

Easter 05 B 2018
April 29, 2018 :: 1st John 4:7-21
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“Agape: Passion Expressed in Action.”

In their book, *America’s Four Gods: What We Say About God and What That Says About Us*, Paul Faroese and Christopher Bader claim — and their claim is based on a poll of thousands of Christians distributed across hundreds of congregations throughout our country — they claim that Americans believe in one of four different Gods. I’ve talked about this before, but I think it’s worth revisiting, given our reading from 1st John.

First, there is the “Authoritative God,” who is highly engaged in the people and events in our world, but who manifests himself mainly by either actually *causing* bad things to happen to people — like tornadoes and hurricanes — or by turning his back and *allowing* bad things to happen, as punishment for our sins. And thirty-one percent of those polled believe in this sort of God.

Then, there is the “Benevolent God,” who is also highly engaged in the people and events in our world, and who manifests himself as (in the author’s words) “all-powerful and all-present life coach,” who *never* causes harm, but who will use tragic events as

opportunities to express his love, and as opportunities to help us to learn and grow from those events. And twenty-four percent of those polled believe in this sort of God.

Next, there is the “Critical God,” who is quite *disengaged* from the people and events in our world, but who nevertheless is paying attention, and taking notes, and who will definitely pass out rewards and punishments in the hereafter. And sixteen percent of those polled believe in this sort of God.

And finally, there is the “Distant God,” who created all things and people, and then basically walked away from it all, allowing whatever happens to happen, without any thought or concern about any outcome. Twenty-four percent of those polled believe in this sort of God.

And so, those are America’s four Gods, and I find that all really fascinating. And it’s against that backdrop that I want to turn our attention to our reading from 1st John, which, if you recall, began in this way:

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (vs. 7).

That first word, “beloved,” in the original Greek, is a form of the Greek word *agape*, which is a word that talks about God’s infinite and unqualified love for all human beings. I recently heard someone define *agape* as “passion expressed in action.” I like that a lot. And so, the author of 1st John opens this section of his letter by addressing his comments that follow to “you who are loved by God.” To you, for whom God is passionate. To you, in whose lives, God has acted. “Love one another” (vs. 7). And those words apply to us as well.

And that “passion expressed in action” in each of our lives ... changes us. It draws us away from the brokenness that life has impressed upon us. And it draws us towards what God always intended for us to be: and that is, men and women created in the image and likeness of God; people in whose lives the character and nature of God is made manifest; people who *agape* one another.

In my own life I became acquainted with that *agape* love, that “passion expressed in action,” certainly when I met, and fell in love with, and married my wife Peggy. And yesterday was our 34th anniversary. But I experienced that *agape* love even more acutely when our first child was born. It was then when I truly came to understand what it means to love someone without qualification or condition. And over time I came to realize that there was nothing that my child could ever do that would cause me to love her any less, and that there was nothing that she needed to do to get me to love her any more. And, what’s more, I would do everything in my power to protect her and keep her safe. And nothing she could do or say, would ever change that. (And, you know, they’re fine with that when they’re kids, but when they grow up, they’re more like: I can handle this. Please stop asking me questions.)

And that’s when I began to understand what complete and total love — what *agape* love, what “passion expressed in action” — really meant. And then, one day, it dawned on me, that God’s love, God’s *agape* for us his children has got to be a gazillion times bigger than my love for my children. And that’s really great news,

and it has really important implications for each of us. And the author of 1st John expresses it in these words:

“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. 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. We love because [God] first loved us” (vv. 17-19).

And so, the first implication is this: God’s love, perfected in us, enables us to have that same “passion expressed in action” for the people around us; for all the people in the world. God wants to respond to the needs of the world, and God wants to respond to those needs through us! And so, when we finally get to that point in our spiritual journey when we actually *believe* that God loves us; when we’re at that point when we *trust* that God intends good for us and not ill; when that anxiety and uncertainty have been replaced with *agape* love, that’s when we’ll be ready to reach out in love to the world.

And the second implication is this: that, on the day of judgment, we can stand boldly before God, and without fear or hesitation. And not because of anything we've done or accomplished, but because of God's perfect love for us. And what's more — and in acknowledgment of our Gospel reading — if we happen to need a bit of pruning, God will take care of that, and God will do so, but not with the goal of punishing us, but rather with the goal of making us more fruitful.

Finally, let us remember how our reading from 1st John began: “Beloved, let us love one another.” I want you to note that it *didn't* begin with “Beloved, let us love God,” and it did so probably because God doesn't necessarily *need* our love. But we certainly do need each other's love, each other's help and support, each other's “passion expressed in action.” We need to see God at work in our lives, supporting us, strengthening us, perfecting us. And we'll see that, we'll experience that, and we'll be perfected by it, only through each other.

So, American's believe in one of four different Gods: There's the Authoritative God who punishes us with hurricanes and tornadoes. There's the Benevolent God who uses those hurricanes

and tornadoes to express his love for us, and help us learn and grow from those events. There's the Critical God who is keeping score of all the good and bad things we do, and who'll either reward or punish us accordingly. And then there's the Distant God, who got the ball rolling, but who really doesn't care what happens after that. Which God do you think the author of 1st John would believe in? I think the answer to that question is clear.

And so, and in the end, if you take nothing else away from this sermon, let it be this: That all things begin in love. All things flow from love. All things are perfected through love. And, all things return to love. And that love is God. [Pause] And it's a love that will never ever turn its back on any of us. And that, my friends, is the Good News of the Gospel.

Amen.