

“God is Love?.,;:”

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Texts: Psalm 116 and Ephesians 3: 14-21

I don't know if you caught the title this week. It is “God is Love”, followed by several types of punctuation. In my life experience, it seems to me that Christians are not sure which type of punctuation should follow the phrase “God is Love”. And while I'm no English major, I thought this was a good way to try to get at what we mean (we're only speaking for ourselves here) when we say, “God is Love”.

To some, it seems that we need to put a question mark after the phrase. Something has happened to someone when they place a question mark after the phrase. “How can God be loving,” they ask, “when God lets so many bad things happen to me and to the world?” It's a great question. In fact, it's a necessary question, because it forces us to ask ourselves how we believe God is present in the world. Is God in charge of everything that happens? If so, does that include people? Is God some kind of puppeteer, constantly manipulating the strings so that we do whatever God wants? And if that's true, then God isn't so great at it. I

mean, if God is love, and God is controlling everything and everyone, don't you think that things would be better than they are?

Still others in this group say, "No, God doesn't control anything. God started things and just watches until the end and then God comes and cleans up the mess." Kind of like having a party at your house where you provide everything, but you leave the building. In this model, everyone is on their own and humans completely control everything. These folks, I would guess, never talk about the more than human world and how that works, but I think they would conclude the same thing happens: God sets things in motion and lets it go until it's all over. It's something like a ride at an amusement park, although the results haven't been so amusing. In this model, God is the distant parent, not in very much contact with the world. I would ask, how can a loving God just let us destroy one another? More on that later. Would someone who loves us, though, leave things completely out of control?

I'm not sure a question mark is the one I would choose for the phrase, "God is love", but I can see how someone might for many more reasons than the ones I chose here. If we're not sure that God loves us, however, how can we be loving if we've never received love? We all know children and adults who struggle to love

because they grew up in a house that seemed not to have it. It's not that they don't want to love, but they don't know how.

So, let's try the next option, the period. God is love. It's a statement, maybe a simple statement of fact. I would assert, however, that the period is devoid of any emotion about the statement. God is love. It is a fact. That is true. It's like pointing to the floor and saying, "that is the floor." While true, there's not much to it. A simple statement. That works fine when all is fine, but when things get tough, I wonder if it will be enough to get us through? Some of the same questions we raised a minute ago might come up again when we have a simple statement and that's it. Statements like these don't necessarily move people to a deeper relationship with God, nor do they lead to us being more loving. "God is love. I love people. I love you." All true statements, but someone robotic, I think. Say "I love you" to someone with no emotion. What does it feel like to you...and to that person? I have no doubt it's a true statement, but lacks something, true?

Next comes the comma. We like the comma thing in the UCC. "Never place a period where God has placed a comma" we say. What does that mean? Well, for us, it means that God is not done talking and acting. God has more to say and do than maybe our traditions, or even the Bible have said. It means there

is more to come. If we say, “God is love” with a comma at the end, then we need to say something more. God is love, which means... God is love; therefore, I believe... The phrase ending with a comma could also lead to where most commas lead, to a “but”. God is love, but...not for some people who look different, act differently, love differently, pray differently, sing differently, ... you name it. While a comma can be good because then we can say more, there is also a danger that we could say some not very helpful things. It also can lead to a lack of clarity, which some thrive in, and others just can’t take.

Semi-colons and colons I think have a similar effect. English majors can fill in the blanks here, but semicolons and colons can be used like periods or commas, depending on many circumstances. At the end of the day, they give us a place to say more, which has both it’s blessings and curses. See the comments about both.

Where’s the exclamation point? What if we end the statement, “God is love” with an exclamation point? I have a confession: when I originally made up the title, I left out the exclamation point. It wasn’t on purpose, but I wonder how that happened? Anyway, an exclamation point can change the meaning of many words. My father-in-law is notorious for putting exclamation points in a card at

Christmas, birthdays, and anniversaries. They may not always go at the end of sentences where they belong, but he has no shortage of exclamation points. If we can put our grammatical hats away for a minute, it's kind of cool that he puts so many in between so few words. When you use an exclamation point after "God is love" it changes things. There is emotion, there is a lift to your voice and your eyes. It's impactful. I'm sure some might say that it's too much to be excited about God's love all the time, but I disagree.

Now I know you didn't come here in person or online to have me talk about punctuation all morning. Few people I know love punctuation. The ones that do are typically English teachers or writers, or both. The reason, though, is our punctuation has a lot to say about what we believe. It's worth our considering which one(s) we use. Do we use different punctuation at different times? Your answer is yours...or better yet, your answers are yours, but I don't know if you understand how important this is for the community.

Brian McLaren doesn't talk all about punctuation in his chapter from the book we're reading this week, but he does acknowledge that the word *God* has become a problem for a lot of people. How can a god be loving that is an "angry old white man with a beard, oppressing women and minorities, promoting

discrimination and war, and blessing the destruction of the planet?” How can a god of love be “a curator of a religious museum who seems to have a taste for all that is outdated, archaic, dour, and dusty”? How can God be loving if God requires “everyone [to be] artificially smiling and excessively, unrealistically happy”? How can God be loving if he is a “testy border guard who won’t let new arrivals through heaven’s passport control office unless they correctly answer a lot of technical doctrinal questions with a score of 100 percent”?

While punctuation is perhaps not the best way to get at it, our ideas about who God is say everything about who we are as God’s church. We have work to do as many in the church have told the world that God is this judgmental, even hateful dude smiting people all the time for things as small as stepping on a crack in the sidewalk. There are lots of reasons people aren’t engaging church, but chief among them is the kind of God the church portrays to the world. McLaren writes,

Hot-headed religious extremists, lukewarm religious bureaucrats, and cold-hearted religious critics alike have turned the word *God* into a name for something ugly, small, boring, elitist, wacky, corrupt, or violent – the very opposite of what it should mean. Maybe God is more turned off to the word God than anyone else! And maybe the distaste of many for the word *God* as it is commonly used actually reveals a corresponding love that longs for what *God* truly is.

And what do we believe is God all about? I'm sure most of you would say *love*.

What kind of love? For whom? Can it be taken away? Do we have to earn it?

And why does it matter? Because of that last sentence of McLaren's paragraph, I shared with you. There is a corresponding love that *longs for what God truly is*. That is why this question matters. Once we figure out who God is and what is God about, then we realize that God is love...an unconditional, never ending love that is freely given to us all. When we learn to love God and learn that God loves us...wait...let me turn that around: when we learn that God loves us, then we learn to love God, and we learn to love other people. I am convinced that much of the hate in the world arises from our manipulation of who God is for our own ends. When God is for us and against you, then, well, God isn't love anymore. At least not unconditional love. The Psalmist writes in today's Psalm, "Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you." And Paul writes, speaking of Christ, but Christ and God are one in the same, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

God is a god who loves this world and all that is in it. As Richard Rohr reminds us, "everything belongs". And if God can love this messed up world, then maybe God can love us: each of us and all of us, in spite of our shortcomings. And if God can love us this much, maybe we can love one another and that world out there just a little bit more. Striving daily to love even a little bit as much as God loves. All of them. All are precious and loved.

God is love always and all the time. Period. Exclamation point. The end.

May we comprehend it someday and live accordingly. In the many blessed names of a loving God. Amen.