

Sermon for April 15, 2018 "Children of God?"

1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36-48

John's words about God's children remind me of a story. Once upon a time there was a woman who had two daughters. The woman was a wise and loving mother. But despite her care for them, they grew up hateful and selfish. As soon as they could, they both abandoned their mother and went out to fulfill their selfish desires.

Years passed and the woman, who had stayed in contact with her two wayward daughters, discovered that she was terminally ill. Out of love she sent word to both daughters telling them that her days were short. One of the daughters came to her mother and spent her last days with her. As she watched her mother suffer and die, she grew to know her again for the first time. She saw the faith and the love and the wisdom that was always in her mother, but that her selfishness had never let her see.

When the woman died, her other daughter arrived for the funeral. But people could see the difference between the two daughters. The one that had been with her mother had learned her wisdom and love. She was no longer the selfish, spiteful woman her sister remained. She was like her mother a person of love and wisdom.

What does it mean to be called the children of God? To some people "the Children of God" means one thing and to others another? Some say, "We're all God's children, aren't we?" Well, that sounds reasonable because we are all descendants of the first human beings created by God. Often this way of speaking of all God's children is a way of calling for human rights for all and love for neighbor. After all, if we are all "God's Children" then even a non-Christian of a different race on the other side of the world is my sister or brother. In that sense we are all children of God by creation.

But John has a different meaning of "The Children of God" in mind. He is not thinking of "God's children by creation" but "God's children by vocation." The word "vocation" comes from a root that means "to call." It is a calling. Not just one that is heard, like a child who hears their mother calling the to dinner and ignores it, but one that is heeded. John writes, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" To John the title "Children of God" is a lavish gift from God the Father. It is a title that we have, and some don't.

But before you get proud and think you are somehow special because you are called "God's Children" consider this. Nowhere does it say that this title was not offered to others. In fact a reading of the Gospels makes it clear that Jesus offered this title "Child of God" to everyone. It is just a matter of some accepting it and others rejecting it. Like the two daughters in the parable: one got to know her mother and gained a great gift from it. She truly became the daughter of her wise and loving mother. The other did not but stayed a selfish spiteful emotional orphan. We were all God's Children by creation. But only a few have accepted the gift of that relationship with God and they are God's Children by vocation.

So, what does it mean to us that God has lavished this great gift on us? First, it means that we are inheritors of the riches of the Kingdom of God. John writes, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known, but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." Some people think of Heaven as just a continuation of this life without all the negative things present. But the Bible speaks of us becoming glorified. It says that we will be like Jesus.

Do you remember the passage I read from Luke? It described Jesus as appearing as he had in life. He was even able to eat with the disciples. The wounds that had killed him were ever visible. But at the same time, he was able to appear in locked rooms and disappear at will.

John says, "What we will be has not been made known." I won't try to speculate on how we will appear after the resurrection. But it's clear that the depth of our inheritance in Christ is far beyond what we can even imagine. We speak of heaven as having streets of gold, but its glory is far beyond that. By calling us "Children of God" and heirs of heaven we have indeed been given a lavish gift from God.

But is that all it means to be called a child of God? No, as children of God we are also called to responsibilities. John says that "everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as he (Jesus) is pure." So as God's Children, we have a responsibility to live pure lives. John goes on, "In him (Jesus) there is no sin." And if we are in him, and Children of God, there should be no sin in us.

John says, "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him." Does that mean that a person who commits any sin is no longer a Child of God? That is how some have interpreted this. But John is talking about continued unrepentant sinning. We all commit sins; sometimes even sins we are not aware of. Sometimes we harbor hatreds, or participate in prejudices, that we are blind to until the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to them. The difference is that when a Child of God recognizes they have sinned, they repent, and with God's help they try to purify their lives of that sin.

So as Children of God we have a responsibility to become more like Christ in our daily lives. Some people think that receiving the gift of salvation is the end of the road. But this makes it clear it is just the beginning. Now that we are Children of God we are called to let the Holy Spirit mold our lives to be more like Christ's. Like the daughter who came to her mother before her death, we are called to get to know our heavenly Father and become like him.

Perhaps another parable will bring all things together. Once upon a time there was a king who had great wealth. In this king's realm there was a region that had been through a great famine. Since the king had such great wealth he sent great amounts of aid to that region. In fact, he sent so much that the region became the richest in the kingdom.

How should the people of that region react to the King? Should they show undying loyalty to that king? Or should they openly disregard that king's laws?

You tell me. Out of great love God has made you Children of God. The greatness and the depth of this gift will not be fully realized on this side of the resurrection. If we are truly grateful for this gift and look for the hope of Jesus' return, then it should affect the way we live. We should seek to follow God's ways as shown to us in Christ.

In other words, if we are children of God, we should act like it.