

Sermon
Third Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 14, 2024
10am

Text: 1 John 3:1-7

Theme: How Shall We Live: We Purify in Hope

[prayer]

[ask congregation] Church, what does it mean to you to be called a child of God?

A few words come to my mind: Loved. Seen. Cherished. Nurtured.

John says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God” (v. 1 NRSV).

In Protestant theology there are two main metaphors for God: Sovereign and Parent. Reformed theology emphasizes God as Sovereign – a ruler, lord, king. Wesleyan theology emphasizes God as Parent. John Wesley’s favorite book of the Bible was 1 John because of its doctrine of love. 1 John says that the Christian’s relationship with God is a parent-child relationship; God loves us like a parent loves their child – intimately, unconditionally. Your relationship with your parent or child may be flawed, but God is perfect Love. Therefore, God’s love for His children is also perfect (1 John 4:16).

“Child of God” is used inside and outside the Church to affirm the innate dignity of human beings. But to be clear, Scripture does not call every human being a child of God. Only those who have faith in the Living God are called His children. This does not negate the inherent belovedness of every human being. Every person is made in the *image* of God (Gen 1:27) and should be loved and respected as such. But “child of God” has a specific legal meaning in the Bible. The Hebrew Bible calls the Israelites God’s children (Deut 14:1-2) because they were heirs to the promise God made to Abraham. God’s only *begotten* child was Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abraham. The New Testament teaches that those who put their faith in Jesus and conform to the pattern of his life become God’s *adopted* children – sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus (cf. Rom 8; Gal 3-4; Eph 1).

In the prologue to his gospel, John writes,

“But [to] those who welcome[d] him [Jesus],
those who believed in his name,
he authorized [gave the right] to become God’s children,
born not from blood
nor from human desire or passion,
but born from God” (John 1:12-13 CEB).

That word “authorized” is interesting. Jesus has given us the *right* to be called a child of God. With that right comes freedom and an inheritance in the kingdom of God (Rom 8:17).

But if we only count the rights and privileges that come with this title, then we understand just half of our relationship with God. Every right also comes with a responsibility. God relates to us as His children, and we relate to Him as our Parent in heaven. Good parents set the standard for their children’s behavior, and children have the responsibility to behave according to that standard. This is what John reminds us of in today’s reading: We must *behave* like the children of God.

[pause]

When my sister and I were younger, we did not look especially alike. I resembled my mom, and she resembled my dad. My sister is two years younger than me and when she started high school, my classmates were surprised we were related. But as we have matured and our appearance has changed, we resemble each other more and more. I see some of my mom in my sister now, and more of my dad in myself. Now when people find out we are sisters, they often remark on how they can see the resemblance.

What they don’t see, though, is how our parents’ behavior and worldview and values have also formed us. The resemblance is more than just skin deep.

1 John is highlighting a similar family resemblance that has nothing to do with skin and blood and everything to do with our spiritual DNA. God has demonstrated his expectation for our behavior through His only begotten son (2:29). Jesus reveals God’s character to us. John writes in his gospel,

“No one has ever seen God.
God the only Son,
who is at the Father’s side,
has made God known” (John 1:18).

If we follow Jesus, then we will demonstrate a familial resemblance to our brother (Jesus) and Parent (God) in heaven through our behavior.

We show we are related to God in two ways: Through acts of righteousness (justice and mercy) (2:29) and through our purity (moral uprightness).

I want to acknowledge that *purity* has different connotations for different people. The Church has had a long fixation on purity culture and sexual sin, despite a host of other priorities that Jesus draws our attention to, like greed and pride and hypocrisy. Because of this, *purity* might bring up feelings of shame or inadequacy, like you are just too dirty or broken to draw near to God.

It is true that the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Bible, has a lot to say about purity. Purity is related to holiness. Nothing unholy can exist in the presence of a holy God. But when John commands us to “purify [ourselves] as [Jesus] is pure” (v. 3), we do not do this out of fear. We do this because we have hope! It is our hope in Jesus that gives us a *desire* to purify ourselves. Jesus is already pure. And as Easter people, we believe that one day we will be raised to a pure and spotless life, too. For us, this purification is an ongoing process. We are in the process of becoming like Jesus. Like my family resemblance to my sister and parents, our spiritual resemblance to Jesus should grow and mature over time.

This letter from John is at the center of our Methodist theology of salvation. There is a difference between the work of justification – being pardoned for our past sins, which Carol taught about last week – and the work of regeneration through the love of God. When we are regenerated as a disciple of Jesus, a vast and inward change begins inside us. Wesley writes that regeneration “is a total change in all [our] particulars – [we] see the light of the world, [we] hear the voice of God, [we] feel the love of God shed abroad in [our] hearts...And now [we] may properly be said to live.”¹

¹ John Wesley. “The New Birth.” In *The Sermons of John Wesley: A Collection for the Christian Journey* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 237-239. Kindle edition.

This inward change is our spiritual rebirth. Regeneration purifies our spirits. Now we are open to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us how to love God, love our neighbor, and love ourselves. Now we are open to cooperating with God's sanctifying grace, which is transforming us in the image of our Savior. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, "God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ" (4:13).

A child of God is not just loved and cherished in God's sight. A child of God has been reborn, regenerated. A child of God has been given God's DNA (v. 9). And if we have this DNA, then we do not sin.

This doesn't sound believable, right? I know that I still sin. And if any one of you told me that you do not sin, then I would wonder what you are doing in church today. We take sin seriously here and we confess it to each other often.

John does not mean that once we are a child of God we will never sin again. What he means is that once we are a child of God we will not *want* to sin. The world we live in is still characterized by violence and greed. And our own lives are still distorted by our sin and the sins of others.

But we also yearn for peace and holiness. It is this *yearning* that sets us apart as God's children. Righteous conduct is God's genetic imprint on us. We long to practice righteousness and live pure lives like Jesus.

What is your besetting sin – the sin you struggle with over and over? Is it pride? Judgment? Greed?

Do not become complacent! Do not give up hope that you can overcome! You are a new creation in Jesus (2 Cor 5:17). You have a new identity. You are no longer identified by your sin, but by your relationship to Jesus and our Heavenly Parent. You are no longer trapped by your sinful acts and thoughts. Instead, there is a way forward. Because of the power and grace of God, you can overcome your sin and live differently.

[pause]

John writes, “Dear friends, *now* we are God’s children, *and* it hasn’t yet appeared what we will be. We know that when he appears we will be like him because we’ll see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves even as he is pure” (vv. 2-3).

We are God’s children *now*. God’s love equips us to live differently *right now*. John wrote this letter because not all of God’s children remained attentive to living lives patterned after Jesus. They weren’t interested in resembling the character of their Parent in heaven.

But our desire for righteousness is the proof that we have been adopted as God’s children. And our Christian conduct is our loving response to the unearned love that we have received from God. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God” (v. 1 NRSV). Can you hear the wonder and awe in John’s declaration? What wondrous love is this that a mere human can be called a child of the Almighty? This is our identity – the only identity that matters! Not father, mother, grandparent, sister, brother, friend, pastor, teacher, doctor, lawyer, businessperson, rich, poor, man, woman, gay, straight, single, married, divorced, widowed, healthy, sick – whatever label the world has given you, at the end of all things it will not matter! The only identity that matters is this one: *You are a child of God.*

The challenge is to truly claim our identity as children of God. Let the knowledge of God’s love permeate your soul. Rest in that knowledge.

And then...let it change you. Because what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We look with hope to the final day when Jesus comes again. And when the fullness of his glory is revealed, we will not shrink from him in shame because of our sin and brokenness. Instead, we will finally see ourselves as God sees us – whole, healed, and made perfect in His image.

In the meantime, we have the hope that we are already growing into this future. We are continually being regenerated and replenished by God (cf. Rom 8; 2 Cor 4). Every day we must center ourselves in this hope. When we do that, we can set aside worldly expectations, insecurities, and anxiety, and instead fix our eyes on God, the only One to whom we are ultimately accountable.

Ronald Cole Turner writes, “Through this lifelong metamorphosis, we are purified by hope. In hope we cling to the truth of what God is doing to us. When this truth is hardest to see, we hope all the more. And as we do, we yearn in expectation for those around us who do not understand us, that by the witness of our love they too may come at last to say: ‘See what love God has, that we too are become children of God.’”²

Amen.

² Ronald Cole Turner in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 421.