

June 12, 2005
The Sunday After Ascension

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the many parts of Holy Scripture that merit closer regard with respect to grammar, I would include St. John's simple admonition, "My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18).

In John's combination "word and tongue" we readily recognize what grammarians call a hendiadys, which means that John conveys a single idea by a double expression. That is to say, in John's "in word or in tongue" there is no real difference between "word" and "tongue"; both are metaphors for speech. John means simply, "Let not our love be just a lot of talk."

Now respecting "word and tongue," these comments are perhaps too obvious to require critical attention. Let me suggest, however, that our parsing should be carried over to John's second pair of words, "deed and truth." It is important to see that this second combination is likewise a hendiadys. In context, both expressions mean the identical thing. In regard to love, there is no real difference between truth and deeds. The truth of love is composed of what we do.

To the extent that love has a "truth," love is also knowable. How, then, are we to know the truth of love? Empirically, because the truth of love is indistinguishable from the deeds of love. Thus, John says in the very next verse: "And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him" (3:19). This is pretty standard doctrine in John. In his Gospel, for instance, Jesus says succinctly, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). And again, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me" (14:21).

In the thought of John this moral observance is very much related to the Christian's sense of personal assurance. "Now by this we know that we know Him," says John, "if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him" (1 John 2:3-5).

How can I know that I am in God? How do I be sure that I really know God? John answers these questions by urging us, not to analyze the quality of our consciousness, much less our emotional state, but to observe the empirical data of our conduct. It's really very simple, says John. Just check the evidence.

John's approach in this respect is entirely practical. He regards a person's conduct—how he walks—as the reliable barometer of that person's spiritual condition: "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (2:6). Again, "If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who does [ho poion]

righteousness is born of Him" (2:29, my translation). For John, then, being righteous means "doing righteousness."

The Christian life, in short, is not just a secure state of mind, still less a reassured emotional condition. It includes also righteousness of conduct, and to some degree our conduct—including what we permit ourselves to think—is open to observation. If we want to know if we are in God, says John, the best indicators are our deeds.

In John's insistence on this point, we perceived a resemblance to James, who declared that "a man is justified by works, not by faith only" (James 2:24). Both writers may also be compared to Paul, who said, "and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2).

If Christian faith is more than an intellectual state or emotional condition, this is also true of Christian love. It must do certain things, says John. He inquires rhetorically, "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (1 John 3:17).

In both his concrete example and in posing his thesis as a rhetorical question, John further resembles James, who uses the identical example in a series of three rhetorical questions: "[1]What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? [2] Can faith save him? [3] If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:14-16).

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