

1 John 3:1-3 Sermon

Rev. Lindsey Odom

From an early age, we are taught to be successful. I still have memories of my mom taking my sisters and I to elementary school in the mornings and making us recite our multiplication tables on the way there so that we would do well in our math classes and be successful. As each academic semester came to a close, you would not believe the anxiousness report cards brought me. On top of that, my twin always excelled in math more than I did so it was a constant struggle that brought bragging rights for my twin, and I could not stand it. Thank goodness online platforms like power school for parents to check their kids' grades did not exist when I was in school.

At the time, I did not think much of it, but now looking back at this and through my experiences working with children and youth, the bar is set so high. Children are expected to perform well in school and in their extracurricular activities. Youth are expected to make certain grades, perform well on their standardized testing such as the SAT or ACT, pass their AP tests, and be involved in lots of extracurricular activities outside of school to boost their resume and get accepted into college. Even adults are constantly faced with expectations to succeed, often leading them to measure themselves against others and measure their own success whether that is in their workplace, in their relationships, their wealth or appearance, or even in the way that they parent.

Now do not get me wrong, some expectations are good and healthy for people to have as they give us a sense of how we measure up, which is valuable information for self-improvement and knowing whether we have progressed, but they can also become stressful and overwhelming...

In the third chapter of John's first epistle in verse 1, John writes, "see what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." In the eyes of God, we do not have to try to measure up or compare ourselves to others. In the eyes of God, we are not our jobs, we are not our academic success, and we are not the things we are good at or not as good at, rather, we are God's beloved children.

To be God's beloved children is both an honor and a privilege. In biblical thought, the expression "children of God" literally means those who are like God. The expression "children of God" helps us understand that since we are created in the image of God, there is a hint of God's divinity vested in all of us.

We as human beings bear God's image. We possess an innate value beyond anything else in God's created order. As God's beloved children, we have been known by God since before we were born. Even prophet Jeremiah reminds us of this in Jeremiah 1:5 when he says,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born, I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Think for just a moment about what this means and how powerful this truly is. Not only did God know us long before we were born, but God uniquely created each and every one of us for a purpose! There is no other person exactly like you. We are all made in the image of God, and it is God who sustains us and gives us our life purpose. God wants us to use our variety of God-given gifts to further God's plan and purposes in our world. Because we are all God's beloved children, it provides the assurance that each of us are deeply loved, uniquely created by God, and each of us have a purpose, to do what we are created and called to do and to strive to make a difference in our world.

One of my favorite children's books titled *When God Made You* by Matthew Paul Turner affirms this when it says:

“You, you, when God made YOU, God made you all shiny and new.

An incredible you, a you all your own, a you unlike anyone else ever known.

An exclusive design, one God refined, you're a perfectly crafted one of a kind.

'Cause when God made you, somehow God knew that the world needed someone exactly like you.

You, you, God thinks about you. God was thinking of you long before your debut.¹”

Let the warmth of this fill your heart that we are all God's beloved children, uniquely created for a purpose and loved by God before we were even born. The world needs each one of us and is a better place because God created us. I hope each of you can recognize how special, unique, and loved you are by God.

As God's beloved children, all of us “are special, set apart, and singled out in creation for distinctive glory.²” Being a child of God reminds us that every single person is loved deeply by God, no matter who they are, what they look like, or what they have done. It also reminds us that we were created to be like God. So, as God's children, we not only have a human similarity to God, but, we also have a role and responsibility to faithfully reflect and represent God within our world today. We are made to be like God so that we might live as God's representatives within our world today. I know what you are thinking. I have just given you a huge expectation to live up to, but I have great news! In striving to faithfully reflect and represent God within our world today, we must recognize that this is not a task we do on our own. As God's beloved children,

¹ Matthew Paul Turner, *When God Made You* (Colorado Springs, Convergent Books), pg. 1-3

² Gale A. Yee; Hugh R. Page Jr.; Matthew J.M. Coomber. *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The Old Testament and Apocrypha*. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 2014), 91.

God promises to always guide us because God has a special purpose for our lives. God walks alongside us every day to help us fulfill that purpose.

I always associate our gospel passage from 1 John 3:1-3 with Baptism, the sacrament that grounds our identity and engrafts us into the body of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. At Baptism, God claims us, defines our inherent worth, and commissions us outward as disciples of Christ. All our values are founded upon this initial call. Baptism is a visual reminder of God's unconditional love for us. During our baptism, God does what we cannot do for ourselves and initiates love, grace, and salvation. The water that is used in our Baptism not only represents that our sins have been washed away, but it also reorients our lives and sets us on a new path. Our former sinful ways and sinful selves are made new and we are reminded of our true identity as a beloved child of God.

In seminary, I had a professor who would call the class "beloved" each time we gathered or came back together after a short break. This professor was affirming who we are and whose we are: beloved children of God. I appreciated this professor saying this as often as they did because I personally know how hard it is to believe this sometimes. If I am being honest, sometimes when I look at myself in the mirror, I don't always see someone that looks lovable. Sometimes I even have a hard time feeling loved. This is something that I am working on, and I know it is a result of going through my parents' really difficult divorce and having a challenging relationship with my mom. I imagine many of us have instances where we may feel unworthy. In those times, this verse from 1 John 3:1, which says, "see what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" has become a source of support for me. These words comfort me and sustain me when I need to be reminded of how deeply God

loves me. These words remind me that I am a beloved and valued child of God, like all of you. I hope this verse can become a source of support and encouragement for all of you as well.

Chances are some of you could use this reminder too: that “we are unconditionally loved by God and the proof of the love of God is being, and being called, children of God.³” For it is in this passage that John calls our attention to the manner of love that God has bestowed upon us in reminding us that we are all God’s children and we belong to God. John not only calls our attention to the love of God that makes us God’s children, but he also calls our attention to a life of love and how we are to live a life of love, especially when Christ returns.

While John assures us that we are already, at present, children of God, the future will bring some changes due to Christ’s return. Today in verse 2, we read: “what we will be has not yet been revealed.” This statement delicately balances the relationship between the present and the future. There is uncertainty because we do not know what we shall be (v. 2) as Christ has not yet returned. However, this uncertainty is offset by the assurance that we already are God’s children. That has already occurred and does not need to be earned. It is also further offset by the assurance that “we shall be like him.”

The hopeful note that we can take hold of is “that when Jesus appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (v. 3).” We may not know exactly what we are going to be like when God’s work in Christ is completed in us, but “we do know this: we are going to be like Jesus, and this is cause for great hope!⁴”

³ Smith, Moody D. *First, Second, and Third John - Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville , Kentucky: John Knox, 1991), pg. 77.

⁴ <https://pastorsings.com/2015/04/18/and-that-is-what-we-are-sermon-on-1-john-31-7/>

In thinking about what it means to be like Jesus, John encourages us as God's children to live as those who cannot be understood apart from Jesus Christ or in simpler words, to live like Christ would.

Living as those who cannot be understood apart from Jesus requires us to recognize that we are all children of God and that the character of God – the compassionate, merciful, loving, and just character of God, becomes a part of who we are. As a result of this, we are to reflect God's divine image and live like the one who represented God and gave us an example to follow, which is Jesus. I encourage you all to consider a person or experience that has reflected the image and character of God at work in our world.

For me personally, one that comes to mind was this past February when youth and families from our church came together to help with Room in the Inn. For those of you that are not familiar with Room in the Inn, Room in the Inn collaborates with local churches to provide shelter and basic needs for people experiencing homelessness during the winter months. I saw the image and character of God at work through the way our youth lovingly served our neighbors by assisting with their laundry, serving them dinner, making their lunches for the next day, helping them settle in their rooms, and providing a welcoming and hospitable presence. But even more than this, I saw the image and character of God at work most through the way our youth compassionately interacted and formed relationships with our homeless neighbors and their kids. From youth sitting beside our neighbors at dinner, talking to them, and learning their story to other youth playing with their kids and coloring with them, it almost drew me to tears in the way that our youth were living out their faith and making a difference by investing in them and striving to meet their needs. I challenge you all to consider how you will project the image of God in your words and actions and live like Christ would, just like our SMPC youth did.

We must remember that when Jesus came to earth, his mission and ministry consisted of teaching, healing the sick, feeding the poor, crossing boundaries in eating with sinners, becoming a servant in washing the disciples' feet, taking time to be with children, treating his followers as equals, and committing the greatest sacrifice of love in dying on the cross for us. Through his actions, Jesus taught volumes about how God loves each one of us and showed us how to live.

Jesus is the one who gives us the blueprint of how to live, just as much as I rely on Apple CarPlay to give me directions on how to navigate Charlotte. But in all seriousness, Jesus is the one who shows us the way and teaches us how to live. The Gospel of John affirms this when it says that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). What this means for our life is that Jesus is the one that goes with us on our journey of faith. We must remember that God carefully and uniquely constructed us in God's image for a purpose, and Jesus promises to never leave us until that purpose is fulfilled. This should add comfort and a sense of peace to the actions we take, dreams we fulfill, and the decisions we make, knowing that every step we take, we are accompanied by Jesus Christ, who is always with us. Jesus shows us how to know and do the will of God, but we also have a role to play.

In Jesus' example of teaching by doing, Jesus gave his followers a true picture of what it means to follow him and to live according to the ways and will of God. Additionally, among Jesus' final words to his disciples, as recorded in the Gospel of John, are these calls to action: "Do the works that I do"; "Do what I command you"; "Go and bear fruit." (John 14:12; John 15:14, John 15:16). We are to imitate Jesus' purity, selfless humility, and his desire to love and serve others. When we do this, we will begin to understand what it means to live as a child of God and live a life of love, like John describes in our gospel passage. For Jesus gave us an

example to follow as he lived out the love of God in both his teachings and in his actions, and he calls us to go and do likewise.

Kayla Craig, author of *To Light Their Way*, powerfully reflects on what it means to live as a child of God and do as Jesus did in one of her prayers. So, I would like to share a part of her prayer with you all:

“Holy God, we know that in you, all are given life. You have created each one of us in love, and we are instructed to live in Christ’s love. So, may we grow to walk in paths of peace. May we run the race set out before us, and lie down in green pastures when we are tired. May we grow in truth and gentleness, and in wisdom and in grace. May we, as God’s children, dance with abandon and never be afraid to cry. May we be rooted in love and live with open hands and hearts. May we choose peace over violence and empathy over judgment. Give us the gift of community anchored in your love, O’ God. Give us the gift of others who will act as a compass when we need your help. Remind us that you created each one of us to be in relationships with others. May we follow you always and proclaim the miracle of who you are in all we create, in all we say, and in all we do.⁵”

This prayer reminds us that we are called to do likewise in teaching the good news of God’s love through our words, actions, and being, and follow Christ’s example in living out a life of love. Even in times when we are lost, confused, stuck in a state of despair or grief, or in times when we look at ourselves and don’t feel loveable, Christ brings us hope and reminds us that we are loved more than we could ever imagine as we are all God’s beloved children. This is the foundation for our faith. This passage assures us of this and assures us that we all belong to

⁵ Kayla Craig, *To Light Their Way: A Collection of Prayers and Liturgies for Parents*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2021), pg. 8-9

God through Christ because of God's great love for us. This passage also assures us that when Christ returns, "we will be like him, for we will see him as he is (verse 3)."

While no one knows the day or hour of Jesus' return, scripture assures us that "all things will be made new and there will be no more tears, no more death, no more mourning, no more pain, for all of these things will have passed away (Revelation. 21:1–8)." In the meantime, we are to become more like Christ until the day when our eyes are opened, and everything is transformed because of Christ' return. May we use this time after Easter to be renewed people because of Jesus' resurrection that creates newness and transformation for us. May we have hope "and be on the lookout for the day when the risen Christ will return and transform us all into his image."⁶

In this waiting time, may we remember that the result of God's love is that we are called God's children. May we live into our identity as beloved children of God by reflecting the very being and character of Jesus within our own lives. May we strive to imitate Jesus' purity, selfless humility, and his desire to love and serve others. May we recognize that faithful discipleship rests on the "declaration of what we already are: loved by God, beloved children of God now, promised that we will be like Jesus when he appears, and called to live a life of love until that day occurs."⁷ And in thinking about living out our faith in a manner of love, will we...

- Will we... "do all we can "to build and to mend, to love what God loves, to heal and transcend?"
- Will we... "use all that we are "to love strangers and friends and try to help others see God's dreams for them?"
- Will we... "fight the good fight and with faith, move a mountain?"
- Will we... "find and discover joy, make peace, and help justice increase?"⁸

May we go forth knowing that we teach the faith best through the lives we live. Amen.

⁶ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-1-john-31-7>

⁷ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-1-john-31-7>

⁸ Matthew Paul Turner, *I Am God's Dream* (Colorado Springs, Convergent Books), pg. 28-31.