



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

All Saints' Day

November 3, 2019

“A Foreign Love”

(1 John 3:1)

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“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You knot 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**

When the kids were small, after dinner we'd sometimes play a game called "All Hands on Benno!" Benno was our big, wonderful chocolate lab. We'd converge on the unsuspecting dog and surround him on the living room floor and get all ten of our hands on him, scratching him, petting him, kissing him, and giving him all the attention he could possibly handle. We'd pour it on . . . and he loved it! He'd roll over onto his back and stretch his front and back legs, totally elongating his body for maximum exposure. His jowls would hang slack; his long, pink tongue would dangle out the side of his mouth. Benno was a groaner. Without a shred of dignity, and with a big smile on his face, he'd soak it all in and groan with delight. In hindsight it was borderline obscene.

When a dog is on his back, it doesn't take long before he explodes with a big, vaporous sneeze and that usually marked the end of the game. We'd evacuate leaving him dazed and confused.

Benno was a dog, an exceedingly good dog, but still, just a dog. I'm not sure any dog deserves that kind of love and affection. But that's part of the fun, to give it freely, cheerfully, generously. We lavished it on him. That's what lavish means, to be extraordinarily generous, immoderate, unrestrained, over the top. And that's the word John uses to describe the love of God for us. He has lavished his love on us. He's been extraordinarily generous, immoderate, unrestrained, and over the top with his love. "How great is the love the Father has *lavished* on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

In the original Greek, the expression translated "how great" suggests that it is foreign, from a distant place. God's love for sinners is a foreign love. It's alien to us. It's strange to our ways, even the way we love one another. It's not how we usually deal with one another.

For us it's usually a quid pro quo arrangement. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours; you attack me, I attack you back. It's there in the Code of Hammurabi dating to about 1700 years BC, the Babylonian code of law. "If a man puts out the eye of another man, *his* eye shall be put out." It's really quite brutal and blunt, often resorting to the death penalty. The one who steals a slave shall be put to death. The one who commits robbery shall be put to death. Those who commit adultery shall be bound hand and foot and thrown into the waters. The false witness shall be put to death. In principle that's how people still work with one another. The punishment should hurt at least as much as the crime, and probably a little more as deterrence. That's how sinners work with one another, and maybe that's how sinners have to work with one another to curb crime, but that's not how God prefers to work with sinners. God chooses mercy. He lavishes his love even on the undeserving. In Romans 5 Paul writes, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (7-8).

This is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, but we hear it so often we forget how foreign it is to us, how outlandish and alien and strange and extravagant it is. We deserve God's love no more than a dog deserves ten hands on him and probably a lot less. Remember "the sinful mind is hostile to God." If Benno had been hostile toward us, we wouldn't even have allowed him in the house, much less played a game called "All Hands on Benno." The sinful mind is hostile to God and yet in the death of Jesus Christ, he has lavished his love on us. That's what makes it foreign to us. That's what makes it great, Paul says. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" Paul just can't get over it, especially as he thinks about his own sin, what he's done. Maybe it's the same way for you and me: knowing our sin, how we've rebelled, that **we** should be called children of God. That we should bear his name!

What we are called and what we are are often two different things. People may call you the nicest guy in the world, but you know better. However, when God calls us his "children," that is exactly what we are. It's no empty title. This is his declarative

Word. In Genesis he called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. He names a thing and that's what it is. So when God calls us his "children" that's exactly who we are. His Word makes it our new reality.

This lavish love of God isn't an isolated incident. Scripture is infused with examples of it. It's all over the place. It's there at the very beginning. God creates this marvelous earth (the oceans, the fields and forests and mountains and streams and lakes . . .); he creates it all and then, in a sense, steps back and hands his precious creation over to us. It's ours to enjoy, to use, to take care of, to pass on to ensuing generations. He withholds nothing from us; he even gives us dominion over all the other creatures. That's lavish, extravagant, even reckless generosity!

Later, he adopts for himself a people. They are not a large tribe, nor highly organized nor cultured nor powerful. They really have nothing to offer God, and they've really done nothing to earn this special treatment, and yet, after he brings them through the water, he calls them "my people." That is what they are. By grace, that's their new reality. He feeds them manna and quail in the desert, more than they could ever eat. He brings them to a land flowing with milk and honey and drives out their enemies before them so they can live in houses they did not build and reap from fields and orchards and vineyards they did not even plant.

Their response to him is mixed at best. We read of the terrible faith of these people, and how they kindle God's anger with their ingratitude and grumbling, and we wonder if we ever make God that angry too. Of course, we do. Yet he still calls us "my people" and "children of God." No dog deserves ten hands on him, nor do we deserve this kind of grace or generosity. It's outlandish!

It's there in the New Testament too. Think of the first miracle of Jesus, in Cana of Galilee. A wedding runs out of wine, a big faux pas in that culture, but surely not something the Son of God should worry about, right? Yet he orders six stone water jars to be filled to the brim with water, each holding about 25 gallons. When the caterer draws some out, ordinary well water has become a very fine wine. $6 \times 25 = 150$. One hundred and fifty gallons (plus or minus) of very fine wine! That's over

the top, more than necessary, reckless, even. Maybe they're not ready for all that. But that's generosity and that's grace, and it gives us an early peek at the only way you or me or anyone else for that matter gets into the kingdom of God, by his generosity and grace.

Examples of his decadent love are all over in Scripture. One day he's out there in a remote area, teaching a crowd of thousands. It's getting late. They have no food, nor any easy way of acquiring it. But a boy offered his five little loaves and two fish to the cause, and that's quite enough for Jesus! He can do a lot with a little. He gives thanks to God, orders the people to sit, and starts dividing, and as much as he gives away, there's always more to give. The people ate until they were stuffed. Then, as a matter of good stewardship, he says "gather the leftovers." And the disciples come back with twelve baskets full. That's over-the-top. That's more than what was necessary. That's the love of God. When God gives, he gives lavishly! Think of the catch of fish that was so great the disciples could hardly haul it in. Think of God's forgiveness which cleanses us from *all* sin, not just the easy little ones, but also those of which we are most ashamed!

You can see it in the parable that Jesus taught, saying the kingdom of heaven is like a king who canceled a man's debt of 10,000 talents. It was an impossible debt, yet the king cancels it outright; he doesn't even ask for the minimal monthly payment. That's what the forgiveness of God is like, a huge, impossible load of debt lifted off your shoulders. Lavish generosity.

It's there in the parable of the prodigal son, that spoiled brat who does every possible thing to deserve his Father's wrath. He squanders his Father's wealth on high living out there in the far country, and he doesn't even think about returning home until he's broke and hungry and out of options. Yet this father runs down the road and embraces him and in that embrace he forgives him and restores him as a son. Then he starts issuing orders to celebrate his return: get a robe, a ring, a pair of sandals and prepare the fattened calf. It makes me think of our lesson today: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we (spoiled brats that *we* can be, who have done every possible thing to earn his wrath) yet he pours out on his love, because

remember, in his eyes, we are his children. He has declared us thus, that is our new reality, and his new reality too.

Of course, this lavish love of God is also there on the cross, where the God doesn't send a goat or a prophet or an angel or some other surrogate; he comes himself because no one else could ever handle the wrath his justice demands. In physical and spiritual agony, he doesn't call down curses upon his crucifiers, or upon us. No he begs the Father's forgiveness. It was all different and foreign and alien to our usual ways. Even the centurion noticed: "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

It just doesn't stop. Did you notice his over the top grace in our psalm? It calls us to "Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song!" But then in verse 4 the tables are turned: "The Lord takes pleasure in his people!" But how can he take pleasure in us even when we are shaking our fists at him? I honestly don't know, but this isn't just an irregularity. No, we see it in other places too. Zephaniah 3, "The LORD will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you with his love, he will exult over you with loud singing." That God would exult over us with singing? Incomprehensible! How thorough his forgiveness must be if he can exult over us with singing! He even thinks of his relationship to us as a marriage, a marriage between God and his people.

One of the things I love about my work is the privileged view I have at weddings. Every photographer would love to stand where I stand. I get to see every tremor of the lips, every involuntary twitch, the squeeze of the hands, the eyes welling up. I get to see the bridegroom rejoicing over his bride. One of the most beautiful, inexplicable, mysterious passages in all scripture is from Isaiah, "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you" (62:5). He lavishes love on us!

Even more impressive, however, are those visits to the hospital, 50, 60 years later. When a couple has been married that long, you know there's history there. Joys, for sure, but deep hurts as well. Knowing what they know about each other's faults and failures, what a privilege it is to see how some couples dote over one another, each more worried about the other than about self. The church, of course, is the bride of Christ, and we've not always given the groom reason to rejoice. Yet, by sheer grace, he looks at

his bride and loves her, as much on the Last Day as on the first. And he's not just pretending that love. She is beautiful in his sight. "Husbands, love your wives" Paul says, "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word (Holy Baptism), so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands ought to love their wives" Paul says (Eph. 5:25ff).

One last thing: it's All Saints' Day, and who of us hasn't been thinking today of those saints we knew who kept the faith. Not one of them qualified for sainthood if by that we mean virtuous living and moral purity. If a person is a saint, it's only because God made him that way, passing him through the water like he did his ancient people. When he baptized you he cleansed you of your sin, and ever since he's thought of you as his child. "That is what we are!" Paul says, because the Father has lavished his love on us.

That love of God tests the depth of my thesaurus. It is foreign to us, not indigenous. It is extreme, excessive, over-the-top, outlandish, and unwarranted. It's the opposite of measured and restrained and reasonable. It is God's lavish love for us. All praise be to him! Amen.

