

John's Love Letters: Love is a Verb

I John 3:16-18; 4:7-9

May 14, 2006

One of the first grammar lessons students learn is the difference between nouns and verbs. Nouns are persons, places, or things. Verbs are action words. Some words fit into both categories. When I looked up the English word "love" in the dictionary, I found it listed first as a noun, then as a verb. The noun love is described as a strong affection for another. The verb love is defined as to hold dear, to feel a passion, devotion or tenderness for someone or thing. The Greek word used by the author of John's letter is *agape*, which has the sense of caring action on behalf of another without the expectation of reciprocation. Sometimes love is a feeling, but in the biblical sense love is more frequently an act of service freely given to another or to God. In other words, love is a verb.

A mother seized an opportunity to teach self-giving love to her sons, Kevin, 5, and Ryan, 3. As she was fixing pancakes for breakfast, the boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother asked, "If Jesus were sitting here, he would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'" Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, "Ryan, you be Jesus!"¹

Today we consider what it means to have a Christian home. How are our households different from others because we carry the name of Jesus Christ? How are our relationships different from others because we are children of God called to love God and one another?

Let's look at one of the words we heard in the Bible reading this morning: Beloved. Take that word apart and make it two words – Be loved. We can love because we are loved by God. Love is a gift from God, who generously loves us without our doing anything to earn God's love. We are loved by God simply because we are alive. Unfortunately too many people don't feel loved by God, or they think that they have to work hard to earn God's love. Some people haven't been loved by other people, and so they don't feel worthy of being loved by anyone, especially God. But Jesus came to show us and all people God's love. He treated people with dignity and respect. He made them feel worthy of God's love. Jesus expressed God's love not just with his words, but also with his actions and his relationships with people. His message was, "Be loved. Allow yourselves to be loved by God. You are loveable. You are special. You are worthy. Be loved, for God loves you."

Once we feel God's love for us, then we feel good about ourselves. We feel a deep joy and inner peace. We want others to feel this love as well, and so we share this love with others. Because we experience God's love for us, we love one another. That's the other way to look at that word beloved: take off the "d" at the end and we have "be love." **Be loved** by God so that you can **be love** to others.

It is often said that children express the qualities and tendencies of their parents. If we are children of God, God is like a parent to us. When we experience God's loving action on our behalf, we will learn that loving action is the way we are to treat others. Our relationships will be marked by love.

A writer studying the Amish people noticed that during the time they spent on the school playground, the Amish children never screamed or yelled. He was amazed and asked the schoolmaster about it. He noted that he had not once heard an Amish child yell, and asked why the schoolmaster thought that was so. The schoolmaster replied, "Well, have you ever heard an Amish adult yell?"²

Those who know God are likely to become like God, who is love. Knowing God we will be loved and we will be more likely to love one another.

A Korean film called *The Way Home* offers a wonderful parable of love. A seven year old boy named Sang-woo is taken by his mother to stay with his grandmother. The single mother has lost her job in Seoul and asks her mother to watch her son while she seeks employment. This is one of the daughter's few visits back to her home in the hills since she left it years before. The city boy is appalled by his grandmother's shack that has no running water, no plumbing, and no electricity. When he learns that his grandmother is mute and cannot talk, he calls her ugly names.

Grandmother tries to make the boy feel welcome, but Sang-woo turns away her love. He retreats into playing with his Game Boy and postcards of superheroes. He whines about Grandma's food, eating the cans of Spam he has brought with him. Then he tells Grandmother that that he wants chicken, so the old woman sells some of the produce from the vegetable garden, which is her only source of income. She walks to town to buy a chicken for the boy. She cooks it for him, only to be rewarded by his refusal to eat it. "I want Kentucky chicken!" he complains.

Time after time the old woman endures such rejection, and time after time she continues to meet his needs. One day the grandmother and boy take her vegetables to town to sell. She spends most of the money earned on a new pair of sneakers for her grandson. She also treats him to a restaurant

meal. He slurps up a bowl of noodles while she has only a cup of tea. She puts him on the bus home, but he refuses to take her heavy bag with him. The bus pulls away, leaving the bent over woman to walk home carrying the heavy load, for she has spent all her money on the grandson and has no money left for her own bus fare. Only when he sees his grandmother walking home, instead of taking the bus, does the boy recognize her unconditional love for him. Finally there is a transformation in the thoughtless brat and he learns to offer loving acts similar to those that have been modeled for him.³

In the seventies, Clarence Jordan translated many books of the New Testament into southern slang. One of the verses we heard today is translated this way: “My little ones, let’s not *talk* about love. Let’s not *sing* about love. Let’s put love into *action* and make it *real*.” Making love real. Putting it into action. That’s what love is all about, for love is a verb, an action word.

My friends, be loved by God so that you can be love to others.

¹ *Homiletics Online*, retrieved May 13, 2006.

² *Homiletics*, April 2006, p. 71.

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³ *The Way Home (Jibeuro)*, Paramount Classics, 2002.