

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Children of God, Now

1 John 2:28-3:3

In one respect, today's sermon begins where last week's message left off. You may remember that I preached about being joined to Jesus. Paul repeatedly emphasizes that believers are "in Christ." We're united with him in his death and resurrection. Through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we become more like Jesus the Son, in relationship with God the Father, who puts us into his family, the people of God called the church, as the relational space where we can grow in our union with Christ.

Though Paul and the author of 1 John were writing to different congregations of Christians, in different places, under different circumstances, they both know that birthing, teaching, and raising up children of God requires that those children stay in the space that's defined by relationship with Christ. Paul talks about being "in Christ." The writer in today's text talks about "continuing" in Christ/God. This is one of the author's favorite words for describing the Christian life. The word means to "abide" or "remain." It has to do with dwelling in the domain that's created by the saving love of God.

The writer opens today's text by urging the members of the congregation to stay put in their convictions and live deeply in Christ. Under present circumstances, that's good pastoral advice. After all, these words are addressed to a community of Christians experiencing a split. We don't know the details of the disagreement, but it appears that some folks have already packed up and left the church. Though they consider themselves followers of Jesus, they don't believe some essential things that help define the community of faith. So now, those who remain need to hold firm to their confession, not simply as a theological creed but as a living reality, something they've already experienced in their life together.

It's not as if eternal life is something way out there ahead of them, beyond their ability to know or experience. On the contrary, the Father sent the Son into the world, making eternal life available in the present. The members of the congregation have already come into fellowship and oneness with the Son and with each other. They've already begun to see, hear, and touch the life of the world to come, a life without end, a life generated by God's love for lost humankind.

Sometime in the future, at Christ's coming, this eternal life will be fully unveiled. God will complete his work of rectifying the injustices and wrongs of this present world. By sending his Son, he has shown us that his purpose is to take away the sins of the world. God's righteousness will have the last word. It only makes sense, then, that the lives of believers will be aligned with the movement of God's purposes. "And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him" (2:28-29).

Born of God. A child of God. That involves bearing a resemblance to your spiritual parent. True, not every child is just a smaller version of his or her parents. But it's usually no great surprise to see that a child reflects the habits, patterns, styles, and ways of a parent. Sometimes we even stretch it to the point of saying, "He's just like his father," or "She's just like her mother," or some combination thereof. Family likeness helps us know who came from whom, and who belongs to whom.

In our text, and the letter as a whole, the writer never tires of addressing the congregation as God's children. It's not as if he and they must wait until Christ returns to be authorized and affirmed as sons and daughters of the Father. They already are. Of course, that doesn't mean that they're already all that they're meant to be. They're not yet fully transformed. "... what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him. For we shall see him as he is" (3:2). What a remarkable promise, full of sustaining hope.

But back up and notice how the writer begins that sentence. Before he says consider what's ahead, he says consider where you are, and who you are. "Dear friends, *now* we are children of God..." I like the way that one commentator has translated it: "Yes, beloved, we are God's children right now."¹ The writer is essentially repeating the way he started out our text: "And now, dear children,..." (2:28a). In one respect, he's connecting what he's about to say to what he's just said. But in another respect, he's stressing the urgency of the present. As one person has suggested, the writer is saying, "At this crucial time," dear children.²

So yes, there will come a day, the day of Christ's return, when the fullness of your identity as God's children will be revealed. But that only underscores the urgency of living as children of God here and now. Anticipate God's coming with assurance, but dwell deeply in the present. Let the righteousness of God, that's on its way, be reflected in your own righteous living where you currently are.

Henri Nouwen has written:

The real enemies of our life are the "oughts" and the "ifs." They pull us backward into the unalterable past and forward into the unpredictable future. But real life takes place in the here and the now. God is a God of the present. God is always in the moment, be that moment hard or easy, joyful or painful.³

God is always in the moment. But we aren't always in the moment. Many times, we're there, but we're not really there. We're present in body, but not really present as our full selves. Our minds, our thoughts, our attention, are elsewhere. One of the keys to maturing as a child of God is growing in the spiritual discipline of attentiveness, to God and to others. This means being more fully available and present to God and to others, in the collection of moments that make up daily life.

Julie Canliss tells about a time in her life when she learned about dwelling more deeply in Christ in the midst of the ordinary circumstances of daily life. She writes:

Years ago during graduate studies at Regent College, I had a desperate talk with Eugene Peterson about how my PhD had turned the words of God into a great, big research project. I was trying to read my lifeless Bible, but I was interrupted 1,000 times by children needing to be fed, changed, read to, and more. I begged him to give me a spiritual discipline, some rope to haul me out of the hole I was in.

"Well, Julie," he said, "is there anything you are doing in a disciplined manner already?"

I thought about my newborn daughter, Iona, and the hours that I spent nailed to our couch feeding her. She had reflux, and most of what went into her immediately came up again, which meant that I had to repeat the feed all over again. "Nursing Iona is the only thing I can count on," I said. "She makes sure of that."

He patted my hand, then, like a parent consoling a dissatisfied child who is not content with their lot in life. "Julie, that is your spiritual discipline. Now start paying attention to what you are already doing. Be present."

... I saw my family responsibilities as obstacles to a godly life when in fact they were the very place where he wanted to meet me...⁴

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are children of God now. Yes, when he's fully revealed, we'll be like him, for we'll see him as he is, and be filled with the joy of heaven. But even now, we can experience sightings of our Lord, as he comes to meet us, especially through the needs, sufferings, and struggles of others. Mother Teresa has said:

We all long for heaven where God is but we have it in our power to be in heaven with Him right now—to be happy with Him at this very moment. But being happy with Him now means:

loving as He loves,
 helping as He helps,
 giving as He gives,
 serving as He serves,
 rescuing as He rescues,
 being with Him for all the twenty-four hours,
 touching Him in His distressing disguise.⁵

During the circumstances created by the coronavirus pandemic, it can be attractive to look back to how things were before all this started, even though that period of time had plenty of its own pain and problems. It can also be attractive to look forward, trying to anticipate what life will be like once COVID-19 is over. Whether you think of it as a return to normal, or entrance into a new normal, the fact remains that the present is what's right in front of us.

As children of God, doing family life together here in this congregation, we can't withdraw and say, "Well, when this is all over and we can get our church back to the way it used to be, then we'll get on with the business of pursuing righteousness." No, as today's text reminds us, the hope we have in Christ for the future energizes doing what's right in the present. Here and now is where God is meeting us. Here and now is where he's working to cleanse us. Here and now is where we're supposed to abide in Christ. Here and now is where we have the opportunity to be fully present to the call of God.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*. Anchor Bible, Vol. 30 (New York: Doubleday, 1982) 392.

² Brown, quoting J. L. Houlden, in *The Epistles of John*, 379.

³ Henri Nouwen, *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit*. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, No. 13.

⁴ Julie Canlis, "The Bible's Best Description of Salvation Is a Phrase We Rarely Use." *Christianity Today* website. January 29, 2019. Accessed October 21, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/january-web-only/bibles-best-description-salvation-is-phrase-we-rarely-use.html>>.

⁵ Mother Teresa, *A Gift for God*. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, No. 1.