

1 John 3:1-7

Children of God

One thing that is certain is that we are all born into families. I'm not saying that we are all born into loving families that are longing to care for our needs and nurture us into fully functioning adults, but we are all born into families of one sort or another. We are all children of someone.

It is the hope that every child will be loved by their parents. Sometimes that love means giving up a child for adoption. It can be a heartbreaking choice to give a child up to be raised by another, still it may be the most loving choice one can make, for all kinds of reasons. And I have witnessed the amazing love that parents who have an adopted child can lavish over the new person in their families. However, no matter what one's family is like, even in the best of families, the love of parents or caregivers is imperfect because we human beings are imperfect.

The first line of chapter 3 from the reading today says, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" What amazing and full words. What hope for all of us that God loves us lavishly. God who can see and knows everything about us, loves us lavishly.

Biblical teacher and preacher Stan Mast writes, "The word "lavished" comes from a French word that means to wash. God has washed us in his love—not with a little drop of love, not with a feeble shower dribbling a few drops of love down from heaven, but with multiple showerheads, with buckets, gallons, barrels, rivers, waterfalls, gushing, flowing, overwhelming love that has swept away all our sin." ¹

Wow! With that description hear again the words from verse 1, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" Which is followed up with the verse that says, "And that is what we are!" Both of these verses ending with an exclamation mark!

We are children of God! This is the starting place for the reading today, but from there it gets a lot more challenging to hear what the writer of 1 John has to say. In fact, the scripture that follows what was read today, verses 8-10, are really difficult to unpack, and so in what is called the Revised Common Lectionary, a prescribed list of readings for each Sunday, these verses are not included as there would not be the time during a sermon to deal with the questions that arise. But I acknowledge this, not so that you think that I am avoiding the difficult parts of scripture, but rather to say that it is complex.

¹STAN MAST. 1 John 3:1-7 - Center for Excellence in Preaching (cepreaching.org).

As for what we have before us, it is affirmed not just in the first verse but again in verse two, “Dear friends now we are children of God” with the addendum, “what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he [Jesus] appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

It sounds very much like the line from 1 Corinthians 13, where the Apostle Paul writes, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (v12)

Understanding that we are people still in the making, people becoming more Christ like, is important as we consider the words in verses 4-7. Words about sin and lawlessness. Words that say that “No one who lives in him [Jesus] keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.” Those are harsh words, words that seem impossible to live into as we all know that we continue to sin. We know that sin is part of being human. We do not do the right thing every time. We cause pain for ourselves and others.

Really, knowing human nature, one might hope that the intent of these words is that we do right, as to the best of our ability. It is not that we don’t sin, even as we strive to live lives worthy of Christ. However, as followers of Christ we no longer look upon sin in the same way as the rest of the world does.

Once again, I turn to some wise words from Stan Mast where he writes, “A child of God has a different perspective on sin, a different attitude toward sin, a different intention toward sin.”²

The intention is that we should not accept sin as normal or okay. Using one of my favorite quotes from Maya Angelou, “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.”

It isn’t that we stop sinning, but rather we do our best to stay attuned to God, to behave in ways that brings life to ourselves and others. To do better as we come to know better. Responding to God’s love with our love for God, for creation and those God has created. We are transformed slowly but surely so that “we shall be like him,” like Jesus in how we love others and live in the world, and that means paying attention to our sinfulness. Knowing that in Jesus we are forgiven and set free to live together in community and for community. Community that again is loving and transformative.

Another piece, a poem by Maya Angelou puts things in perspective.

When I say... “I am a Christian”
I’m not shouting, “I’m clean livin’.”
I’m whispering, “I was lost,
Now I’m found and forgiven.”
When I say... “I’m a Christian”

² Ibid.

I don't speak with pride.
I'm confessing that I stumble
And need Christ to be my guide.
When I say... "I'm a Christian" I'm not holier than thou,
I'm just a simple sinner Who received God's good grace, somehow.

For the moment, we rest in the words, that describe God's love for us, that great love that is lavished on us, knowing that we are children of God. Imperfect, but forgiven, daily renewed and washed clean as we seek forgiveness and live in and lean into the grace of God. This grace which helps us to see where we need to change ourselves. We trust in God's continuing work in us that leads us to be transformed people. Becoming the people we can be and the people we are meant to be; the image bearers of God.

I speak to you in the name of the God the Creator, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.