

Divine Romance (Part One)

“God is love”

Reflection 49 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

People today, many people today, wary of church, who’ve all but given up on church, who often declare themselves to be “non-affiliated,” still seek a robust sense of God’s love. They seek in their lives and in their faith dynamic, ongoing, sustaining love. A foundation for living based in love. Not just an appreciation of the sacred but a sacred passionate relationship in which to ground the meaning of their lives. They seek tentatively, hopefully, not at all sure that the longings of their hearts have any basis in reality, but hungering for a divine romance.

They also know what is loving and kind. They recognize love and a lack of love. They know when a church is loving and kind, caring and compassionate. And they know when the teachings of a church are loving and they definitely know when they’re not. So when they hear teachings about salvation that are unloving, they recoil. Naturally. When they hear notions of atonement, notions of why Jesus died, anchored in the wrath of God, they know this doesn’t make sense. And when they consider again what has been too often the traditional teaching of the church on hell, that billions of people are consigned to unspeakable torture, to unimaginable agony, broiling, baking, blistering in the fires of hell not just for a minute or two, or ten, or an hour, or a day, or a week, or a month, or a year, not just for ten years (“Give me a break”) but forever and ever and ever, they know that the church is maybe more than a little confused about love. And on these matters they are right.

The writer John in 1 John 4:7-21 emphatically backs them up. To fully gasp the text though, we have to go back in behind it and see its back story. Which we now do. Once there were two brothers, James and John, who traveled with Jesus. One day the group approached a Samaritan village, and Jesus sent some ahead to the village seeking hospitality, perhaps food for his entourage, or accommodations for the night. But the people of the village seeing that they were Jews headed for Jerusalem turned them away. When James and John saw this, they asked Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and resolutely set out for Jerusalem. The text, Luke 9:51-56, might well have added, “To die.” There was, however, a name that stuck with James and John – Boanerges which means Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17).

Sixty years pass. Now one of the brothers, John, is an old man. And he has seen a lot: the crucifixion of Jesus, and then his resurrection, the exciting early days of the church in Jerusalem, but then the arrest and execution of his brother James, his own departure from Jerusalem, under duress, at risk of death, life across the sea in strange, exotic Ephesus, far away from all he had ever known. He’s experienced years of struggle, disappointment, danger and loss. He’s lived through the church debates over circumcision, and which foods to eat, and law and grace, and when Jesus would come back. One by one his original companions have either dispersed to far-off lands or died. Peter was executed in

Nero's Rome, as was Paul. The power of Rome was, in fact, now clamping down on believers everywhere.

And the Son of Thunder erupts again with the book we call Apocalypse, summoning vengeance on Rome: sword, famine, plagues and wild beasts; a great earthquake and a mountain ablaze thrown into the sea (Vesuvius, anyone?); the sun turning black and the moon blood red, vast armies like locust unleashed on Rome. But now even within the churches he loves there is new trouble. There were people who thought they were smarter than everyone else. They felt and acted elite and looked down on those like John – simple people with a simple faith. And so this last surviving Son of Thunder rises once again to the challenge and gives us The First Letter of John. In it, the thunder still rumbles: “God is light; in him is no darkness at all” (1:5). “Do not love the world or anything in the world” (2:15). “Dear children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come” (2:18). “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits” (4:1).

But then John returns again to the core message, the truth he learned from Jesus the night before the crucifixion, the night indelibly stamped on his consciousness (John 13:34-35), the truth that we really must love one another (1 John 2:7-11; 3:11-20). Then in 1 John 4:7-21 he writes one of the greatest good-news passages ever written. He says: “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God” (verse 7). “If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete” (verse 12). We can know this, he says, by looking inside to the Spirit of God within us (verse 13). He goes on (now in verse 16): “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.” And then he adds: “Perfect or mature love drives out fear” (verse 18), because fear has to do with punishment. And John is saying: You who have truly entered into this life of love need fear no punishment. Ever. I don't want you, he says, to see life – to see God – that way again. This is exactly what Paul had prayed for the believers in Ephesus earlier in Ephesians: that they would know God better (1:17), that they would “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (3:18).

Both John and Paul, each a brilliant controversialist, are saying to us today: I don't want you to see God as an angry, vengeful tyrant acting in petty ways we train our children not to. I don't want you to see a God whose habitual state is anger, God with a hair-trigger temper, God refusing to accept anything but perfect people in perfect churches who've figured everything out perfectly. I want you to see that God is love. God's a shepherd who goes out into the wilderness looking for us when we are lost! God runs to us when we are still a long ways off. God became one of us and died for us. God bleeds for us. He's the God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19), so a woman is brought in before him, caught in sexual sin, and he will protect her from her accusers, and he will not condemn her; instead he gently redirects her life (John 7:53 -8:11). Trust this. Believe this.

All of this matters because we become like the God we worship. If we see God as vengeful and vindictive, we become vengeful and vindictive people. If we see God as calculating, we become calculating. If we see God as generous, we become generous. If

we see God as forgiving and loving, we become forgiving and loving people. So John writes: “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16).

– Dale Pauls

Part two (of two) next week