

The Grammar of Divine Love

I'd like to start today with a grammar lesson. I know a lot of people don't like grammar. It's in the same category with fractions, and spelling, and algebra—subjects which stir up memories of feeling inadequate to the task. But this is a simple grammar lesson, and I promise, there won't be a quiz afterwards.

It's about two different "moods" which verbs can have. One of these moods is the indicative mood. Hear the word "indicate" in that word. The indicative mood states what already is, the actuality, what is certain. In contrast, the imperative mood states what should be, a direction or command.

My first preaching professor harped on the difference between these moods because he wanted us never to forget the indicative. He saw in prospective preachers the desire to tell people what they ought to do, how they ought to think and live—the imperative of the gospel. And in those same budding preachers, he saw the tendency to neglect to say what God has already done for us—the indicative of the gospel. (It was kind of ironic how imperatively he taught us to "always preach the indicative.")

The indicative dominates this passage from 1 John. God's love is the beginning of everything. Even as John's words circle and spiral, seeking to express the inexpressible and define the undefinable, he always returns to where everything originates, that is, in God's self-giving, unconditional, inexhaustible love. In these 15 verses, the word "love" and its cognates appear 27 times. "Beloved," "love," and "loved." It is both a noun and a verb. It is the indicative out of which everything else arises, including returning love to the source of love and the moral imperative of loving others. (Gary Charles, 2008, *Feasting on the Word*, year B vol. 2, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, pp. 467-71)

Beloved, God is love. We love because God first loved us. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us. Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. There is so much indicative that the imperative is obvious. We could rearrange John's sentences, and still come out with the same message: God is love, love is God, God is in us as love is in us, we are in God as love is in us.

There is nothing sentimental about this love. It is not romantic at all. And it's also not some sort of self-potential that we just need to tap into. It is pure gift, from the One who is Love. And we have this knowledge because we have experienced Jesus Christ.

Writer Steve Garnaas-Holmes riffs on 1 John's simple assertion that "God is love." (v. 8, v. 16)

God is not just a loving being—
some nice guy in heaven—
God is love itself.
God is being itself.
Love is God.
The energy of loving,
the act of loving,
the happening of love,

that is God.
When you love someone,
that is God happening.

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That is the indicative mood. It just tells it like it is.

There are, of course, a lot of other things the Bible and people say about God's identity, God's being. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, written in the 17th century and memorized by Presbyterians for several centuries thereafter, says, "God is a Spirit: infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." (PC(USA) *Book of Confessions*, 7.004) Every one of those descriptors has a Biblical source. There also are the one-dimensional images of God. Such as, the image of God as judge, watching us like Santa Claus to see if we are naughty or nice. Or the image of God as commander-in-chief, ruling over everything with an unconquerable will.

But John says simply, God is Love.

And everything else derives from that ground. The indicative generates the imperative, which is the broad-brush command to love one another, love those brothers and sisters we see, love with the love through which God creates us and by which God redeems us and in which God perfects us as channels of God, vessels of love.

Baptist pastor William Self observes,

The love that is talked about in John's letter is so unique that the early Christians took an old colorless Greek word that was rarely used and adopted it for their own purposes, giving it a rich meaning. That word is *agapē*, love that gives without expecting a return, sacrificially. God is love, *agapē*. Jesus died for us as an act of *agapē*, and we ought to *agapē* one another.

(*Feasting on the Word*, year B vol. 2, 2008, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, pp. 467-69)

And theology professor Ronald Cole-Turner adds,

We do not have to guess what God is like. We simply have to look at what God has done. We cannot see God, but we can see what God has done in Jesus Christ.

(*Feasting on the Word*, year B vol. 2, 2008, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 468)

And if you haven't gotten the message from all this repetition and reiteration and redundancy, just remember how John addresses us, his readers:

"Beloved." In Greek, *agapētoi*.

The indicative is the basis for the imperative. Theological truth grounds moral action. Divine love is both the source and the reason for human love.

In these days of stress and polarization, the love commandment, our moral imperative, is challenging. We hear so much blaming and see so much finger-pointing. Nobody wants to be the weak one, no one wants to give an inch because their opponent will take a mile. The merciful are seen as meek. We live in a time of hardened lines, defined sides, and demonization of the other. That brother or sister we're supposed to love? Well, if we don't recognize them as siblings, how could we recognize them as God's beloved ones?

Among all the laws our state legislature has considered this session, I am most troubled by the laws which aim to limit the rights of transgender individuals, because I believe they promote hate instead of love. I believe these laws arise out of fear, which today's scripture tells us is the enemy of love. Instead of allowing parents, doctors, counselors, and coaches help young people navigate the confusing world of gender identity, these laws make their decisions for them. And by doing so, they contribute to an environment of shame and self-hatred. The suicide rate among transgender teens and young adults is already way too high. Too often, Christians are the perpetrators of judgment and scorn rather than acceptance and love. I say this because I believe Christians need to stand as allies for transgender persons, who are equally beloved of God. Like some of our youth group, who wear buttons and t-shirts that say, "Protect Queer Youth." As John wrote to his readers in the first century, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars." I think it's also true that those who say, "I love God," yet keep silent in the face of scapegoating, are liars.

It's not hard at all to think of others who need to know that God is love through the loving expression of those who love God because they know God loves them. Words aren't enough. Love is an action verb which starts out as indicative in mood and becomes imperative. The chronically homeless who will receive a home in the Housing First Village will feel divine love in the form of a roof and four walls and a warm bed in the nighttime. The immigrant who receives a welcome after years of violence and deprivation will feel God's love through love given in a basket of household goods, or help learning the local language and culture, or support for kids in school. We all know someone near us who needs God's love to flow through us: an elderly neighbor who has been sheltering for months through the pandemic; a parent who is struggling to make ends meet; a child who is getting in trouble in school, maybe because things aren't right at home. Look around, see who you see. That person is beloved of God, and this one is your opportunity to see God as you share love.

I close with the conclusion of Steve Garnaas-Holmes' meditation.

Beloved,
faith is not thinking
the right things about God.
It's receiving love,
radiating loveliness,
and spreading love.
It is that alone that we practice.

Praise to the Holy Trinity:
the Lover, and the Beloved,
and the Loving that flows between.
Amen.

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God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Where do you choose to abide?