I suppose, was to hold a small pad of paper.

I never saw it used that way, though my mom had it on her desk for years.

Then, we were given some alphabet pasta to glue onto the crosspiece of our project,
making the following statement:

GOD IS LOVE

Doesn’t seem particularly profound, but it was significant in its simplicity
and something I noticed every now and then

when I went by my mom’s desk or used the phone.

God is love...

This is something we all know, but how hard it is to describe what it means.

It would seem to be a subject we were more familiar with as children –
less encumbered by harsher realities and disappointments.

Yet, ‘God is love’ – embracing all that is good, true, and beautiful

Is as dependable as the returning green grass of spring.

Willard, p.2

God is love,

but the reverse of that statement doesn't quite work.

"Love is God" would be kind of an idolatry –

because nothing finite can ever equal what is infinite.

At some point – no matter who or what it is, is going to let you down.

For example, you shouldn't put someone you love like your spouse

up on a pedestal, because no one can live up to that expectation.

Not even... your mother –

yes, I know that can be hard to believe for some of us.

And though 'God is love' – who or what you love should not be

expected to fulfill your idea of perfection – to be your 'God'.

However, who and what you love and hold most dear, certainly comes from God

and knowing this can help you gain an understanding of

who God is and what God is about.

And to love God is best done by how we love one another,

including everybody's 'Mother' – Mother Earth with all its children.

To say 'God is love' is to say that 'love' plays a foundational concept

in Christian theology.

There are some distinctions made in how we define love as it relates to Christianity,

and traditionally, that has been shaped by the Greek language –

in which the New Testament was written, and by Greek philosophy.

Eros is the love of expressed physical desire and emotional affection;

Philia is the transactional love of friends who return favors to each other;

and *Agape* which is concerned for the sake of the beloved

beyond the expectation for anything in return.

The love of and for God is primarily associated with the unconditional love

of Agape.

Erich Fromm – who wrote the book, The Art of Loving, defined love

as 'the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love'.

And that definition has served to flesh out what 'love' means to me –

reinforcing the notion that 'love is a verb'.

http://quote.robertgenn.com/auth_search.php?authid=1226

Love is the way we should conduct ourselves

and isn't it true that when we love what we are doing

and who we are with, that we feel most alive?

Jesus said 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life'

and that's just to say that he was love-personified.

And we are to become love-personified within our own circumstances –

not just fulfilling our needs, but by showing compassion for others.

Willard, p.3

A friend of mine named Chris Farlekas is a retired newspaper reporter who is known in his community for the variety shows he would organize and direct as fundraising activities.

He would take over the local theater for these events to help poor people in the Orange County, NY area or to bring attention to some justice issue through popular songs, scenes from plays, and dramatic readings.

He has also regularly played Santa Claus year to year, to distribute Christmas gifts of toys he helped collect.

Chris once told me he was '90% love' – not as something to brag about, but to describe his motivation for the various altruistic activities he was involved in.

And it was then that I realized that's enough!

That is all of the Gospel you really need to know – and put into practice.

For a start, Love – *agape* love or loving-kindness, is the key to unlock the meaning of our scriptures – to unpack even the most difficult passages to get at God's unerring call for justice and mercy despite human depravity. Love is the litmus test for God's will in any given situation.

It is the core value that energized young people in the Civil Rights movement to stand up to a society frozen in its prejudice, hatred, and fear – and overcome institutional evil with nonviolent good.

Though that work is not yet completed, many victories were achieved and this method of opposing tyranny has earned the respect of those still fighting for freedom throughout the world.

Martin Luther King spoke of the significance of love early on in his writing and speeches.

In his article for the Christian Century, "Nonviolence and Racial Justice", he said:

In speaking of love...

we are not speaking of some sentimental emotion...

Agape means... understanding,

redeeming good will for all men,

an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.

When we love on the agape level we love men not because we like them, not because their attitudes and ways appeal to us,

but because God loves them.

Here we rise to the position of loving the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that he does.

Willard, p.4

And in a sermon he gave in 1956 shortly before the Supreme Court outlawed Alabama's bus segregation laws, Dr. King said:

... love is the most durable power in the world...

As John says, "God is love."

He who loves is a participant in the being of God.

He who hates does not know God.

Love provides a foundational understanding of who God is
as our Father/Mother/Beloved Guardian in Heaven
and as what is expected of us as God's children.
We are commanded to love.

Christianity – throughout its history even to our present time,
often picked up where the Pharisees left off,
keeping score of everyone's sins as if God needed help with that.

I believe we need to re-discover an ethic based on loving-kindness
and not constantly try to fit reality into a set of human rules and consequences
that anticipate God's judgment.

Instead, we should teach people to live up to their full potential
while respecting others' potential to live up to theirs –
making room for each other while guarding against indulgence.

That means making sure people are properly fed, safely housed,
have opportunities to get an education, find a decent job with a livable wage –
for all of us to accept and be accepted in return
for who we are and who we can become.

By the way, amidst all the new discussion this week
in response to the President's remarks about "Gay Marriage"
and how the Bible should be interpreted concerning this issue,
I found this quote by a UCC minister whom I have had the pleasure to meet:
*Graylan Hagler, the pastor of Plymouth Congregational UCC
in Washington, D.C., says "of course it's a civil rights issue."
Hagler notes that there are plenty of blacks who are gay,
and they, too, should have access to the God-given institution of marriage.
To him, legitimizing marriage for committed gay couples is precisely
what the Bible envisioned.
"I just think of the words from Galatians where it says,
"There is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free," he says.
"And what is happening there is that they're pointing
to what the kingdom of God looks like ...
it's open to everybody and everybody has equal status."*

Willard, p.5

Love is the key for interpreting the great questions of our time
and for unlocking the mysteries of the Bible
that allow for an ever-expanding humanity.

Love also sets the boundaries for what is just
while our creativity helps us to be who we can be just like God who says,
'I Am Who I Will Become'.

In closing let me share a song I happened to discover on TV and have adapted.

It's from "Brother Sun/Sister Moon" – about St Francis of Assisi:

*Flowers in the meadow gently sway
and all the little birds sing, 'Happy May Day!'
Kittens in the garden sport and play
and all the little creatures smile and are gay.
My little girl and boy, sing out your joy!
I am here, my dear. My darling, do not fear.
Love is all around you comforting
with gentle lullabies to make your heart sing.
Amen*

Our reading from I John 4:7-21 includes an expanded interpretation about the meaning of love to Christians.

⁷ My dear friends, we must love each other. Love comes from God,
and when we love each other,
it shows that we have been given new life.

We are now God's children, and we know him.

⁸ God is love,
and anyone who doesn't love others has never known him.

⁹ God showed ... love for us
when [God] sent his only Son into the world to give us life.

¹⁰ Real love isn't our love for God, but his love for us.
God sent his Son to be the sacrifice by which our sins are forgiven.

¹¹ Dear friends, since God loved us this much,
we must love each other.

¹² No one has ever seen God.
But if we love each other, God lives in us,
and [God's] love is truly in our hearts.

¹³ God has given us his Spirit.
That is how we know that we are one with him,
just as he is one with us.

¹⁴ God sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.
We saw his Son and are now telling others about him.

¹⁵ God stays one with everyone who openly says that
Jesus is the Son of God.

That's how we stay one with God ¹⁶ and are sure that God loves us.
God is love.

If we keep on loving others, we will stay one in our hearts with God,
and he will stay one with us.

¹⁷ If we truly love others and live as Christ did in this world,
we won't be worried about the day of judgment.

¹⁸ A real love for others will chase those worries away.
The thought of being punished is what makes us afraid.

It shows that we have not really learned to love.

¹⁹ We love because God loved us first.

²⁰ But if we say we love God and don't love each other, we are liars.

We cannot see God.

So how can we love God, if we don't love the people we can see?

²¹ The commandment that God has given us is:

"Love God and love each other!"

John 15:9-17 [DWW]

[Jesus said,]

As the Father/Mother/Beloved Guardian has loved me,
in the same way, I love you.

Live in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will be living in my love,
just as I have kept the commandments and live in the love
of my Beloved Guardian.

I have spoken these things to you so that my joy may be within you
and that your joy may be overflowing.

This is my commandment – that you love one another.

There is no greater love than this – that someone lay down their life for their friends.
You are my friends.

If you practice what I have ordained, never could I call you slaves,
because the slave doesn't know what the master is doing.

But I have called you friends, because everything I hear from my Beloved Guardian,
I have made known to you.

You did not choose me, but I chose you,
and I have empowered you to go out and bear good fruit.

And that the harvest of your work should keep on going,
so that whatever is asked in my name,
the Father/Mother/Beloved Guardian may give to you.

What I am commanding you to do is this –
love one another.

John 15:9-17

[Jesus said,]

⁹ I have loved you, just as my Father has loved me.

So remain faithful to my love for you.

¹⁰ If you obey me, I will keep loving you, just as my Father keeps loving me, because I have obeyed him.

¹¹ I have told you this to make you as completely happy as I am.

¹² Now I tell you to love each other, as I have loved you.

¹³ The greatest way to show love for friends is to die for them.

¹⁴ And you are my friends, if you obey me.

¹⁵ Servants don't know what their master is doing, and so I don't speak to you as my servants.

I speak to you as my friends,

and I have told you everything that my Father has told me.

¹⁶ You did not choose me.

I chose you and sent you out to produce fruit, the kind of fruit that will last.

Then my Father will give you whatever you ask for in my name.

¹⁷ So I command you to love each other.