

*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! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.<sup>2</sup> Dear friends, now we are children of God, and 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.<sup>3</sup> Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:1-3)*

### What Does it Mean to be a Child of God?

When I was fourteen, I went away to a synodical boarding school. I spent a total of twelve years in four synodical schools from high school to the seminary. At every one of those schools, I had the experience of watching while some professor asked another student, “Are you so-and-so’s kid?” The WELS is a small synod. Most pastors and teachers know a lot of other pastors and teachers. When you hear a name you remember from school, it’s a natural question to ask. But nobody ever asked me that question. I’m not related to anybody important. I didn’t grow up at a big congregation somewhere in Wisconsin. So nobody in the synod at large ever heard the name Kieta before I started going to those schools. It was especially noticeable because it did happen in the small town where I grew up. My dad was the editor of the local newspaper, so people did ask me, “Are you Ed Kieta’s son?” And of course, when people ask those questions, they automatically connect you to what they know about your dad. Whether it’s in a small town or a small synod, that connection affects the way they think about you and what they expect from you. Sometimes, those kids wrestle with what those adults are thinking and expecting of them. And that’s true spiritually, too, as the Apostle John points out this morning. Today’s epistle lesson is all about being known by who your Father is – not your physical father, but your Father in heaven. The Apostle John says that we all are our Father’s children. But **what does it mean to be a child of God?**

#### I.

It doesn’t mean the same thing that it meant in that little town where I grew up and everyone knew me as my father’s son. It doesn’t mean the same thing that it means in the synod where my children are probably known as mine. In a perfect world knowing our heavenly Father would tell all kinds of things about us. But here it actually can mean the opposite. **What does it mean to be a child of God? It means not being known.**

John says, **“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! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”** What does he mean when he says, “The world does not know us”? People don’t understand who and what we are. Why not? Because they don’t know God. Now, is that true in America, a country with such strong Christian roots? The answer has to be yes. Jesus once said that he taught his disciples to know God. They grew up in Israel, hearing the scriptures read every Saturday and following all those ancient laws of Moses. But they didn’t know God in the sense that they really didn’t understand what he was all about. That is every bit as true here in the supposedly Christian west as it was then in the Jewish east.

What do most people think about God? Most Americans do believe in some kind of god, even if it’s just “the universe.” But they’re reluctant to say very much about him. In fact, they hold that doubt is a virtue. A couple of weeks ago, I was watching a silly Marvel comics TV show. And one of the characters was trying to comfort one of the superheroes who was doubting himself. She said, “In our world, the people we mistrust the most are the ones who are certain.” You know what? Lots of Americans would agree with that, even lots of pastors and professors. Certainty to most Americans equals fanaticism. Moslem terrorists are certain they’re going straight to heaven for blowing themselves up on a street corner. Racists are certain that people of color are inferior. And you could go on and on. So to many people, being certain of what God says, knowing that we are his children and other people aren’t, smacks of fanaticism.

I can understand that point of view. Nothing frustrates me more than arguing with someone who isn’t even willing to examine his or her own assumptions and consider the possibility that they might be wrong. And if being God’s child was about us figuring God out, then certainty would indeed be scary. But that’s not what John said. He said, **“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!”** It’s not something we figured out. It’s not a status we achieved or an award that we can wear on our

high school letter jacket. The Father called us the children of God. In other words, God adopted us. But he didn't do it because we're cute and adorable or because we're the people most like him and least likely to stick out in his family. He didn't do it because he knew how good we were going to be. He selected filthy, ugly, undeserving sinners and he chose to love us in Christ. He chose to send his Son to die and pay for all our sins. He chose to say to each one of us, "I forgive you for all your sins." He chose to reach into our hearts and plant faith there.

Just like a little baby who doesn't even know that he or she is being adopted, God didn't ask our consent. He simply claimed us and made us his. Now, we are the children of God. And that is the greatest gift we could ever have. But the world around us finds it puzzling in the extreme. Unbelievers don't understand us. They can't really imagine what it would be like to be a part of a Christian family that comes to church and teaches their children to know the Lord – to be certain of his promises. They can't imagine listening to catechism class memory work or singing old Lutheran hymns or coming to church twice this year on Christmas Eve because it happens to fall on a Sunday so we'll have church in the morning and then again in the evening. When I was in college, I worked for Bethesda Lutheran Home which is a Missouri Synod ministry. I helped care for developmentally disabled residents. One day, one of our older residents came up to me and my boss. He was very excited because in their Bible class they had been learning about Pentecost and how the Holy Spirit came down in tongues of fire. My boss didn't even know what he was talking about. After he left, she rolled her eyes and said, "Why do we teach our residents things like that?" To which I replied, "Because this is Bethesda *Lutheran* Home." Even though she was a compassionate lady and worked full time in that ministry based care center, she didn't have a clue what our faith is all about.

The world doesn't understand us because it doesn't understand God. It thinks that if we're just good people, God has to let us into heaven. They don't think God cares about the lust or the greed in our hearts or the nasty thoughts we think. As long as we don't act on them, they're victimless crimes. But God does care. He sees and knows all that we think and feel and say and do. He is the judge of all the earth and on Judgment Day, his justice will have to be satisfied for each and every sin every committed.

But what they don't understand most of all is how God solved that problem. Because they don't understand God's wrath over sin, they will never understand what Jesus did. Jesus was perfect not to be an example. But to take our place so that in God's official record, he can put down that we were holy and perfect. Jesus died because someone had to pay for all that sin that you and I pile up every day. So Jesus took our place. And Jesus rose to tell us it's over. It's paid for. We are free. Knowing that is what makes us God's children. We know that because God declared it to us and he gave us the faith that trusts in Jesus and that changes all that we are.

## II.

So it really shouldn't surprise us when people don't understand why we roll out of bed on Sunday mornings when we could just sleep in, or why we give so much of our money to church when we could use it to feed the hungry or to go on a really nice vacation. It shouldn't surprise us because we don't really look any different. God doesn't do visible things to set us off from the rest of the world. He doesn't have rain just fall on the crops of Christian farmers. He doesn't keep disease and car accidents away from believers and only let unbelievers experience that stuff. He doesn't require us to wear a special uniform or to move away from the evil society we live in. He doesn't even take away the sin in our hearts that leads us to commit most of the same sins that people around us commit. We often don't seem to be different. John says the same thing. **What does it mean to be a child of God? It means not being revealed yet.**

Now, the truth is, we are different. Jesus lives in our hearts. Unbelievers are dead in sin. They're born God's enemies and they fight him with all that they are. We used to be like that. But God gave us new birth and he put a new person inside us who loves God and lives for him. But that new man is hidden inside us. No one can read the heart of another person. Even though I stand up here week after week and proclaim God's word to you, you can't see my faith itself. You only see the fruits, the preaching and teaching. When Jesus comes back, all true believers will be revealed to the world.

But John is talking about something even more profound than that. He says, "**Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.**" We don't know what we will be. We can't imagine life in a world without pain or sorrow or death. We can't imagine life in a world where everyone truly loves everyone else, where everyone listens to God and rejoices to do what he says. We can't

imagine what it would be like to be free from sin. We're all Christians, right? But did any of you have trouble climbing out of bed this morning? Did any of you want to use the time change as an excuse not to come? Did any of you groan when you opened your bulletin and saw the sermon theme and hope that this week, I'd get done early? What would it be like to truly rejoice every time we got to go to church? What would it be like to rejoice every time we had to do the hard thing and stand up for Christ in a godless world? What would it be like to live in a world without sin or pain or any hard things that challenge our faith?

We don't know. I'm always interested in the way movies try to depict the life to come. They never come close to what the Bible actually says about it. And John tells us here that we don't really know that much about it even from the Bible. But we do know something. John says, **"But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."** Do you remember the story of Moses asking to see God? God told him, "You cannot see my face and live." A sinner can't look at God. But when Jesus, God the Son, comes back, we will be able to look God in the face. Why? Because he took our sins away. When he comes back, we are going to be like Jesus. What kind of a gift is that? It's impossible even to imagine. It's amazing. It's the depths of God's love made real and concrete for us. We will be his children, members of his own family, just like Jesus is. We will be sinless and holy, just like Jesus is. We will see God and live with him forever, just like Jesus does.

Until we see Jesus there, we strive to live like Jesus here. John said, **"Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure."** You are pure – as pure as Christ himself in the eyes of God so you have the promise of eternal life. Every day that you live here, you strive to be as pure as God declares you to be. But finally, you have to get to heaven to actually experience the perfection Jesus won for you.

And what that's going to be like, I can only guess. The Apostle John could only guess. But it's God's gift to us. We are his children. Today, we're celebrating a holiday of the church year that fell on Wednesday: All Saints Day. All Saints Day is a celebration of making it home to heaven. Of making it to the resurrection and eternal life. We could never do that on our own. So God gave us that gift. He made us his children and like a good Father, he promises to take care of us here and then bring us home. Trust his love and look forward to the wonderful surprise that eternal life is going to be. Amen.