

Did everyone hear how the Scripture for today begins? I hope you didn't miss these encouraging and uplifting words. If you did, allow me to repeat this tremendous declaration of what God thinks of us: “*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*” (NIV). From the very beginning our relationship with God is something God has *given*—not merely that God will allow as a possibility, but something actually *given* to us. This needs to be in the front of our minds as we think about God. We have a place as children in the heavenly family only because God has *given* it to us. In addition, because we are God's children, we receive family privileges: to live close to God and to depend on God for life.

John, who wrote this epistle, is also concerned that we depend on one another and treat one another as family. This was how Jesus conducted his ministry: bringing people close to God and then teaching them to love one another as they would their own family members. John wrote to people in the Greek world who didn't always align their religion with ethics. Religion was a way to influence a deity. Perform the right rituals. Offer the right sacrifices. Then you get what you want from the gods (little “g”).

Yet Jesus' message and ministry showed a way of life where all of our living is turned toward God, as a small child in the family is turned toward his parents. In premarital counseling I always ask engaged couples to recognize what they've learned from their parents about how to be married people. Daughters will be much like their mothers as wives; sons will be much like their fathers as husbands. So what kind of wife was your mother? What was your father's way of relating to your mother? In this situation, of course, you're picking and choosing between the good and not-so-good behaviors, trying to be conscious of both the good and not-so-good things as a future spouse, so you can concentrate on the good without letting the bad infiltrate your own marriage.

The new Christians John writes to very much need to recognize that they're linked to God in a most intimate way, so he repeats his point: “*that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*” We're *known* as God's children, and we *are* God's children. And here's the thing to hold onto: Lots of people think of religion as feelings, and therefore their thoughts about God follow their feelings and mood swings. John, like most of the New Testament writers, sees it the other way around. Remember that you are God's child. That's where to begin. Hold onto that no matter what doubts you have, no matter your negative feelings, no matter the troubles you're in. When you face decisions or when people are pressuring you to do wrong, it's God's opinion of you that matters most. What could that opinion be? You are God's dear child.

You will still have doubts, down times, disturbing questions about God and faith. People will disagree with you about your faith. John knows that. So he goes on to say, “*The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.*” Not everyone knows or believes that God has loved the world in Jesus Christ, and so at times believers seem strange to non-believers. In today's secular world, someone who believes in God (instead of believing in a vague spirituality or a distant higher-power) is seen as quaint, a museum piece among modern people. And many non-believers treat believers condescendingly. They treat us like we're pretending there's an Easter Bunny in order to maintain some sort of personal security. Many think that we are weak minded. This attitude usually comes from those who have never been affected by the love of God that takes over our lives and gives us a place in a new heavenly family. So when people don't recognize us as God's children it's because they have not recognized God reaching down with love through Jesus Christ the Savior.

This means we have a job to do, to help others recognize and respond to the dignity God wants every human being to enjoy. Both by what we say—speaking about God’s love for us and explaining the unique message of Jesus—and also by what we communicate through our actions.

By way of Christian witness, our church and neighboring Presbyterian churches have initiated the work of providing water to remote African villages, organizing a preschool for disadvantaged children in the southern US, struggling for human rights and justice for oppressed people. In our community we are offering counseling and comfort, getting meals to those who are homebound, and providing clothing and school supplies for children as they start school. Christian people do all of this because of what God has declared us to be: Children within God’s family.

As members of God’s family on earth, wonderful things await us beyond this earthly life. We don’t know the exact nature of those things or exactly when they will come about. But here’s the surest message we have about the future: God has more for us, much more for us, in this life and beyond. This is our reason for doing what John writes next: *“All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.”*

We consecrate ourselves to God’s service, as did Jesus. We’re expected to live for God’s purposes in the same way Jesus did, which is the practical holiness Jesus commanded and lived. It’s a happy and joyful way to live, released from death and sin, members of God’s family, and on our way toward heaven. Of course, we need to get the word out to others because God sits up late until all his kids come home and return to heaven’s family.

I recently ran across some interesting answers to science test questions, as answered by 5th and 6th graders last week. For example, one described the law of gravity as saying, “No fair jumping up without coming back down.” Pretty good answer. Another said, “You can listen to thunder and tell how close you came to getting hit. If you don’t hear it, you got hit, so never mind.”

A couple of them responded to questions about clouds. One said, “I’m not sure how clouds are formed, but clouds know how to do it, and that’s the important thing.” Well, OK. Another said, “Water vapor gets together in a cloud. When it is big enough to be called a drop, it does.” Uh huh. One student defined a “monsoon” as a French gentlemen.

Just a few more: One youngster said, “When planets run around and around in circles, we say they are orbiting. When people do it, we say they are crazy.” True. One student defined the spinal column as “a long bunch of bones. The head sits on the top, and you sit on the bottom.” Right you are.

None of those test answers have anything to do with the sermon, but this one jumped out at me because it definitely does. One 5th grader wrote, “Genetics explains why you look like your father, and if you don’t, why you should.” In the context of today’s Scripture, this one hits home: *“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”* The question we should all be asking today is this: “Is there a family resemblance?” If not, there should be.

Several years ago, Stephen Carter’s book, *The Culture of Disbelief*, looked at how our society tries to convince us to treat God as a hobby. Our culture sees faith as something that we should not bring with us into the public square when making decisions about life and how life ought to be lived. Our society’s message is clear: Practice your faith, if you must, but please do it PRIVATELY. First John emphatically says “NO” to that. First John tells us that what we believe will determine how we behave, both privately AND publicly. To put it plainly: *If we are children of God our Father, the world should be able to see the family resemblance.*

But wait a minute. Aren't ALL people children of God? Well, the answer to that is yes and no. One writer explains it this way:

“There are two English words which are closely connected, but whose meanings are widely different. There is the word *paternity* and the word *fatherhood*. Paternity describes a relationship in which a father is responsible for the physical existence of a child; but, as far as paternity goes, it can be, and not infrequently is the case, that the father never sets eyes on the child, and would not recognize him or her, if he met them. Fatherhood, on the other hand, describes an intimate, loving, continuous relationship in which father and child grow closer to each other every day. In the sense of *paternity* ALL people are children of God; but in the sense of *fatherhood* only those who have responded in faith to God's gracious gift in Jesus Christ are children of God.”

I love the promise that John gives in verse 2 following his stunning declaration that we are children of God: “*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*”

What he's saying is that God isn't done with us yet. And amazingly, what lies in store is too wonderful for us to comprehend. God has no expectation that we should be sinless, because that is clearly impossible in this fallen world. Rather, the expectation is that we do not continue to sin because now we know God and love God. If we find ourselves OFF track, we will not be content until we get ON track again. In other words, our profession of faith and our practice of faith...our beliefs and our behavior...as far as is humanly possible, should match. We do not just “talk the talk,” but we “walk the walk.”

Does that mean we all talk and walk identically? Not at all. There are Protestant Christians; there are Catholic Christians. There are Republican Christians; there are Democrat Christians. There are pro-life Christians; there are pro-choice Christians. There are straight Christians; there are gay Christians. There are crew-cut Christians; there are dreadlock Christians. And on and on and on. There are many many differences in the family of faith.

But, there is ONE trait that insures all the world will know to whom we belong: *our family resemblance*.

How are we children to resemble our heavenly Father? I think Jesus said it best: “*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*” (John 13:35).

Amen.