

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

1 John 2:28-3:2

Now we are children of God.

There are numerous pictures the Scriptures use to describe the relationship, possible only in Christ, between God and His people: bride and groom, potter and clay, shepherd and sheep, etc.. There is another picture of this relationship especially prominent in St. John's writings: Father and child. "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!"

Some would contend that all are God's children regardless of faith, but that is simply not true. About a year ago, I and went up to visit a member in the hospital. The hospital chaplain, a no doubt sincere elderly woman of a different synod that puts the name Lutheran on its church signs but not on its doctrine and practice, was already there. When I introduced myself, she asked what synod I was. My response, "Wisconsin Synod," got the usual frown it seems to trigger like an automatic reflex from those turned off by our confessional stance on the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions. But then she managed to smile and say, "Well, we are all God's children, regardless of what we believe." I bit my tongue. I was surprised I didn't draw blood. I knew she meant it in a kind way. We may indeed have all been God's children in that room, as I don't doubt she knew her Savior, but the statement most certainly wasn't true.

St. John recorded these words of Christ in his Holy Gospel: "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.'" There are two types of people in the world: God's children and God's enemies. We are all born as God's enemies. By God's grace and through Holy Baptism, we are born again as God's children. And we remain God's children so long as we remain in Him who made us such. That is why St. John writes: "And now, dear children, continue in [Christ Jesus], so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming." That idea is like a refrain through this letter: remain, remain, remain, abide, abide, abide, continue, continue, continue, never let go of Jesus, because with Him as your Brother you have God as your Father. And so now we gather as the children of God and encourage each other by our presence to remain part of the family.

The relationship between parents and children ought always be loving, but, if it is a healthy relationship, it should not always be conflict free. What do I mean? Good parents have to drive their kids nuts sometimes. There are times when a parent must put their foot down, must warn, must admonish, must selflessly say no. Such is the case with our Father. He's given us His law out of love. He's lavished us with unbelievable love by adopting us through Christ's death and resurrection, made our own in Holy Baptism, and He still lavishes His love on us by correction, warning, threatening, and encouraging. "The Lord

disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son,” the writer to the Hebrews assures us.

As often happens with children, that discipline may often seem unfair, selfish, arbitrary, or not in our best interest. But we must always remember our Father knows best. A child may think a hot oven is precisely where his hand needs to be. A loving parent knows that is not the case. At the time, the child may think the parent is keeping him from some great fun or discovery, but as he grows older, he sees the wisdom of his mother’s “no.” How many “no”s will make sense to us finally in heaven! If you are like me, probably too many to count.

Part of growing up as a child is the temptation to test boundaries. Sometimes it seems that those are the tests that high school and college are really about. It is a common misconception in our day that one must experiment with something before deciding it is wrong or unhealthy. Friday and Saturday, I had the great privilege of checking the septic tanks, or “poop tanks,” as the kids called them, with our trustees, which illustrates the problem with such logic. Luther would have reveled in such a picture for sinful rationalizing, and I can’t resist. Apparently when checking a septic tank, part of the way one knows that it needs to be changed is by seeing how much of a solid film is on the top of the tank. You can take a board or a shovel and stick them into measure. Sometimes in life as children of God, our sinful nature convinces us to test the filth. It is the oldest trick in the Book. The serpent used it with Eve. The problem is, once you put your toes in, you stink to high heaven and you are more likely to fall all the way in, head deep in muck, calling for help, wondering how you got in such a mess. Isn’t it better just to keep your toes out of the toilet water? Why jump into the “poop tank” to make sure that it stinks?

Dear children, you have a loving Father, and He has loved you so much that He has jumped into the filth of sin to save you, that He has bathed you in His sufferings to cleanse you of the filth of this world, that He has disciplined you when you have erred to keep you from danger and point you to safety, that He has waited with open arms for you to return when you stray. You are not only called children of God. You are children of God. You bear His name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let Him clean you up. Let Him guide you. You may not understand everything He does. His judgments may seem unfair or arbitrary at times. But know He loves you, and when you get older, it will all make sense, and it will all together in one grand blueprint of love meant to bring you from the muck of this world to the glory of heaven. You are the children of God through Christ. “Continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.” Through faith in Christ and nothing else you are the family of God. Time for the family meal. Amen.