

**Psalm 22:24, 29** My praise is of him in the great assembly; I will perform my vows in the presence of those who worship him... My soul shall live for him; my descendants shall serve him; they shall be known as the LORD'S for ever. (45)

## Introduction

I'll confess that over the past few years I've found it easier to say, "God is dead" than, "God is love." It seems we are daily forced to navigate a world decorated with the placards of death and destruction, mischief and malice, greed and grief. With a single swipe up, we easily witness death's toll rise as our sisters and brothers are seized by pandemic, suffocated in the grip of hatred and prejudice, and neglected for the preference of self-indulgence. It is hard to reconcile the manifold tragedy we see all around us and the claim "God is love." The world feels absent love especially at a cosmic level. God feels gone.

I wish I could say (with confidence): even though the world feels divested of divine love, the church stands as a bastion of the perpetuity of this love. Sadly, I cannot. The very institution charged to carry on the precious treasure of the life-giving message of God's love is also the institution that participates—by word and deed—in the same violence and destruction of so called "secular" institutions. It seems that the proclamation God is love and its twin "God loves us" are trapped under systems of the necessity of right thought wedded to faulty interpretations of what it means and looks like to be a follower of Christ. We've become mesmerized by our image and not God's and what makes us feel pious and good. We'd rather quibble over fabric, wood, stone, and precious metal than throw open doors and arms tossing religiosity to the wind to embrace the "least of these."

With so much pain and turmoil around us, maybe it would be better to throw in the towel, admit the failure of this divine experiment, and confess, with the 19<sup>th</sup> century genius existential philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche,

"...Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead."<sup>1</sup>

## 1 John 4:7-21

*Beloved, let us love one another because Love is from God; all who love both have been birthed from God and know God...In this way the love of God was manifested in us, because God sent forth [God's] only begotten son into the cosmos so that we might live through him. In this is love: not that we we<sup>2</sup> have loved God but that [God God] has loved us and sent [God's] son as atonement for our sins. Beloved, if*

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche "The Parable of the Madman" *The Gay Science* Trans Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1974 (trans). Original publication *Die fröhlich Wissenschaft* 1887. III.125.181-2.

<sup>2</sup> The double pronoun use here and following is due to the use of the pronouns with the verb in Greek which indicates an emphatic emphasis on the pronouns. It's stressing that **we** did not love God but that

*in this way God loved us, also we we ought to love one another...We we love because [God God] first loved us. (1 Jn 4:7, 9-11, 19)<sup>3</sup>*

According to John's first epistle, love is from God because God is love. He goes so far to say that those who love are the ones who have been birthed of God. Then he quickly moves to describe how divine love is brought forth in those who have been born of God and thus of love.

Harkening to the imagery of the gospel of John chapter 3—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (v.16, NRSV)—the author articulates: the love of God precedes our love for God.<sup>4</sup>

Pushing the imagery further, we can also say, in accordance with Gen 1, that the wind of God hovering over the formless void and the face of the deep is the same as love.<sup>5</sup> Everything about the cosmos is embedded and submerged in divine love. Divine love is the creative force animating the cosmos; the very fabric of our material being is nurtured and produced from love. Thus, God's love predates our love for God. Love itself is older than time and recorded human history. We neither know of a time nor can conceive an era when love didn't exist. (As Rev. Teri pointed out last week: God loved and loves the dinosaurs!) Our scope is cosmic: God loved and loves without end.<sup>6</sup>

And as God loved the cosmos into being so too does God in God's love rescue the cosmos and its inhabitants from the plight of humanity by entering that very plight unto death. It is for this reason the epistle writer uses the events of Good Friday through Easter as the lens to comprehend the preceding and continuation of God's love from one end of the cosmos to the other. God's love is so profound that not only can it create but it can recreate. That which is dead can be made alive. Christ died on the cross, was buried, and then walked out of the tomb. God's love produced what is (creation) and then went beyond that to grant us the possibility of what could be (recreation).

The epitome of divine love is manifest in standing in solidarity with suffering and stuck humanity threatened with death and destruction and liberating them from it even if they brought it upon themselves. This is unconditional love, and therefore divine love can exist into eternity because it's based on the eternal source that is God and not conditioned on this or that behavior of the beloved. Conditional love isn't love; it's a contract. There is no contract in God's love language. God just loves because love loves. Where there is love there is God.

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<sup>3</sup> All translations of the text are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. 555 "...aorist indicates past time with reference to the time of speaking."

<sup>5</sup> Gen 1:1-2 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> The statement here is based on the conception of the aorist verb used in the verse translated. This portion reads, "...αλλ' οτι αυτος ηγαπησεν ημας..." the ηγαπησεν is an aorist active indicative 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular verb. Daniel B. Wallace explains that the aorist is best understood as, "as taking a snapshot of the action..." as opposed to a moving picture. And here, "The aorist tense 'presents an occurrence in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence.'" (554).

## Conclusion

Going back to the quotation above from Nietzsche. The quote is only in part. *The Parable of the Madman* is more profound than the portion I referenced.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him* -- you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

Far from pessimistic, Nietzsche's words partake of possibility and hope. God is not dead because we cannot kill Love. What Nietzsche refers to as "God" isn't "God" but what we've crafted and fashioned to be "God." And this "God" is dead. The false idols we have constructed of God and propped up in the name of God are the ones that are being exposed as monsters and must be torn down. The death and destruction we see abounding around us isn't because God is dead; rather, it's because we've baptized (in the name of God) the death dealing and life destroying structures and systems we've built and curated, and these we must destroy because they are putrid and septic. The god we've presented to the world in our own flesh is a god who has been found wanting and we must kill this "God." And the only way to do that is to love, to love to the fullest extent of the word and in the most radical interpretation. For where we love there is God, where God is there is life and light and liberation.

"The gravity of her situation settled in on her, closing in on her chest, making it difficult to breathe. Would she put the chains back around her neck or let them go and step forward into love? Her heart beat right up into her throat. She tried to swallow it down, but her mouth was suddenly dry. She sat perfectly still but within she was a child, flailing about, trying to push love away; until another part of herself pulled it to her, holding love out to her. It's not what you want, it's what you need. She stopped writhing and pushing and looked at it. She reached out and took love, still afraid. She held love in her hands, not knowing if she held it right...Tell God you are afraid. And thank Him. She couldn't find a way to say she was afraid, but she could at least hold her fear and the love she feared out to Him. So she held our what He was forcing her to carry, her

commitment to carry love without even knowing what that meant, her fear, all of it, and took one step forward, making herself say aloud, '*Alhamdulillah.*'"<sup>7</sup>

You are the beloved not because it's a nice sentiment but because Love started this entire thing and sustains it, always in search of the object of love you, the world and everything in it from the very small to the very big, the entire cosmos. You are the beloved because you've been wrapped up in this ancient and present activity of divine love. You've been swept up into the current of the activity of divine love, Beloved. You are the beloved because God is love and is not dead; *praise be to God.*

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<sup>7</sup> Laury Silvers *The Lover: A Sufi Mystery* Kindle Direct Publishing, 2019.254