



## Children of God

### 1 John 3:1-3

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Over the past couple months, we have heard from the Biblical text that part of our call as individuals is to be part of the larger body of Christ. The call – whether offered by Christ, or stressed by a leading apostle – to be a part of the whole is not merely a passive invitation; such a charge by the authors of our sacred text is demanded in an imperative voice. In 1 Corinthians 12, we read verse 27, which says, “Now you **are** the body of Christ, and each one members of it.” Romans 12, verse 5, says, “We, who are many, **are** one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” Ephesians 5:29-30 reads, “No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Jesus also does the church, because **we are** members of his body.”

The imperative voice does not provide for the community an option of whether or not you want to belong. Since the days of the earliest church, it was declared for us, **we are** the body of Christ, and each one individually members of it. It reminds me of Jeremy Atticus Finch. In her famous writing, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee has this great interplay between Jeremy (a 10-year-old boy) and his Aunt Alexandra. Jem says, “Aunt, [daddy] says you can choose your friends but you sho’ can’t choose your family, an’ they’re still kin to you no matter whether you acknowledge ‘em or not, and it makes you look right silly when you don’t.”

But let’s be honest about family; the biblical mandate for seeing one another as family, for living together as family, is not as easy as the imperative demands. Family relationships are finicky, and at times, down right hard. It is no secret that many, if not most, children have stressed relationships with their parents at some point growing up. Children and their parents have this ongoing power struggle that begins at birth when the child demands you get no sleep just so they can have a 2am feeding. That’s just the start of it. As they get older, you get into the struggles of what clothing is appropriate, you have to deal with the saga regarding screen time and homework, you have to navigate the right-of-passage to acquire a driver’s license, and you may have to work through the financial headache of selecting a college.

Family challenges aren’t limited to parents and their kids. Many of us have the one proverbial aunt or uncle – you know, the one that you still don’t want to see at Christmas because they have no sensor and no moral decency. Many of us have that one relative that we have to declare warning on before seeing them, “So help me, if she brings up my last relationship one more time, I’m going to flip out on her.” Perhaps we have cousins, aunts, or uncles, who we have had to cut off relationship with because of our vastly opposing political and religious differences. Going into the holiday season, we fear the Thanksgiving meal when we will be forced into close proximity with relatives who know how to push our conversational buttons.

But these are the easy family struggles. If we avoid seeing these persons, we avoid the conflict altogether. We can put up with them for a day at Thanksgiving and Christmas, and then we get to run away. Other family issues stem from long term or long past divisions. Many of us hold deep pain because of relationships that have been severed. We might have a sibling with whom we no longer talk. We may have a parent who abused us as a child, with whom we have no existing relationship. We may have an adult child who hasn't called home in years. We may dread the death of a parent, not because we would be losing a mom or dad, but because it means we'd have to work through the estate with siblings we don't want to be around.

For such strained relationships, Jem Finch seems but a thorn in our side. Why don't we get to choose our family? We didn't ask for this family; why can't we find a new family?

With such family pain among those who are blood related, the Biblical text mandating that we see this larger community as family and part of the body of Christ seems down right silly. There are people with whom we are blood related that we don't want to call family, so why would we go through the heartache of expanding such a circle to include others?

This is very much the question the early church was asking. It's like the early faith communities were pushing back, saying, 'we have our own family issues we are dealing with – can you please stop defining the church as a family unit?'

But John will have none of it. The apostle makes this declarative statement: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." Mic drop by the apostle.

John says, you don't have a say in this matter. Because of God's love, *we are* children of God. This is our true identity. "The Bible is not just trying to cheer us up here by saying something that isn't literally true, as when a parent tries to cheer up a child who has just struck out in baseball. 'You took a great cut, buddy. You're a great swinger.' God isn't cheerleading here. God is telling us the absolute truth. ... You are a child of God."<sup>i</sup>

The gift of God's love brings about this relationship with the family of God. It is a gift – nothing we did earn us this love. God's gift, through love, is given to bring you together in a family unit, called the body of Christ. You are, with one another, children of God.

Turn to the person next to you – right now – and say, "I am a child of God." (Go ahead!)

Now, turn to someone else, and say, "You are a child of God." (Do it!)

Now, all together, I want to hear you claim this. I'm going to say, "We are," and I want you to say, "Children of God!" ... Ready, "WE ARE!" .... "CHILDREN OF GOD!"

That is a gift from God, offered through God's love. We are children of God. And because of such love, as children of God, we are as one family with each other. ... So, let's look around and figure out who the cooky aunt is ....

We are children of God. So, what does this mean?

John goes on, "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."

I love the apostle's vagueness. Such a cryptic and mysterious definition helps me feel more comfortable when I do not have the answers. What we will be has not yet been revealed.

What is unquestionable is that we are God's children. But what is uncertain, is what being God's children means for us in the future. Just as assuredly as we know we are God's children now, we are also assured that we do not know what we will become. The only future promise that is offered is a guarantee that when the Lord is fully revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him perfectly.

With such a mysterious future, one we can't even begin to predict, the most faithful way to live is to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Verse three affirms this path. "All who have this hope in [the Lord] purify themselves, just as [the Lord] is pure."

"Despite the mystery [of who we will become], the thought that we will be like [*the Lord*] when *he* appears seems to have caused [John] to insist that this hope of future transformation – of future conformity with [the Lord] – should lead us to start transforming or purifying ourselves in the present."<sup>ii</sup> Our being called children of God may be a gift, but such a gift invites a commitment to live so that we may be transformed into the body of Christ.

The context of this passage asserts that our commitment to purity isn't just about transforming ourselves, this change in our personal lives is about transforming the community. The commitment is a personal one, but the effect is ecclesial – that is, corporate.

We will have the joy this morning to celebrate the baptism of Miss Grace Blitz Smith. Baptism is a sacramental incorporation into the body of Christ. In baptism we celebrate the prevenient grace of God that calls us into the family of God, the body of Christ, even when we aren't fully able to know what that means. As part of the baptismal covenant, the parents are invited to acknowledge that they will do all in their power to raise this child in God's family. This act declares this child is not just a child of their family, but is a child of God in the universal body of Christ.

Another part of this covenant is for the church to respond. Your response is printed in the bulletin. Baptism is not just a claiming of the child by God, and a dedication of the child to the family of God by the parents, but it's a reminder for the community of your role in the family of God. Your response proclaims, "With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live

according to the example of Christ. We will surround this child with a community of love and forgiveness, that she may grow in her trust of God, and be found faithful in her service to others. We will pray for her, that she may be a true disciple who walks in the way that leads to life.”

Your individual commitment is a promise to uphold the corporate body of Christ, to claim your role as a member of God’s family, that your example in this community may help shape others that they may claim their identity as a children of God. By purifying yourself as a witness to God’s love, by playing your part as one of God’s children in this community, your faithfulness will help this community to continue to grow into God’s vision that we don’t yet fully understand.

Such a shaping of community is why we celebrate today the Saint’s of our lives. “Our legacy as children of God is to remember that, even though our loved ones have died, through their love and compassion, their instruction and correction, their laughter and tears, their honesty and humility, their sacrifice and dedication, and, most of all, their faith, they are still speaking.”<sup>iii</sup> We are who we are today as a community of Christ, as a church in Old Town, Alexandria, as children of God in the world, because of the impact of those who came before us who took seriously the call to faithful living.

The impact of those who have gone before us does not cease when they go to join God’s eternal glory. I can tell you, there’s not a Sunday that passes that I don’t think of Mrs. Virginia Backus – for the pulpit I stand in was given to the church by her mother in honor of her father, who pastored here in the 1940s. I can tell you, not a worship service will go by that I won’t leave the sanctuary without missing Mrs. Jackie James who would greet me in the back at the close of every service. Not a week will pass without missing the accountability of Helen Bradford, who established a baseline of hospitality that we will never fail to uphold.

Some of you may not know these women, but I know there are people here today who would not be here, who would not have found their place as a member of this family, without the dedicated faithfulness of these women.

When I think back on my own upbringing in the church, when I consider my being taught what it means to be a child of God, I can only pause and give thanks for the men and women who exemplified such faithfulness in my life. In reality, not all of these persons have passed. Most of those who I consider the saints in my life are still living. From those who taught me the stories of the faith, to those who called me into ministry, to those who mentored me in ministry – the stories of those I give thanks for on this All Saints’ Day are largely still living.

In remembering the saints of our lives from years past, whether those living or dead, I can’t help but wonder, who will take the place of these saints in the church? God isn’t calling us to replace these people. Each saint we remember had unique gifts, graces, and callings that have been lived out faithfully. We remember these men and women today, not because they have died, but because their legacy is a life of faithfulness. John makes clear, God isn’t asking for us

to replace those who have come before us; God is calling for the next generation of witnesses to purify themselves, to claim their gifts, talents, and treasures, and to faithfully lead the body of Christ into a faithful future that will one day, without our even being aware, will look just like the Lord, revealed.

Beloved, we are children of God. That is our identity. We may not know what we are to become, but we are invited to commit ourselves to faithfulness in Christ, that as a family, as the Eucharist, as the body of Christ, the world may know God's love. Let us claim the glory of the saints, upon whose shoulders we stand, that everyone may know the great love of God as it has been made known to us. For the glory of God shall be made known – Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Stan Mast. cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved November 1, 2017

<sup>ii</sup> Tat-Siong Benny Liew. William H. Willimon. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> William N. Jackson. William H. Willimon. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.