

The Indicative and the Imperative: God's Gift of Love and Life, Part II
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
May 17, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture :
Isaiah 43:1
1 John 4:7-21

If someone asked you to sum up the Christian life, how would you respond?

Could you do it in one sentence?

If someone asked me that, I have to admit that my sentence might be fairly long.

But, I think I could do it in two short questions.

What has God done for us? And, how do we respond?

Those two questions capture the elements, or movements, if you will, of the two-part series of sermons we began last week based on our New Testament reading from 1 John. On page 7 of your bulletin, we have reprinted the rudimentary graphic I drew up to illustrate the movement of these 14 verses.

When I confessed last week that it resembles a baseball diamond and that I might have been channeling the dream of a Caldwell softball team, several of you said to me after the service that you were ready to suit up. So, stay tuned on the front.

And, when I asked Thomas and Smitty about hymns for this Sunday, I told them I half expected that one of them would suggest "Take me out to the ballgame." I suppose that is a hymn to the most devout baseball fans.

Last week, we started out at home plate and considered what it means to be God's "beloved," marked by the promise of God's eternal love.

Then, we took off to first base, where we stopped to dwell on the truth that, through divine love, God abides with us and calls us to abide with each other, through life's ups and downs, twists and turns.

So we begin today by taking a long lead off first base, ready to round second, third and head for home. Are you with me?

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First, though, I suppose I should explain the title of the sermon.

A member of the church called me out this week for what I am – a grammar geek. She based her charge on my point in last week’s sermon that we can find a pretty good nutshell theology in the structure of a simple sentence. God is always the subject, the primary actor in everything, the one who initiates every good and perfect thing. We, then, are the direct object, those who receive God’s love and grace, forgiveness and forbearance.

I admit it. I am the proud son of an English teacher, my mother, who happens to be here. Words and language mattered in our house.

So, I am going to ask you to endure one more classroom flashback. Who remembers the grammar lesson about how verbs have moods? In the rules of grammar, verb moods are additional ways of expressing ourselves. Two moods in particular capture our life with God – the indicative and the imperative - and they grow out of those two questions I offered earlier.

The first of those question was: What has God done for us?

The answer is that God *indicated* God’s very nature in and through the sacrifice and the victory of Jesus Christ. In Christ, fully divine and fully human, we know God as a creator who does not stand at a distance but has thought what we think and has felt what we feel. In God in Christ, we know God’s unconditional love and pledge of life over death.

This, then, has been called the *indicative* of our relationship with God, a promise that nothing in life or in death can separate us from God’s love. As the prophet Isaiah offers: “Thus says the Lord, who created you ... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are mine.”

Grounded in this truth, we arrive at verse 17, second base on your scorecard.

“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.”

In short, the author of 1 John tells us that there is more to the life of faith than the indicative. We are called to respond, to act on our faith ... and we do that in one way, by loving others. And in this call is the imperative of our faith.

So many of you feel this as truly an imperative, something we feel compelled to do.

As I wrote in my email to the congregation on Friday – and as today's bulletin shows – so many of you act out your faith. Yesterday, some of you spent the morning in a seminar thinking hard and long about how those in poverty struggle to survive and how this struggle leave no time for anything else. Others of you planted vegetables in our garden to feed the hungry.

As the bulletin, promotes, you can also go to local Habitat for Humanity building site or all the way to Guatemala. You can be a part of our new partnership with one of Charlotte's poorest schools, learn more about immigration or sponsor an inmate in a North Carolina prison. And those are just the things we're promoting this week.

But loving God is not only working in the mission field. As needed and important as these acts of faith are, they are no substitute for how we love those closest to us. That can be a real trap, can't it ... to direct our acts of faith outward into the community and the world but at times overshoot our family and our friends?

There might be plenty of explanations. Perhaps we do so because we feel that we often fail at that kind of love that is closest to home. Intimacy and the vulnerability it requires may seem to escape us, to evade us and remain beyond our reach. Or we may have other reasons.

What, then, is the author of 1 John talking about in verse 17 when he says love has been perfected among us? How in the world can our flawed love be made perfect? Only a fool thinks he or she can do anything perfectly, much less love another person.

But here, friends, the good news of the gospel breaks through. We cannot make our love perfect, to be sure, but we are called nonetheless to imitate God, to seek to be vessels of God's perfect love. So even through our scarred and busted up capacity to give and receive love, God's love sustains us and can sanctify ours. Even our imperfect love, our stumblebum efforts to extend God's strength, peace, care and affirmation are underwritten by our creator.

This is grace and it can shape our faith and give our lives meaning and purpose and value. The great preacher William Sloane Coffin said it this way.

“God’s love doesn’t seek value, it creates it,” he wrote “It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value.”¹

* * *

So now we sprint toward third base, emboldened by the words of verse 18 like the roar of the crowd:

“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.”

Last week, I heard a radio interview with an author who has just written a book about the relationship of fear and faith. His father and his grandfather were both fundamentalist preachers, the kind who preached a faith defined by fear rather than grace. Now he is re-examining everything about his faith, trying to reconcile the God he heard described in his father’s and grandfather’s churches with the God we find in these passages of 1 John.

He is not alone, is he? How many of us have encountered this image of a God who hovers over us with a handful of lightening bolts, ready to hurl one down and smite us the second we step out of line? And, how much damage has been done to the church by those who put fear deep into the hearts of other believers, in the name, unfortunately, of God.

There is a judgment to come, as 1 John says, but we will be judged by a God of grace.

I had another conversation with a member last week – this was a different person than the one who called me out me as a grammar geek. We were talking about Caldwell’s growth and what finally brings people to join. While there are many important things to consider, I said that joining the Presbyterian church really boils down being able to answer one essential question: Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?

Don’t ever underestimate the weight of that question, my wise friend reminded me. You never know, she said, what paths people follow to get to a point they are ready to say “yes.”

She’s right, of course. Each of us walks our own path and we get to that “yes” in our own time. But the good news is that God has already said “yes” to us. So when we have realized that we may never find answers to all our own questions, when we have at least gotten the upper hand on whatever fears hold us back, when we have come to

¹ The Courage to Love, p. 11

accept that faith can even include doubt ... then we are liberated to say our 'yes' to God's "yes." We are freed to act, to live out our faith. And we do that, 1 John says, by loving fearlessly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian who stood up to the Nazis and died for it, knew how to love fearlessly. In his work titled Letters and Papers from Prison, Bonhoeffer laid out what he called the Four Stations on the Road to Freedom. One of those stations he called "Action." Action, he said, is:

"To do and dare – not what you would, but what is right. Never hesitate over what is in your power, but boldly grasp what lies before you. Not in the flight of fancy, but only in the deed is there freedom. Away with timidity and also reluctance! Out into the storm of event, sustained only by the commandment of God and your faith, and freedom will accept you with exultation."

I told your session I thought it demonstrated this kind of fearless love when the youth organization Children Come 1st approached came in April with the idea of running a summer camp for kids in our Price Education Building.

It would have been easy to say "No." There are risks, after all. Something in the building could break and we don't have the funds budgeted for repairs. This is Children Come 1st's first time running a summer camp and we don't really know anything about hosting a summer camp. The timidity Bonhoeffer referenced could have been well justified.

But your session said "yes" anyway. Now 50 at-risk kids in our city will have a safe place to spend their summer, to grow and learn and have fun. Surely this is something of what it means to love boldly and fearlessly.

God calls us to love fearlessly in all parts of our lives.

For the Presbyterian Church, the two sides of the debate over the ordination of homosexuals must find a way forward now that the votes are tallied and the majority opinion is to keep the ban against ordination in place. As 1 John says, the commandment is that those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also, even when, especially when, they disagree.

As I thought about that, I recalled a hand-written sign that someone had put up in the kids Sunday School room over an indoor sandbox. "Sandbox Rules," it read:

- All sand MUST stay in the sandbox.
- Do not eat the sand.

- Do not throw sand at each other.
- Only three people in the sandbox at a time.

Those are pretty good guidelines for us adults as we seek to be church together, with all of our diverse views and perspectives on life with God. But that is probably another sermon for another day.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, God calls us to follow 1 John's guidance to love fearlessly as we strive to love those closest to us.

To be sure, loving fearlessly in any arena requires courage, courage to be open, to be weak and vulnerable and to be honest with ourselves, with others and with our God. But the source of the courage we need is at hand in these 14 verses from 1 John, in particular these words:

“Beloved, since God first loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

They are such simple sounding words, I admit. But in them we can find a lifetime of purpose, the indicative of God's desire for us and the imperative of how we respond.

May God give us the strength to follow God's own model, to imitate him – in courage and in vulnerability - and, in so doing, find that even our imperfect efforts at loving are made perfect by our gracious creator.