

God's Children Now

April 14, 2024

1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36-48

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

Up to this point in the First Letter of John, the author – I guess we'll call him John, although the name itself doesn't appear in the book or in the other two books we call “letters of John” – up to this point, the author has called his readers “little children.” I think he intended it as a term of endearment, because he also uses the word, “beloved” to address his readers. In this moment, however, we're no longer John's children. We're God's children, and God's children because God loved us and loves us still.

That's a wonderful thing to hear.

It's especially nice to hear after hearing, in the first chapter, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” That's a somewhat subtle way of saying that if we say we're sinless, we lie. John assures us, however, that God forgives sin through the advocacy of Jesus Christ. “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Again, a wonderful thing to hear.

In the second chapter of 1 John, he writes about a conflict within the church, one that has apparently caused some people to leave. It's not clear what happened or why they left, but John had no sympathy. “They went out from us, but they did not belong to us, for if they had belonged to us they would have remained with us.”

Having written that they “do not belong to us,” John wrote that “we” are God's children. “They,” therefore, are not.

I'm afraid that conflicts in the Church have often looked like this. “We” are righteous and “they” are unrighteous. “We” are children of God and “they” are “children of the devil,” which John called “them” in the very next verse after our reading stopped this morning.

Nobody knows for certain when 1 John was written, but here we have it: within a hundred years of Jesus' death and resurrection, the Church was engaged in separating "Us" from "Them" and the "children of God" from the "children of the devil."

I'm... pretty sure that that was not what Jesus had in mind.

It does seem that Jesus might have had something in mind around, oh, I don't know, loving one another. John wrote about that a lot in this book, as it happens. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." We will be like the one who loves us into becoming God's children.

It's a pity that we're not there yet.

We weren't there yet when John wrote, because otherwise his understanding of love might have kept him from labeling those who disagreed with him "children of the devil." We weren't there yet when Christian leaders in the first few centuries began calling themselves "orthodox" and others "heretics." We weren't there yet when major divisions in the Church took place in the five hundreds, and in the thousands, and the 1500s, and are we experiencing another transition now?

The biggest witness against the truth proclaimed by the Church is its division against itself. If we cannot love those who proclaim the resurrection of Christ as we do, how will we ever love anyone else?

It's an awfully good question.

You see, I run into verse 6, "No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him," and I ask myself: So do I know God? Do I know Christ? Am I God's child?

Elisabeth Johnson writes at Working Preacher, "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. Perhaps this is the context in which to understand the following verses about sin (verses 4-7), which seem to contradict what the author has already said in 1:6-10. Whereas the author had affirmed in 1:6-10 that it is delusional for anyone to say that they are without sin, now he circles back to say that it is also delusional to think that we can abide in Christ and continue to sin as though nothing has changed.

"The purity of Christ that is to characterize believers is not some esoteric quality but is manifest in concrete acts of love."

I think the purity of Christ that is to characterize believers is not some automatic quality. We have to conceive and achieve those concrete acts of love ourselves. We may have become God's children, but we remain responsible human beings. A child, you may have noticed, makes

their own decisions about things, which are sometimes at odds with the parent's desires. These may happen because the child doesn't know what the parent wants, or because the child isn't paying attention to what the parent wants, or because the child wants something different from what the parent wants. It's the same with Christians' relationship with God. We sometimes do things and find out later that God wasn't in favor. We sometimes do things carelessly, without thinking, and then slap our foreheads and say, "I shouldn't have done that."

And let's face it, sometimes we know perfectly well that God wants us to act out of love and charity and compassion and we choose indifference, selfishness, or even hate.

I think those are the times that are hardest to acknowledge within ourselves and hardest to confess to God. "Oh, I didn't know." Well, yeah, I did. "I wasn't thinking." Well, yeah, I was. About myself and what I wanted. Yeah, I was thinking.

And most popular of all: "I was entitled. I was in charge. I was right."

But entitlement isn't about love. God is in charge. And was I, were you, are we really right when we act outside of love?

Those are hard to acknowledge to ourselves. They're hard to confess to God.

"There is a genuine tension, both within the text of 1 John and within the experience of the church, regarding the reality of sin on the one hand, and life as God's children on the other," writes Brian Peterson at Working Preacher. "What is clear is that the author will allow neither self-delusions of sinlessness nor a casual acceptance of sin within the lives of God's children...

"In our text, as further response, the author says that one's actions really do matter. Being a child of God does not make all behaviors un-sinful for you. Sin within those who hope in Jesus is both a real possibility, and a profound contradiction. That contradiction is not to be glossed over."

We live and strive and choose and act in the "already" and the "not yet." We are God's children – that is what we are – but we do not live, strive, choose, and act with the perfection of the One in whose image we are made, the One whose children we are. We aspire to it, and with each choice and action of our lives we strive to achieve that perfection. With each confession and repentance, we come closer to it.

As Janette H. Ok writes at Working Preacher, "We live into our beloved and begotten identity confident of the fact that God is not done with us yet. We commit ourselves again and again to doing what is right and loving one another, knowing that becoming more like the Father is a privilege of being called his sons and daughters—and that is what we are!"

There are no perfect oh'i'a blossoms, and there are no perfect Christians. There is no perfect Church, and there is no perfect compassion within the Church. But if we feed one another, if we

care for one another, if we extend that imperfect caring to those around us, we get closer and closer to this ideal that John imagined, wrote, and encouraged to those he called “little children,” “beloved,” and, yes, “children of God.”

Amen.

by Eric Anderson