

CHILDREN OF GOD

1 John 3:1-3

All Saints' Day (observed)

November 3, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for All Saint's Day comes from *The First Letter of John*, chapter 3, verses 1 through 3. It is on page 863 of the pew Bible. In this epistle lesson, Saint John the Apostle reminds us who we are as Christians, what that means for the present, and what that means for the future. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 John 3, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear saints,

You are set apart by God, for God. That's what it means to be a saint. It means that God has set you apart, and he has set you apart to belong to him. He has called us his children, "and so we are" (3:1).

On All Saints' Day we remember God's mercy and grace toward all his saints. That especially includes those who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ, but it also includes those on the other side of the world, who are persecuted on account of their faith, and it includes those who are sitting in the pews right here. We thank God that he has knit all saints together into one holy communion, the mystical body of Jesus Christ.

It's helpful to clarify what we mean when we use the word "saint." The Apostle Paul often addressed the recipients of his letters as the saints in a particular city. Here, the Apostle John addresses his recipients as "children of God" (3:1). And these terms are really quite similar. We will see this as we explore the meaning of the word "saint."

There are probably two common understandings of the word "saint," and both of them are wrong, or at least insufficient.

First, we might think of really famous Christians who have been dead for a really long time. They might be biblical characters, like Saint Paul, Saint John, or Saint Mary. Or they might be early Church Fathers, like Saint Athanasius, Saint Ambrose, or Saint Augustine. These people are rightly called "saints," but if those are the only kind of people whom we consider to be saints, our definition is too limited.

So we might also think of people who are just really, really nice. If someone offers to let you go in front of them in line at the grocery store, you might say, "Oh, you're a saint." Well, they might be a saint, or they might not be. But their niceness isn't the determining factor.

The word "saint" comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, which means "holy." And the word "holy" simply means "set apart." We tend to think of it as meaning "righteous" or "pure," but that's not quite what the word means. It simply means "set apart." For example, Holy

CHILDREN OF GOD (1 John 3:1-3)

Communion is a meal set apart by Christ so that we might commune with him and one another. The word “holy” distinguishes it from other meals. In the Old Testament, the holy utensils in the temple were set apart to be used there, and only there, in the service of God. And a sanctuary, like the room we’re sitting in now, is a place that is set apart for the worship of God. The word “holy” simply means “set apart.” And when God sets something apart for his own possession he also purifies it.

So a saint is a holy person. That is, it is a person who has been set apart by God, for God, so that we might belong to him. It doesn’t mean that your behavior is really, really good. It doesn’t mean that you have made yourself pure. It means that God has set you apart, so that you might belong to him. And if you belong to him, then he has purified you.

God has set us apart by calling us his children. This is the title John uses to address Christians. And this reveals the kind of love the Father has for us. He has loved us by calling us his children. It’s the love of a perfect Father for his precious children.

Sometimes it’s important for us to distinguish between metaphor and reality. This is *not* a metaphor. Sometimes we have a tendency to think of Scripture as speaking in metaphorical terms, because, otherwise, some of the promises just seem too good to be true. But this is not a metaphor. This is reality. God’s love is not *like* the love a father has for his children. God’s love *is* the love that the perfect, and powerful, and gracious God of heaven and earth has for his beloved children. God is not *like* your father; God *is* your Father.

John makes this perfectly clear when he adds the words, “And so we are.” “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God; *and so we are*” (3:1). It’s not simply that God calls us his children, as if this is symbolic for something, but that when he calls us his children, we actually become his children. God is not *like* your father; God *is* your Father.

For some people, it might sound ironically comforting to hear that God is not *like* your father, because some people are not blessed with good earthly fathers. This is a sad reality of this fallen world. So if you do not have a good earthly father, know this: that is not the way it’s supposed to be, and God is not like your earthly father. Earthly fathers—even the good ones—are tainted by sin, but God is not. When we hear that God is our Father, we have a tendency to project the image of our earthly fathers onto God, but that’s not always helpful, even if you have a relatively good earthly father. Even the best earthly fathers pale in comparison to our perfect and gracious and tender heavenly Father. The love of God is deeper and stronger and purer.

The depth of God’s love is seen in the way we became his children. God has called us his children, and so we are.

John is describing the act of adoption here. Adoption is an especially loving way to become parents of a child. You see a child in need, and you decide that you will take that child as your own. You go through all the legal work of adopting that child, and you commit yourselves to love and care for that child, as if that child were your own. And so that child becomes your own. Children of adoption never have to wonder if their parents want them. Really, no child should ever have to wonder that, but children of adoption have an extra layer of certainty. No one has ever accidentally signed adoption papers. Adoption is an especially loving way to become parents of a child.

And this is what God has done for us. We were not his children. We “were by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). But God saw us in our time of need. He saw that we were in slavery to sin,

death, and the devil. And he decided to get involved, so that he might adopt us out of that and bring us into his family.

God the Father did this by sending his own Son for us. Because God is just—and we talked about this last week—because God is just, there was a price to pay in order to redeem us out of our slavery to sin, death, and the devil. He doesn't simply declare that we are his children, as if that settles the issue of justice. He sent Jesus Christ as "the propitiation for our sins" (2:2). That means that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice—he is the payment for our sins—so that God the Father can rightly call us his children. God is able to adopt us as his children, because he gave his only Son to suffer and die for us.

That might sound a little weird. It kind of sounds like God doesn't love his Son, Jesus Christ, and chooses us over him. Skeptics of Christianity have called this "divine child abuse." But that's not really what's going on here, and those skeptics don't really understand the Christian faith.

It's helpful, in this respect, to understand the doctrine of the Trinity. There are three persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but there is only one God. That means that all three persons share the same divine nature and the same divine will. So the Father's will is never contrary to the Son's will. Nor are their wills contrary to the Spirit's will, because there is only one will of God. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are perfectly united in their will to save you by the death and resurrection of the Son.

And so, Christ's death is the payment that enables the Father to justly call you his child. He calls you his child, and so you are. This is how he has loved and adopted you. For this reason, we do not say that God is *like* a father to us. He *is* our Father.

This adoption is the first part of the doctrine of vocation. The word "vocation" means "calling."

In its common usage, we often use the word "vocation" to refer to someone's job, but the theological use is much broader. It refers to the life God has called you to in your various stations of life. If you are a husband or wife, a mother or father, a grandparent, a child, a student, a worker, an employer, a citizen, or pretty much anything else that is good, God has called you to live and act a certain way in those callings. Your vocation is what God has called you to be and do in the various stations of your life. So the doctrine of vocation is where we usually talk about good works.

But the doctrine of vocation is about much more than good works. The first vocation of a Christian is to be a child of God. God has called us his children, and so we are. What has God called you to be? Probably a number of things, but the first thing he has called you to be is his child. And then, since God has called us his children, he also calls us to live and act as his children. That means that in our various stations of life, we live and act as a child of God should live and act, because we are his children. So the doctrine of vocation involves all the good works God desires you to do for your neighbor, but it all begins with him calling you his child. This reminds us that our good works do not make us pleasing to God. We do not become his children by acting like his children, but we act like his children because we are his children. God is pleased with us because of Jesus, and it is through Jesus that he calls us his children.

We are God's children. This reality is not always apparent to us. That's because we live in a world that does not care about this reality, nor does the world acknowledge it. And we shouldn't expect the world to acknowledge it. If someone is mistreating you, it probably won't work to

CHILDREN OF GOD (1 John 3:1-3)

say, “Don’t you know who I am? I’m a child of God. I’m gonna tell my Dad, and then you’re gonna wish you were nicer to me.” That’s not going to work, and for a couple reasons. First, being a child of God isn’t supposed to get us special treatment from this world. In the Church? Yes. But from the world? No. And second, the world simply doesn’t know we are children of God. The world does not know God, and so, naturally, it will also not know you to be a child of God.

And not only does the world not *know* God, but the world is *hostile* to God. If the world met Jesus with spit, a whip, a crown of thorns, nails, a cross, a spear, and a grave, then we shouldn’t really be surprised if the world treats us in a similar way when it finds out whom we claim to belong to. The world did not know Jesus as God, and so it will not know us as children of God. So God reminds us in his Word who we are. He reminds us that we are his children now. This brings us comfort in this life, but it also explains why we might suffer in this world. It explains why we are continually attacked by the devil, by death, and even by our own sin. We are children of God and, therefore, heirs of his kingdom, but we live in a different kingdom on earth.

So John reminds the children of God what to look forward to at the end of this age. Yes, “we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (3:2). This is a marvelous promise, and this is our ultimate hope as God’s children.

In order to fully appreciate the glory of this promise, we need to consider what Jesus is like, because that is what God promises in his Word that we will be like.

So what is Jesus like? We know that Jesus rose from the dead in bodily form. He is not just a spirit. He has a human body. It was not simply his spirit that rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. If that were the case, the disciples would have found his dead body in the tomb (John 20:6-9). But the body was not there, because it was raised. And Jesus appeared to his disciples, multiple times, in bodily form. They watched as he was taken up into heaven, not as a mere spirit, but in bodily form (Acts 1:9). And they received the promise that they will see him coming again in the same way (Acts 1:11).

On that day we will see him as well, and on that day we will be like him. The dead will be raised, just as Jesus was raised from the dead. And we will be raised to a new life. Our bodies and our souls will be transformed. No longer will we suffer from sickness, sin, pain, death, and decay. We will be raised like Jesus.

Dear saints, this is our blessed hope, not only for ourselves, but for all the saints of God in Christ Jesus. This includes, of course, the faithful departed. Death is not the end. For the saints of God in Christ Jesus, death is merely sleep, for the dead sleep in Jesus Christ, and those who sleep in Jesus Christ, will also rise to incorruptible life in Jesus Christ. This is our blessed hope.

Your husbands and wives, your parents and grandparents, your siblings and children and neighbors and friends who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ are not gone. They live in Christ. They will live in body and soul. And we will all see Christ in heavenly glory. On that day, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, “**Surely I am coming soon.**” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)