

“Children of God”

1 John 3:1-7

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1 John 3:1-7

¹See what love the Father has given 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. ²Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

⁴Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Prayer.

There is a poignant moment in Arthur Miller’s play “Death of a Salesman” when, in the movie version, Marlon Brando, playing Willie Lowman, tells Stella, in the midst of suicidal despair, “I only wanted to be someone.” Miller captures so well the deep interior feeling that so many of us have. It feels like God has called us to be someone great, a person who can change the world.

These feelings are built from an early age. Our parents and teachers raise us with overdoses of positive self-esteem. The American work ethic is that if you work hard, play by the rules, everyone can assume the desire of their dreams – become an astronaut and fly to the moon, become a brain surgeon, discover a cure to cancer, or become a professional athlete.

These feelings don’t tend to go away as we age into adulthood. I recently read a poll that 70% of the population believes they are destined to become a part of the wealthiest 2% of the population. This is what keeps lines long and reaching out the door of the local gas station when Mega-Millions gets above \$15 million. Never mind the fact that the vast majority of the wealthiest 2% of the population obtained their wealth by means of family, inheritance, and generations of growth.

I don’t believe I am being unduly pessimistic when I observe wealth, fame, and greatness from a mathematical point of view. In a world of 4 billion inhabitants, in a nation of 360 million Americans, even in a county of 105,000 individuals, the likelihood of aspiring to wealth, fame, or greatness is next to zero – quickly approaching infinity.

“What about William Seymore Hoffman?” you ask critically ask. “He won an Academy Award and he’s from Fairport.” OK, I’ll grant you one exception. This changes your odds a whole lot. You now have about a one and 500,000 chance of becoming famous and winning an Academy Award. That is about a 0.0002% chance of making the big time.

The fact is that the vast majority of us go about our lives in a very mundane, unassuming, non-glamorous, decisively lower, lower-middle, and middle class fashion. We look back over our lives and consider those life-defining moments – the job we didn't get, the opportunity that didn't open up – and we realize that we are full of unrealized potential. And we wonder if we will ever be discovered.

More and more we realize potential through our children. If only my son gets into law school, or my daughter gets into medical school, or my son gets into West Point, then ... well, then we will have made the big time. In time we even have these hopes and dreams tempered with the fact that the Yellow Pages are full of doctors and lawyers, and even the military has thousands of generals.

"That's a mighty uplifting message you've got there, pastor," you sarcastically muse as you are tempted to tune me out.

Stick with me just a few more moments, however. I've laid this uninspiring groundwork for a reason.

The question must be asked by every serious person of faith: if value, importance, and status are not to be found in the world, then where are we to find it? If we are nothing more than the anonymous, faceless crowd, what is to distinguish us from anyone else?

When I hear of senseless slaughter – for example, the sister of the new Iraqi vice president was gunned down this past week, with her body guard – I can't help but wonder, what about that body guard? Isn't his life just as important, and unfulfilled, and unrealized as his subject's? as your life or mine? When I hear of the senseless violence of a budding pastor shot dead while dropping off kids from his church after attending a performance of the Lion King – I can't help but wonder, how the world might have been better had he been given the chance to go to seminary and become a parish pastor for the next forty years. Who isn't going to be introduced to Jesus Christ because he was murdered in cold blood?

The world cheapens life. It steals value, robs us of dignity, and leaves us with unrealized potential. It is kind of like buying a car – the moment you drive it off the lot, you've lost a few thousand dollars in depreciation. As soon as we are born, we are meant to die.

The person of faith is invited to be in the world, but not of the world, as the apostle Paul would tell us. The disciple of Jesus Christ is drawn to a new paradigm, a new way of life, where value and status are not defined by the world, but defined by God.

In God's kingdom, value is bestowed upon us with baptism. We are siblings united by baptism. The baptismal waters have made us brothers and sisters, each of us. We are brothers and sisters, not only with each other, but also brothers and sisters with Jesus Christ, who shares with us the baptismal waters from the Jordan, at the hand of John.

Now I know not everyone has a good or health relationship with a brother or sister, so this meta-

phor may have its limitations. The Elder, the Epistle author of First John, envisions the best possible relationship between siblings. As children of God, each of us has value, is worthy of respect, obtains an identity, becomes known and loved by the heavenly Father.

In God's kingdom, even the least, the lost, the last obtain "rock-star" status with God. Indeed, especially the least, the lost, and the last become the VIPs in God's eye. While the Rockefellers, Tiger Woods, Ted Kennedy, George Bush, and Bill Gates' of this world are sitting on a stump trying to figure out how to get themselves through the eye of a needle, the poor, the homeless, the widow, and the orphaned are walking down the red carpet and welcomed into the front door. They are the ones moved to the front table at the heavenly banquet, while others are being sent back.

No child of God is anonymous. Every child is given value by our loving Father. "Whether we live, or whether we die, we are the Lord's," the Apostle Paul reminds us. Even the abyss of death cannot take away our value before God. Once we have become, we are forever the adopted children of a loving God.

This doesn't give us a free pass or get out of jail free card. Just because we are God's children and are loved doesn't mean that we should live with wonton abandon. The Epistle author rightly balances the grace of God's love with the call to responsible living. He calls disciples to choose to live righteously. Every choice of sin, every opportunity of temptation, can be brought to an abrupt halt and dragged back from the abyss, with a firm and definitive decision to walk the path of righteousness, and not take the path of sin and death.

Righteous living means that we watch what we say. We temper our words, our sarcasm, our hurtful criticism. It means that we choose our words carefully; mold and shape these words to become blessings to others. We use language that is inclusive and not hurtful. We communicate grace even without using the word "grace."

Righteous living means that we watch what we do. We place the concerns and needs of others before our own. It means we listen with interest, suppressing our natural desire to become the center of attention, and allowing God to work through us to lift up the lives of others. When we are careful with our actions, we live within the Law and follow the Ten Commandments. We love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and we love our neighbor as ourselves. Self gratification is replaced with Divine glorification.

Righteous living means that we embrace justice, always, everywhere, and without exception. We do not tolerate injustice no matter how big or how small.

Being made into the children of God, given value, and called to righteous living is all well and good. But where are we going with all this? To what ends?

In the short term we know that this effort to live faithfully results in a peaceful society. To those that much is given, much is expected. To those most vulnerable, they are supported. Justice and peace roll down the mountain like a cold, cascading stream. Wars are known no more. All

who are hungry will have sufficient food and drink.

In the long term, I, like the Epistle author, the Elder, we don't know where it will lead. "What we will be has not yet been revealed." He does tell us not to worry; "when the Father is revealed, we will be like him." (1 John 3:2). At best we can struggle within the limitations of language to attempt to describe the uncertainty of the future.

This is how I approach it: I don't know what the future holds. But I do know that God loves and values me, and has done so every day of my life. Therefore, I have every expectation that God will continue involvement in my life – God will continue to support me – in life, in death, and in eternal life.

I can't prove this. For someone who places such trust in the scientific method, I know this is a reach for me. I call this reach "faith." I may not be able to prove it, but I can describe it. I look around and find very little valuation and validation of life in the world. But when I look to Christ, to our Heavenly Father who loves us, now there ... there is the source of all that is good, and loving, and filled with grace.

Dearly beloved, look to God for value in your life. Look to God and follow his will. We may not know where he is leading us, but we do know that we are being led by one who loves us, and who holds close our best interests.

The word of the Lord, as it has come to me this day. Thanks be to God. Amen.