

1JOHN 3:1-7 - PENTECOST 7

God's Children

Today's passage echoes a prominent theme in John's Gospel, namely, what it means to be children of God. John declares that "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.

"God's children!" That's who we are! And that's quite a statement, isn't it? To be God's children is quite an exalted status. What an honour, what a privilege, for God to call us his children! "And so we are." If God calls us that, then that's the way it is. Get used to it! This is a good thing. If God calls us his children, then we get to call on him as dear children ask their dear father. If we are God's children, then he is our Father, and fathers take care of their children, they provide for them and defend them. "You fathers, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children," Jesus said. Now multiply that by about a bazillion, and that's how much our heavenly Father loves and cares for us.

The reading from 1 John continues the two themes of last week: the relationship that believers have to God and the way that sin impacts that relationship. The author, who is conventionally called "the Elder" in scholarship, probably not to be confused with John of the Gospel, develops both themes by highlighting a difficulty that the believers face: They have become children of God and yet they live in an in-between place. Their lives have changed forever, but they do not yet see God's true glory. The Elder's contrasting statements on sin need to be read in light of this difficulty. They should not be read as advocating for the theme that "real Christians don't sin."

We are given an implicit exhortation: if we remain in Jesus, and he has no sin, then we must not sin either. Therefore, we, the children of God, now are called to put away the practice of sinning and instead live for righteousness. This will be a struggle, but God will strengthen us for the fight. We have God's forgiveness as our refuge when we stumble, and we have God's resources – the Spirit of his Son, the means of grace – to help us live as the children of God we are.

1John cannot imagine being a child of God, trusting and hoping in Jesus, and not

reflecting the character of Jesus in one's own life. But we must not get confused at this point. All discipleship rests on the declaration of what we already are: loved by God, children now, promised that we will be like Jesus when he appears.

The Elder's claim that the believers will be like God "when he is revealed," contains the implicit observation that they are not yet like God, and his future promise of seeing God "as he is" conditions the statement that "no one who sins has seen him". This should be read as part of the Elder's strategy to encourage the fellowship to realize the harmful nature of sin and to resist it. By pointing to the future hope of seeing and knowing God, the Elder hopes to orient his readers towards God's ways of being, in order to move them away from impurity and lawlessness.

Today's focus of 1John is on adoption and the hospitality of God: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are!" While many of the background details about why the Elder wrote 1John are lost to history, we have some clues in the text that certain dissenters were trying to lead the Elder's own community astray.

Perhaps the division in the Johannine community had given a rise to doubts about who were truly God's children. The Elder reassures the community that if the world does not recognize them as God's children, it is because it did not know Jesus as God's Son. As in John's Gospel, so also in 1 John; the "world" often means the realm of unbelief and opposition to God's purposes. Here, the Elder implies that those who have separated from the community, belong to the "world" in the negative sense.

And perhaps these dissenters were trying to get them to turn their attention away from Jesus and to safeguard their identity in something or someone else, even to the point of forsaking Jesus. But, as is clear in both the Gospel of John and 1John, there is no safer place to be than in the family of God, and there is no other way to enter this family than through Christ the Son.

The Elder emphasizes both the present reality of Believers' divine parentage ("Beloved, we are God's children now...") and the hope of its full realization when

Jesus returns. While the contours of this realization remain a mystery, what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that we will see Jesus as he is and that we will be like him. The Elder declares that “all who have this hope purify themselves, just as he is pure.”

The nature of Christian hope is to live simultaneously in the “now” and the “not yet.” We are called to live into the future reality that God has promised. The purity of Christ that is to characterize believers is not some esoteric quality, but is manifest in concrete acts of love. In John’s Gospel we read: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Like John’s Gospel, 1 John focuses on loving “one another” or loving brothers and sisters within the community. Little is said about loving those outside the fellowship of believers. One could even ask whether the Elder shows love for those who were once part of the community but have left, as he implies in the previous chapter that they are of the world, even applying the term “anti-Christ” to them.

In communities torn apart by conflict, there is often a tendency for each side to see things in black and white categories and to demonize the other side. The challenge for leaders is to know where and how to set clear boundaries to guard against theology and practices that are harmful to the community, while at the same time demonstrating God’s love to those who push the boundaries or traverse them altogether.

1 John gives us an example of boundary-setting but is perhaps not so helpful for encouragement to love adversaries. For the latter we need to consider other parts of Scripture. Matthew writes : “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbour’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.” Jesus commands love for enemies as behaviour befitting children of the heavenly Father.

In any case, the Elder’s purpose in this passage is to reassure a community troubled by the departure of some of its members that God’s claim on their lives

has not changed. They are God's beloved children, called into fellowship with the Father and the Son, called to grow evermore into the likeness of the One who has called them, anticipating the day when he will be fully revealed.

"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." What wondrous love is this? God's love reaches out to embrace sinners who reject him and forget him and would be heading to hell. What kind of love is this? You see what kind of love the Father has when you see Jesus, his Son, living and serving, suffering, dying and rising again for you. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." "And to all who receive him, who believe in his name, God gives the right to become children of God, who are born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but born of God."

Yes, you and I have been born again, born from above, born of water and the Spirit in Holy Baptism, and now we are children of the heavenly Father. See, that's the kind of love the Father has given us! Can you fathom this love? Can you feel it and know it? Yes, you can, even though the depths of God's love are beyond our ability to fully measure. The Holy Spirit, whom you received in Baptism – the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. The Spirit does this faith-nourishing work through the means of grace, Word and Sacrament. And so we continually need to be fed by the Word to remain firm in our faith in the Father's love. Because sometimes it may not look like we are such dearly loved children. It may look like our Father has forgotten us, like when we don't know where we're going to get enough money to make it. We may wonder: Where is the Father's love now? Or when I look at myself, and I don't see such a great Christian, and I wonder how God can love a failure like me.

Or like when the world mocks and laughs at us Christians. You see, that's what we are now too: Mocked and laughed at by the world. Not recognized. Often ridiculed. For example, when we hold a belief that is not politically correct but is biblically and morally right. Recently, a nominee for an important political position was attacked by an opposing member who held the biblical view that homosexuality is a perversion. Another example: Your friends may not understand why you put going to church on Sunday mornings ahead of all other activities. Whatever form the

opposition takes, the world does not know the children of God.

John tells us why: “The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” The world does not know God, so they don’t know his children either. The world hates God, rejects Christ, and so they’re not going to understand Christians. They think, “What a bunch of poor deluded fools, falling for that religious hokum! A bunch of holier-than-thou hypocrites!” That’s the attitude of our culture. So don’t look to the world for approval. But do look to your Father in heaven for his love and approval through our Saviour Jesus Christ.

The elder offers support for why this community might face rejection from others, including dissenters: “The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Where is your attention?” the Elder inquires. Is it constantly looking to the world for legitimation, security, and accolades? Are you just trying to ‘fit in’? Do you simply want to be like everyone else? Follow their regulations for acceptability? If you do that, you will miss what is happening right in front of you; God is calling out, God is calling out to you, saying you are Mine. And God says this not as demand unto slavery, but rather the opposite, with overflowing love.

The translation of “what” or “what love” in 1John is based on the Greek word ‘potapen,’ which has a literal meaning “of what country?” In that sense, the Elder is saying: from what foreign country did this strange, amazing love come, that we could be called children of God? Possibly the Elder used ‘potapen’ in its more generic sense of “what type” or “what kind.” In this case it would mean something like, what type of love is this; what amazing love that calls us children of God? In either case, the elder shows wonder, joy, and bewilderment that God would treat sinners so graciously. Any one of us with difficult guests or acquaintances will know that it is one thing to tolerate them, something kinder to lend a bit of help. But to actually welcome them into your home and life as family? What sort of love could this be and who is sufficient for these things?

According to the Elder, it is not enough simply to be called a ‘son of God’, if there is no real substance behind this, perhaps poking at the empty promises of the dissenters. St. Augustine raises this matter quite poignantly: “For those who are called sons, and are not sons, what profit them the name where the thing is not?

How many are called “physicians” but know not how to heal! How many are called “watchers” but sleep all night long! So, many are called “Christians” and yet in their deeds are not found to be; because they are not actually what they are called, this is, in life, in hope, in charity.” Augustine’s point is that the divine adoptions of believers-in-Jesus is not simply words - adopted, saved, redeemed. Believers go through a transformative process. We can relate the Elder’s language of adoption to the letter to Colossians, where we read: “He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, forgiveness of sins.”

The content of God’s love, or perhaps its result is that we are called “God’s children.” This is not just wishing or pretending; we are what God declares us to be. The implicit image here is one of adoption. God lovingly calls us God’s children, and that declaration makes it so. We are God’s children not by our choice or by our accomplishment, but by the Father’s love.

In the Roman world, adoptions were considered a normal process. But it was not about compassion for orphans. Many people were adopted as young adults and even older adults. Adoption was about the inheritance and name. Often a man was adopted to carry on the name of a childless family. The adopted son would sever ties to the old family and this would include relief of any debt owed under the name of the old family. He would become a whole new person, in a new context, with a new inheritance and name.

And so it goes with spiritual adoption through Jesus Christ! The Elder’s vision is not just about the past (a clean slate), or the distant future (going to heaven), but also the present. As the Elder notes, redemption is illusory if it is not transformative unto righteousness. Sin cannot be ignored or redefined as an evasive tactic, perhaps a tactic the dissenters were using. Christ came to deal with sin, and abiding in him, entering into the family of God through Christ’s own Sonship, is the only way to sever the bondage to sin.

Therefore we the children of God now are called to put away the practice of sinning and instead live for righteousness. This will be a struggle, but God will strengthen us for the fight. We have God’s forgiveness as our refuge when we

stumble, and we have God's resources – the Spirit of his Son, the means of grace – to help us live as the children of God we are.

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What are we now and what we will we be? What we are now is God's beloved children, dearly and deeply loved, so much so that he sent his Son to save us. We are God's children now. What we will be is God's children forever, raised to the glories of life everlasting, freed from sin, freed from sorrow, in the great fellowship of the saints, and seeing our Saviour face to face. Yes, what wondrous love this is! "See what kind of love the Father has given to us!"

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR PENTECOST 7 - JULY 7, 2024

Holy God, you gather the whole universe into your radiant presence and continually reveal your Son as Saviour. Bring healing to all wounds, make whole all that is broken, reveal your truth where abuse of power exists, and shed light in every darkness, that all Creation will see your glory and know your Christ.

Loving God, friend of the outcast and stranger, prejudiced in favour of those whom others reject, we hear your call to care for those on the margins of our world; indigenous sisters and brothers lost in their own land; refugees seeking asylum and new hope; those excluded from our communities. May our ministry offer dignity and respect to each and every person and offer a place at the table for the stranger and outcast.

We pray for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa refugees who are forced into labour and those fleeing from war in the Middle East. We pray for the advancing of knowledge of these criminal networks such that those working to bring justice to these systems are effective.

Give your comfort to those in detention centres, juvenile prisons, the homeless youth on our streets and roads who are looking for someone to trust. Surround those children living in impoverished and dangerous places, those in the midst of bombardment and unendurable war. We pray for Gaza and Palestine, the lost, the orphaned, those in shock and terror.

For peace in war torn regions of the world. We lament upon learning that documented records reveal that 1,993 children have been killed or injured since the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine, although it is likely to be much higher. Over 4,000 schools have been destroyed in Ukraine. Five million Ukrainian children have been displaced, either internally, or as refugees in Europe and North America. Compassionate God, help to bring this war to an end.

For all who are affected by floods, hurricanes, and fires and are having to evacuate their communities; for those helping them in their distress; for the firefighters and emergency responders; protect them all and give them strength as they respond to these disasters.

For the grace to live in peace and harmony: that God will help us accept the differences in one another, understand the gifts that others bring, and give us patience as we strive to work together: for a new experience of grace and mercy in our lives: that God's love will free us from our past failures, give us courage to make amends, and hope to begin again in our relationships.

God above, bless the land and all that is on it; watch over farmers and labourers as they undertake the crucial work of planting, watering and harvesting. May they experience good weather and rain as needed. Keep them safe and grant them endurance.

Help us to never lose sight of the reality that each person we encounter is a child of your own making, regardless of race, ethnicity, creed, economic situation, sexuality or age. May we see in the faces of those around us and across this globe your own face, filled with love and hope, mercy and peace.

Creator God, we marvel in awe of the expansiveness of your creation. Your margins of diversity are boundless, and for that, we thank you. Each of our beloved 2SLGBTQIA+ siblings, all who are created with various skin colors are beautifully and wonderfully made, all in Your image. Teach us to love all people, just as they are, and embrace their identity fully, as you have embraced us.

In our joy, let us not forget those this morning who know little else but sadness. In our sense of gratitude and praise, let us not forget those whose lives are filled with regrets and heartbreaks. In our feeling of support and guidance, let us not forget those who feel they have struggled against life's difficulties and disappointments alone and uncared for.

We pray for those who are facing illness, medical treatments and therapies, life altering diagnosis and prolonged healing, and at times feel lost and look to you for hope, comfort, and peace. Today we pray for Michelle and Fred Hoenisch; Pastor Kristin Steele as she continues to heal from her surgery, and Bishop Kathy in hospital, as she undergoes testing.

We pray for all people in their daily life and work—for our families, friends, and neighbours, and for those who are alone. We name before you individuals and families experiencing personal hardship or facing an uncertain future; the homeless, those with inadequate housing, those suffering addiction, those who are separated from loved ones. Hear us Lord as we now lift up those people and those situations you have placed upon our hearts.

We pray and are grateful for our church and its leaders: Bishop Kathy and Bishop Susan, Anna, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. We pray for our local Christian communities, our churches and ecumenical groups; Christ Lutheran in Kelowna – Rev. Barbara Groote, Shared Ministries in the BC Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

Creator God, may we proclaim your good news to the world, in the ways we are each able to and in ways which can be heard by those around us. May the fire of your spirit live within us declaring your glory.

Amen.

With joy and gladness let us pray as Jesus taught us ...

Our Father ...