

August 12, 2018

A Triple Redundancy

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I John 4:7-21

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶ So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷ Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

When we worship together, and when we eat together, when we serve our neighbors, when we speak truth to power, when we offer hospitality to the stranger, protection for the refugee, a resting place for the weary, food for the hungry and shelter for the homeless, when we choose solidarity with the weak instead of the safety of our privilege, when we choose self-denial over self-indulgence, when we do ANY of these, we do them with clear biblical precedent, Old Testament and New. This is the **activity, the ethic** of the people of the God of the Bible. Because, everywhere, on every Bible page: God. Is. Love. That is the "Triple Redundancy."

When I was in Washington, D.C. this spring, on my only free day I walked around Georgetown, since I'd only seen it on TV. I saw one-bedroom condos for sale for \$1million. Not interested. Then I saw a tiny storefront: Moleskin. Do you know Moleskin? It's paper. Little notebooks and journals. Shelves and shelves of every color and size of moleskin notebooks. I LOVE moleskin paper.

I also love my kids. And I love my husband. And I love my dogs. And I love the gourd vines in my garden. And I love yarn. And I love good food and good coffee. And I love books. I really, really love books. Love love love love love love love. Could any English word possibly mean less, if it renders family equal to paper and gourds? Other languages have lots of words for love, New Testament Greek included. *Agape* is the Greek word most common for love in the New Testament. *Agape* has practically become synonymous with *Christian love*, the love of God acted out in the Christ event. That's agape. Incarnation – *putting off the things of heaven and taking up the form of a slave* – also *agape*.

To read John – to read the Bible, for that matter – we have to get this right. *I love paper* and *I love my husband* and *I love Jesus* is not triply redundant. Framed by *agape*, Jesus and husband can stay; they are in fact redundant. My love for my husband is redundant of my love of Jesus. But paper cannot remain an object of the same verb. Because if “*God Is Love*” is our measure for love, then everything must change, including our grammar.

John restates in the third person proper verb form what God has said all along in the first person personal: *God calls God's self “I AM”*; John says “*God Is.*” Adding *LOVE* makes it the triple redundancy. To begin to know God is to know this. To know and believe it, John writes, is to abide therein. By default, how you abide in this world tells the truth about what you know and believe. Either you know God, or you don't, evident in the substance of your life – the substance of God's love in your life or the absence of the substance of God's love in your life. The substance of God is love. Love is the substance of God, known in the person – in the event – of Jesus, the Son of God.

Love is not the description of life in God. This is tricky for someone who loves books. Some monks in Pennsylvania wrote a wonderful book called “The Art of Raising a Puppy.” Ben wrote a book report on this book in Third Grade. His thesis was that reading this book is nothing like raising an actual puppy. Raising a live puppy is a substantial commitment of one's life, the commitment of a substantial amount of time-and-energy-consuming activity.

Reading that *God is love* is nothing like believing and knowing that *God is love*. Believing *God is love* is a substantial commitment of one's life, the commitment of a substantial amount of time-and-energy-consuming activity. *God is love* must be ethics before it can be theology. *God is love* is fundamentally what we do. Too easily do we slip into talking and feeling without doing anything at all.

Of the dozens of ways of describing the *agape* love of God from I John, chapter 4, for today I've chosen two. The love of God is substantive, not descriptive; it is a way of living, not a way of talking about beliefs. And, the love of God is initiative, not responsive; it does not wait for cause to love.

God's love is substantive. We know what it looks and sounds and acts like from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It takes up space. It has energy. It moves. It alters the environment in which it moves. It exerts power. It interacts with other people and with systems. It is visible, audible, palpable. It draws others toward it or repels them from it. People were drawn to or repelled by Jesus. Romans 5:8 reads, *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* Dying that began when he was born a human, constant dying to the self he was, in order to be like us and for us, all the way to death.

Jesus told of a man beaten and dying on a road. Two very religious men avoided him, for very religious reasons. Theirs was a well-kept theology. Another man, possibly religious, stopped, knelt, doctored, picked up and carried the beaten, dying man to safety. Stayed with him two days. *He died to his own plans*, as one preacher said. Jesus said he was the neighbor. The original religious question was about the most important commandment, remember? Love, Jesus answered. Loving God and loving our neighbors. Jesus says walking by without spitting on the beaten, dying man doesn't really count as loving God or neighbor. What counts? Dying to your own plans.

The Samaritan man – might have been a salesman – died to all the clients he would have had over the next two days. He might have been a professor headed to conference, who died to all the groundbreaking papers she was supposed to present. Or a student, dying to the finals he was supposed to take to graduate. And it's not just plans, is it? If God is love and Jesus is the teacher, we die to a lot more than plans. We die to our preferred idea of ourselves, our identity, our reputations. Jesus's story of the Samaritan man is picture-perfect I John 4. One man finds another man on the brink of death. He doesn't know him. The bleeding man can't do a thing for the Samaritan. If he could stand, he'd likely have crossed the road to avoid the very man who saved his life. What the Samaritan man does is not rooted in politics, in theology.

For those who make no claims of knowing God, human decency is still at stake when a man lies bleeding in the street. But for those who claim some knowledge of – some kinship with – the Lord, everything rides on whose plans get interrupted next. God's? Or ours? If God is love, all that God does is done in love. From the beginning, including Creation, reality itself is washed through with this love, so that a man beaten and left dead by other men is an affront to the creation, a horror that cannot be abided by anyone who also claims to know of God.

Friends, if God is love, almost nothing else I call *love* is. To what plans have you died lately? Was it for a friend? Because the Bible says even the Gentiles do that.

God is Love is substantive, not descriptive. And it is initiative, not responsive. We are the man in the street, destined for death. God didn't love us because of what God would get out of the deal. Love is what/who/how God is. Love that did something without any expectation or confidence that the ones loved (us) would ever so much as say "thank you," let alone stop being a bunch of hateful snots. Here is the love of which John writes in I John 4. And someone else, in Romans 5: *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Love cannot precede God. God cannot love anyone back. God invented Love. It started with God. We cannot help but love God responsively, but we respond by taking the initiative to love others first. Without manipulation. Without expectation. Because whether or not the other is grateful – or loves me back – is not the point. God loves me. I am, we are, fully, completely, perfectly loved already.

God. Is. Love. I can think it through beginning to end. I can barely begin to live it. I love others about as well as I knit right-handed. Slow and clumsy with lots of starting over. And I get tired quickly. I get mad quicker than I get tired. I am a perpetual beginner. Which I suppose, I want.

John wrote in verse 18, *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.* The root of anger is almost always fear. It helps me to imagine John encouraging us not to be afraid to love poorly, so long as we are loving perfectly, so long as our love for others mimics God's love for us in Christ Jesus. Love that is more substance than description, Love that came to us freely from the first, offered to our neighbors as freely as we have received it from the Lord.

Would you pray with me?