



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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All Saints' Day

November 5, 2017

“God’s Children Now!”

(1 John 3:1-3)

Rev. David K. Groth

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:1-3).

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

A number of weeks ago, Gail and I were in D.C. visiting friends. Of course, we spent some time downtown on the National Mall visiting the various museums and monuments. I don't think I've ever seen a single selfie stick here in Watertown, but in downtown D.C., they're all over the place. It's a curious thing to watch people use them, how they carefully frame themselves in the foreground, and try to fit something of note in the background. Clearly, it's a serious business . . . that is until the moment the picture is taken, when suddenly, out of no place, comes a big flash of a smile, all twinkle and happiness, or a goofy party animal look with mouth wide open as if shouting. The picture is taken, and just like that the smile disappears, the mouth closes, and it's back to the serious business of checking the photo to make sure it turned out, and posting it on social media. Many folks are very careful about the persona they cultivate online, a persona that is usually chipper and upbeat, lookin' good and flyin' high.

I read the other day that Facebook is actually causing depression among many young people. Why? Because, they see what appears to be going on in other people's lives, always having fun, partying and traveling. And they compare that to the reality of their own lives, living in a grim, dark place, grinding away at a dead end job, maybe stuck in a joyless relationship, weighed down and constrained by debt. When they check out Facebook sites, everyone else seems to be having the time of their lives, while *they* feel sad and trapped.

The problem, of course, is that no one on Facebook paints the whole picture. They post mostly good things, one happy photo after another on top of the mountain, more a caricature of themselves than their real selves . . . who they want to be seen as, rather than who they really are. You know, even if we don't take selfies and post them on-line, all of us trying to cultivate some kind of persona or image or reputation. We try to convey confidence and competence, and the happiness of success.

But isn't this a misplaced sense of identity? If your identity is all wrapped up in your image, what others think of you, then, in the end, that will be meaningless and disappointing. First of all, people just don't think about you as much as you think they think about you. And when they die, they won't think about you at all! Then, what happens to your carefully cultivated persona and reputation? The bitter truth is we are soon forgotten in a generation or two, and even those famous few who are remembered for having accomplished something big, it doesn't do them a bit of good before the one whose judgment of them isn't based on achievements or works, and won't be snookered or swayed by our reputation on earth.

However, if our identity is wrapped up in being God's child through holy baptism and faith, that's an identity we will never lose, for we will remain God's child here and into eternity. So it's not about the admiration of other people. It's about the Father's love for you.

In our text, John begins with these beautiful words: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." "See" writes John. In other words, just have a look at this love! In both quality and quantity, it's like nothing else on earth. John uses the word "agape", which means this love is pure gift. Nothing in us prompted this love. God doesn't love us because we're so lovable. "See what kind of love the Father has *given* to us." It's an unearned, undeserved sort of love.

The verse continues, "That we should be called the children of God." Who's calling us children of God? The

world certainly isn't. And we're reluctant to call ourselves children of God because it seems presumptuous. We know our sins. So who's calling us children of God? It's our Father in heaven. In infinite love, he declares us his children. Clearly, this is not what our thoughts, words, and deeds have earned. But that's what he has called us: children of God.

"God's children now"; this is no metaphor or symbol or figure of speech. This is our new reality. By baptism and faith a new being has been created. 2 Corinthians 5: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (v. 17). God promises that he has made us his children. Let the world say what it will, let the devil go on his rant . . . what's important is that God has never lied to us, and he has called us his children.

John continues, "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him." Just as the world did not recognize Jesus as God's Son, so it does not recognize us. Our glory is hidden by our sin and wickedness. If you happen to stand out as a Christian, because you live such a life of service and integrity and selflessness, don't expect any congratulations or honors from the world. Expect hatred and judgment and false accusations. This world does not like comparing itself to such bright lights. Jesus said, "Everyone who does evil hates the light" (Jn. 3:20).

We were talking about selfies earlier on. Researchers estimate that those born after 1980 will take roughly 25,000 selfies in their lifetimes. What does that say? I think it says people want to be known and remembered. People want to leave some kind of mark on the world. People want their lives to matter. But better by far to be known by God as his child than to be known in the world. Better by far to be remembered by God than to be remembered by the world. Better by far for God to leave his mark on us. Better by far that our lives matter to God.

John continues: "Beloved, we are God's children *now*" (v. 2). Already, that is, in the present time! We look around and don't appear any different. Of course, we are

not yet clothed in the white robes of heaven. And we know we still wrestle with sin and temptation. Yet his declaration is crystal clear: “Beloved, we are God’s children now”, saints of God!

Don’t think of the saints of God as plaster figurines of someone who died centuries ago,. Don’t think of the saints of God as only those who are in heaven. Scripture constantly uses this term with reference to those still living on earth who have Christian faith. In nearly every one of his letters, Paul asks the recipients of his letters to greet the saints living there in that particular place. So the saints of God are simply believers in Christ. They’re still sinners. But they are, at the same time, saints through faith.

Luther rejects the idea that the real saints are those who were extraordinary holy and pious. He writes, “We say the real saints of Christ must be good, stout sinners” too. Having gotten our attention, he continues: “They are not called saints because they are without sin or have become saintly through works. On the contrary, they themselves, with all their works, are nothing but condemned sinners [just like everyone else]. But they become holy through a foreign holiness, namely, through that of the Lord Christ” (Plass, p. 1247).

So Luther says we need to reclaim the title of saint for ourselves. “We are all saints” he writes, “and cursed is he who does not want to call himself a saint. However, you do not owe this to yourself but to the will of God, who would be your Father. To call yourself a saint is, therefore, no presumption but an act of gratitude and a confession of God’s blessings” (Ibid.)

You are a saint. By the grace of God you don’t have to pray “to be in that number,” as the song goes. You *are* in that number. You’ve been baptized. You believe that Jesus has redeemed you. All believers in Christ are saints. “Beloved, we are God’s children *now*.”

Finally, John concludes with, “And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (v. 3). That is, our lives need to reflect the new creation God has made us

to be, as his children. Having been given the sure hope of eternal life, we seek to do that which is good and right. There is no exception here. The one who stops purifying himself, the one who just keeps giving himself over to sin has dropped this hope from his heart. To claim to be God's child while not even trying to purify ourselves is to lie.

Here again, Luther is helpful. He writes that the sins of the saints in Scripture are "recorded to illustrate that no man is so holy or stands so firmly that he cannot fall again." They are also "written as a comfort for those who believe, to keep them from despairing even though they fall now and then . . . If you do fall here or there, do not despair; rise again" (Plass, p. 1249). Rise again. Start over again by his grace. He will forgive, but keep trying to honor and thank him with a holy life.

A number of months ago, I came across an Oscar Wilde quote that I just love. I've been wanting to use it for months, even tried to pry it into an earlier sermon, but it just didn't fit. But it fits here and here it is: "Every saint has a past" he wrote, "and every sinner a future." "Every saint has a past, and every sinner a future." Every saint has a history we'd rather not talk about, things of which we are so ashamed. On the other hand, every sinner has a future by God's grace and forgiveness, a future in which we have the potential, at least, to change and become better, a future he has planned for us, a future in which he will be to bless and forgive and wash and redirect us.

"Every saint has a past." Maybe your carefully cultivated image or persona has already imploded, and people have figured out the truth about you. Never mind that. Look to your Father in heaven who loves you as his own child. Or maybe you enjoy a good reputation . . . even among those who know you well. Don't think about that too much lest you become proud and conceited. Instead, look to your Father in heaven who loves you as his own child. Or maybe you're just living a quiet, anonymous life in a small city surrounded by beautiful Wisconsin country-side. That's ok too. Look to your Father in heaven who loves you as his

own child. Whoever you are, whatever kind of reputation you have, “see what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are!” Thanks be to God! Amen.

