

April 19

I John 3:1-7

Sermon: Children of God

As we begin this day we hear that we are called children of God. This is not just a title, it isn't a hope; we are children of God, right now! This is different from what Matthew shares in the Beatitudes. There it says, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons/daughters of God." That is a future hope. Here it is a present reality! What does it mean to be given and more importantly live into this title?

To begin to understand this blessing and challenge we need to understand how John's mind works. He lived in a time where Plato's thinking was the dominant thought process in the Greek and Roman world. Plato's philosophy is called dualistic. It says everything is separated into good and evil, right and wrong, positive and negative, you get the idea. There is no middle ground for John. You are in one camp or the other. Now we might want to disagree with this world view. We realize there are many subtle variations that color our actions and perspectives but if you are to understand John you need to embrace his dualism to hear the blessing and the challenges.

Now I just want you to sit there and think for a moment about that thought that you are a child of God. This status is not earned, it is a gift. But it is a gift that comes to us only as a byproduct of our faith. John would say that all are beloved by God but to claim that special spot at the table reserved for family we have to first say yes to Jesus and strive to follow his teachings and examples. There is a tension here that we have to acknowledge. We need to see our being a child of God as something unique but this special designation does not give us the freedom or permission to treat those not of our faith disrespectfully. We have to remember that God loves them too. They are just not part of our family. So as we become and live as a person of faith we are also adopted by God and become God's child.

Before we talk about some of the blessings of being a child of God, John lets us understand some of the challenges this gift presents to us. He talks about us in relationship to the world which John sees as evil, corrupt or at least not holding to the values and ideals of Jesus. As we remember that John holds a dualistic faith it means that if we are a child of God we are not a part of the world. The world rejects God and

so doesn't know or understand us. We might want to challenge that impression. We want to point to the differences between the culture John's listeners found themselves in and ours. They were a persecuted minority. The power of the state's official religion were opposed to their faith. Rome proclaimed Caesar is Lord while the church proclaimed Jesus is Lord. We want to talk about how we live in a Christian dominant culture. We are not persecuted for a faith, at least not by the government. But we often talk about how the faith Jesus proclaimed is counter cultural. It goes against the norms of even our society. Let me give you just a few examples. Jesus talks about welcoming the stranger and we argue about immigration. Jesus talks about giving someone your shirt if they demand your coat and we talk about creating laws to protect our wealth. In business, cooperation is not rewarded as much as the ruthless drive to the top. All of us have had those moments where if we were to live out the words Jesus shared it might be costly, monetarily or socially with friends dropping us. John wants us to see this tension between what Christ's asks us to do and how the world is structured. We may not lose our life for being faithful but it does mean that the more challenging we find it to live our faith the better the job that we are doing.

John is clear that as children of God we should expect to share God's experience, which is often one of rejection, anonymity, or invisibility in other people's concerns and experiences. If they treat our faith as to be of no account, this is hardly a cause for anxiety but only what is to be expected. They are not children of God and so do not live in our environment. There is this duality of thinking, remember? You cannot live in the world and fully embrace its values and also live within the beloved community. So, if we are finding it easy to live in the world and our faith does not cause us much, if any problems, we need to pause and ask, "How faithful are we?" Our faith is something that encourages us and supports us but should also hold us accountable. It also, through our connection to this local faith community called Trinity, showers us with love but should also confront us with the need to change and grow.

I often find it interesting to see the reactions of people whom I am meeting for the first time and they ask me what I do for a living. When I tell them, I get a whole range of responses. Sometimes it is just a smile and the conversation goes on. Other times I get explanations of why they don't go to church or even hostility about the judgmentalism of

Christians. It is pretty easy to figure out who are of the world and who are children of God.

We know the blessings of being family. We celebrate it. John also points to the future when he talks about when Christ shall appear again. The story of our being a child of God is also a story of future transformation; something more lies ahead that is still veiled. Just as no parent knows what their baby will be like as they grow up and become an adult we, who are just children in God's eyes, do not know what lies ahead in faith. We are called to grow and be faithful and to hold on to the promises we are given.

One of the incredible promises John shares is that we are told that as we grow we will grow more and more into the likeness of God and even more, we shall see God. Throughout the Bible there is the tradition that no mortal can see God and live. To see God and live means that we have become one with Christ. We will see and know God as God is. In other places in the letter John says that because we are children we can come to this meeting with expectation, not with fear. We are going to meet our loving parent, not an angry judge. It is more akin to going to the grandparent's house for Thanksgiving when we were a child, knowing that we would be loved and doted upon instead of standing before Judge Judy and told all of the stupid things we have done.

Finally he talks about our being purified. This future revelation has implications for the present. We should live like him today. We need to begin to become pure today. This is the Wesleyan doctrine of going on to perfection.

This thought comes from the idea that Divinity is pure and all that is associated with the Divine must be made pure. Many of the laws recorded in Leviticus deal with purity issues. Those who approach God in worship must prepare themselves. This was true for the worshipper as well as the priest. Just think for a moment, what it would be like if, as you left today you realized that you were just beginning a week of preparation for coming to worship next week. I don't want you to see this idea as off putting. I am not good enough to worship or God doesn't want me to come unless I jump through such and such hoops. But instead to see worship as this awesome time when the community of God's children gather together to worship and come before God. We

come hoping to catch a glimpse of the divine and to do this we must live with purity of heart and life.

This kind of intentional living is part of the joy and challenge of being a child of God. It is part of the reason that we would not live too comfortably in the world. For John, purifying oneself is therefore not just a preparedness that may be expressed in avoidance of the inappropriate, but an active discipline for those who would see God.

In closing let me give you just one example to take with you. I remember listening to the Rev. Joseph Lowrey, noted civil rights leader who gave the invocation at our president's first inauguration. He was asked what it was like to live at the heart of the civil rights movement. What he said essentially was this. "You realized that everything you did mattered. Every word and every action was going to be examined and they would try to use it against you to discredit the movement. Therefore you had to live carefully and thoughtfully each and every moment of every day." We too should strive to live carefully and thoughtfully each day for we are God's children and we are promised that we will become full sons and daughters of God. This is a gift, but we must live into it today, being as pure as we can because God is pure and we want to see God.