

November 5, 2023
1 John 3:1-3

All Saints' Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Response-able Children”

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

Several years ago, my Uncle Russell – one of my father’s younger brothers – traveled to Denmark to search out the roots of the Laustsen family. His efforts resulted in a genealogy that he shared with the family on both sides of the ocean, a truly remarkable document that traces our family history to the 14th century. It begins with my father’s generation and goes back page after page through the centuries, an awe-inspiring account of my ancestors who lived and farmed that same land that remains in our family. But one thing I noticed almost immediately is that our family name disappears after a few generations, since family names are a fairly recent phenomenon in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries. When communities were more stable and people rarely moved, a person was known not by a family name but as the son or daughter of a parent (our name means “son of Laust,” the “sen” being the Danish suffix for “son”). A person was known not by a common family name but was identified as being the child of their parents, whose ancestry was likewise traced through generations of sons and daughters.

Denmark is not the only nation where a person is identified in connection with their parents. In Russia, the son of Ivan would be known as “Ivanovich.” In Jewish tradition, a son or daughter was also identified in relation to their parents (Jesus would have been known as “Jesus ben Joseph”) and there are similarities in Arab traditions. While our family name is one of our primary means of identification in the modern world, so much of our identity is traced to our parentage, to the people that are our mothers and fathers.

Being identified in relation to our parents also plays a key role in our identity as Christians. In Holy Baptism, we believe and teach that *“we are reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). Baptism is the sacrament in which we are *“given a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”* (1 Peter 1:3), the moment in which through water and the Word *“the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise*

up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.” (Small Catechism). When we are baptized, we receive the promise that each of us is a “child of God ... sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.” As we celebrate our birthdays as the moment our lives begin, our baptism date becomes a second birthday as we mark the occasion in which, in the words of the First Letter of John, “we are God’s children now.” (1 John 3:2).

The First Letter of John is one of the three “Johannine Epistles” that are related to the Gospel of John (the Revelation of John was written by John of Patmos, a separate individual). The author of 1 John never identifies himself (some people refer to the author as “the Elder”), and his work is more of a tractate than a letter or personal note. It bears none of the hallmarks of traditional New Testament letters; instead of beginning with the name of the author and the people to whom the letter is addressed, 1 John begins with the purpose statement for the writing of the letter:

- “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” – 1:1-4.

A dominant concern of the Elder is to reinforce the readers against a group that he believes is doing the work of the devil and the antichrist (“*As you have heard that the antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.*” – 2:18). This is a group that has seceded from the community (“*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. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us.*” – 2:19). While they are no longer members of the faith community, they pose a threat to its unity by trying to win over adherents to their side. By not acknowledging Jesus Christ come in the flesh, they have negated the importance of Jesus Christ for the Christian faith (“*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.*” – 4:2-3). Although they claim communion with God, they do not see any importance of keeping God’s commandments and pretend to be free from the guilt of sin (“*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*” – 1:8); in particular, they do not show love for their fellow brothers and sisters (“*Whoever says, ‘I am in the light,’ while hating a brother or sister, is still in*

the darkness.” – 2:9). “*The First Epistle stresses love heavily in order to reinforce inner community adhesion against conversion by the secessionists.*” (Raymond Brown).

The Elder encourages the community of faith to dwell for now in that domain that has been climactically defined by Christ, so that later, when Christ is revealed at his coming (*Parousia*), the church may stand before him, boldly confident and unashamed (“*And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*” – 1 Thessalonians 3:13). The Elder balances a promise of his readers’ status as God’s children now with a reminder that the future into which they are growing has not yet been revealed. What the Church will be when he appears is not yet clear, but “*what we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is*” (3:2).

- “The text itself focuses on these two key ideas: that those who believe in Christ have experienced a change in their status so that they are called God’s children, and that the appearance of Christ will bring about another change insofar as believers will now experience him in a new way. Thus, the experience of God is both present and future.” – Richard Ascough.

The Elder focuses on the language of kinship in inviting his readers to “*see what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are*” (3:1). As one’s relationship to their parents was their primary means of identification in the ancient world, so for Christians their identity as God’s people is expressed in the language of family relations, as Paul expresses in his letter to the Romans:

- “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” – Romans 8:14-17.

As children are the heirs of both their parent’s genetic identity and their physical possessions, so are those who are reborn children of God through the waters of Baptism heirs of an inheritance that is “*imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*” (1 Peter 1:4-5). Being a child of God

means that we live in the confidence that even though *“the world does not know us is that it did not know him”* (3:1), we have that blessed assurance that we are children of God, born anew to that living hope that *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever”* (ELW Hymn 781).

- “God’s loving adoption of the believer comes at a cost: ‘because of this, the world does not recognize us’ (verse 2). The cause behind this nonrecognition is not directly apparent; is it the believers’ status as ‘children’ or is it the love that they are now experiencing, or perhaps both? The ‘world’ – that is, outsiders – do not recognize the connections the believers have with God and with one another, perhaps through willful blindness or jealousy.” – Ascough.

Even if others do not recognize our identity as God’s beloved children, we live in that confidence that *“we are God’s children now,”* and that even though we may not yet know every detail about our future, we do know that *“when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is”* (3:2). These gifts are not an end in themselves, but *“the source of confidence for the future, provided that those who are already God’s children continue to live a life worthy of the Father whom they shall one day see face to face.”* (Brown). The Elder looks to an even richer future in a threefold sequence of events around the coming of Christ:

- He will appear.
- We shall see him as he is.
- We shall be like him.

“Thus, the believer’s relationship with God is both in the present and for eternity, with the latter beginning with the return of the risen Christ to earth, the Parousia in Johannine language” (Ascough).

Living as children of God in the assurance that God will fulfill all that God has promised us in the future has implications for how we live in the present. As families have traditions and expectations that are passed down from generation to generation that children are expected to learn and fulfill, so are children of God taught to live as a witness to their identity as God’s faithful people. When we are reborn children of God in Baptism, we are called to live in accordance with Christ’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, to *“let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16). Jesus’ commandment to his disciples of every generation is that they *“love one another as I have loved you”* (John 15:12), a love that *“bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”* (1 Corinthians 13:7). For the Elder, it means

that “*all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure*” (3:3). Purity (*hajnos*) is one of the family traits of God’s children; it is understood in the sense of “unimpeachable sincerity” or “moral uprightness”:

- “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” – Philippians 4:8-9.

For the Elder, the resemblance between God and the children of God is verified by the world’s attitude toward the Johannine Christians; in the writings of John, “world” (*kosmos*) is those who stand in opposition to God and God’s people (which makes the most famous verse in the Bible all the more remarkable, because “*God so loved the world [the world that did not love God in return] that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.*” – John 3:16). The conduct of God’s children is a response to God’s prior action; the initiative for creating children of God belongs entirely with the God of gracious love.

As children do not give birth to themselves, neither does our self-purification stem from misplaced confidence in our own abilities or strengths. It arises instead from “*this hope in him*” (3:3). We abide in our Lord not out of dread that our identity as God’s children will be stripped from us but in order that our confidence may be bolstered, that at his coming we may not shrink from him in shame. What we shall be has not yet been revealed; but that in no way overturns the reality that we are God’s beloved children now. Our status as children of God means that “*the child of God is a responsible agent and is response-able, enabled to respond by the endowment of God’s prevenient love*” (C. Clifford Black). As God has done all of this “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all ... For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.*” (*Small Catechism*). Being a child of God means that we express our thanks and praise to God by living in accordance with our Lord’s teachings and expectations for those who have been incorporated into the family of God through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ:

- “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” – 3:16.
- “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with

punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us.” – 4:11, 18-19.

On this All Saints’ Day, we remember and give thanks for “*all the saints who from their labours rest.*” (ELW Hymn 422). In our Lutheran traditions, “saints” are not only those people who are remembered throughout history, those who have churches and hospitals named after them. “Saints” are all those who have been proclaimed as “holy” by God, all people who by water and the Word have been born anew to a living hope through their baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We take time on this day to especially remember those saints in our faith community who have died in the past year, those whose life on earth has run its course and who are now in the presence of our God who “*will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes*” (Revelation 7:17). The saints we remember on this day are those who lived among us as God’s faithful people, who taught us by their words and example what it means to live as a Christian, and whose legacy lives on in that way we now live in reflection to their example of holy and faithful living. As the Church of Jesus Christ is truly “*the communion of saints,*” we give thanks for the faithful departed as we commit ourselves to living as the holy people of God in shining God’s light to those in our generation.

- “To be a saint is to be human because we were created to be human. To be a saint is to live with courage and self-restraint ... To be a saint is to live not with hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews ... It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full.” – Frederick Buechner.

Our Laustsen family history reminds me of our roots in our ancestral homeland and the generations that have gone before us. It reminds me of who I am, and the traditions and expectations that I was taught and am now expected to carry forward in my own time. It reminds me that I am a child of my parents, an heir to all that my ancestors have entrusted to me; it is at the core of my identity. It was these same parents and ancestors who passed on the greatest blessing of all when they brought me to the waters of Holy Baptism so that I might live in that blessed assurance that I am a child of God and an heir of all of God’s promises. As the community of God’s children who are united in this blessed hope, may we continue to give thanks for the

saints who have gone before us as we commit ourselves to being both responsible and response -able children, empowered by the Holy Spirit to shine the light of God's love before others and live every day as a reflection of the people we are – the children of God!

Amen.