

Family Resemblance

Summerlea U.C.
Rev. Scott A. Patton
April 18, 2021

Luke 24:36b-48
I John 3:1-7
The 3rd Sunday of Easter

Prayer:

God, help us to be present to you this day, as we know
that you are present to each one of us.
Draw us closer to you, and open our hearts and minds to
all that you have in store for us today, for we, your servants,
are ready to listen.
And now, may the words of my mouth... Amen.

Some people see the Internet as a vast network of information and communication that spans the entire world. I see it as a never-ending supply of humorous sermon material. For example, I came across some answers to test questions made by some 5th and 6th graders.

One described the law of gravity by saying, “no fair jumping up without coming back down.” Another said, “You can listen to thunder and tell how close you came to getting hit. If you don’t hear it, you got hit, so never mind.” A couple of them responded to questions about clouds. One said, “I’m not sure how clouds are formed, but clouds know how to do it, and that’s the important thing.” Another said, “water vapour gets together in a cloud. When it’s big enough to be called a drop, it does.”
And here’s a couple more. One youngster said, “when planets run around and around in circles, we say they are orbiting. When people do it, we say they are crazy.” One defined the spinal column as “a long bunch of bones. The head sits on top, and you sit on the bottom.”

None of those have anything to do with today’s sermon, but this one jumped out at me because it certainly does. One youngster wrote, “genetics explains why you look like you father, and if you don’t, why you should.” In the context of our scripture lesson from the First Letter of John, that one really hits home. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are...” Is there any family resemblance? There SHOULD be!

I wonder how the Christians who were the first recipients of this letter felt about that. They were in the process of dealing with some severe conflict in their fellowship. There was apparently some dissention about the relationship between faith and action. For what it’s worth, that controversy would not have been a surprise, because the surrounding culture fought the same battle.

For those who came into Christianity from a Jewish background, a life that divorced faith from practice was unthinkable, but in the larger world, the world that was nurtured in the culture of Greece and Rome, religion largely had to do with paying homage to the gods so that the gods would protect and enhance one's life. Morality was a matter for the philosophers. Many early converts probably saw Christianity as yet another way of approaching the gods, of securing safety and prosperity for themselves, sort of a celestial good-luck charm.

I don't think it's very much different today. In his book The Culture of Disbelief, Stephen Carter looks at how our society wants us to treat God as a hobby. Our culture sees faith as something that we should not bring with us into the public sphere when making decisions about life and how life should be lived. Our society's message is clear: practice your faith on your day of devotion within your four walls and leave it there.

First John says "no". First John tells us that what we believe will determine how we behave. Today's text begins with a reminder of the high privilege we have in being part of God's family. It is a privilege to be named as the children of God. John Chrysostom, the great preacher of the Middle Ages, in his sermon on how to bring up children, advises parents to give their child some great biblical name, to teach over and over the story of the original bearer of the name, and thus to give a standard to live up to, and an inspiration for living when reaching adulthood.

So, we have the privilege of being called the children of God. Just as belonging to a great school, a great church, or a great household is an inspiration to good living, so, even more so, to bear the name of the family of God is something to keep a person's feet on the right path. But some will want to raise the question, "are we not ALL children of God?" The answer is Yes and No.

One commentator explains it this way:

There are two English words which are closely connected, but whose meanings are widely different. There is the word "paternity" and the word "fatherhood". Paternity describes a relationship in which a father is responsible for the physical existence of a child; but, as far as paternity goes, it can be that the father has never even set eyes on the child, and would not even recognize him or her if in later years they met. Fatherhood describes an intimate, loving, continuous relationship in which father and child grow closer to each other every day.

In the sense of paternity, all people are children of God, but in the sense of fatherhood, we are only children of God when God makes that gracious approach to us, and when we respond.

Again, turning to the words of 1st John, “Beloved, 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.” Some day we will understand God as God really is, and some day we will truly see and understand ourselves as people made in God’s image.

But if that is true, how do we take seriously that part of John’s letter that none of us wants to hear? “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.” Wait a minute! That sounds impossible. No one who abides in God sins?? That leaves me out. And how about you? Not to mention everyone you know? Or perhaps there is more to this.

This is one of those rare moments when all those hours studying New Testament Greek in seminary pay off. The Greek verb here that is translated as “sins” is not to be understood as a one-time thing, but rather, something that is on-going.

A more helpful translation would be, “no one who abides in God sins and keeps on sinning.” For that matter, even John, the writer of the letter, knows that sin is going to come into our lives.

Not many paragraphs prior to today’s passage, we find these words:

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, the One who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

The point of John’s declaration is to make sure that our profession and our practice – our beliefs and our behaviour – match. In other words, don’t just “talk the talk” but “walk the walk,” as the popular saying goes.

The phrase refers to people who can be trusted to integrate the two into their lives. It is the person who professes to be a follower of Christ, and then actually LIVES a Christian life.

This is why Dr. Robert Coles, who was professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, in his class lectures has told students that he is unwilling, as a Harvard intellectual, to dismiss religious faith as a matter of little consequence.

As a young psychiatrist in 1958, he was drafted by the army and sent down to the southern United States. While living in New Orleans three years later, he encountered 6-year-old Ruby Bridges, who was among the first black children to integrate the city’s schools. Everyday, Ruby was picked up by federal marshals and walked past crowds

of people who shouted things like, “you don’t deserve to live,” or “you’re worse than an animal.” And yet, each day she went to school.

One day, one of the government officials heard that Ruby had been talking to the crowd that was heckling her. “Ruby,” he said, “your teacher told me you were talking to the people in the mob. I wondered what you were saying to them.”

“I wasn’t talking to them,” she replied. “I was praying for them. They need praying for.” “They do?” Dr. Coles asked, incredulously.

“Yes” Ruby answered. “That’s what God would want me to do.”

The point of the story, says Dr. Coles, is not to make Ruby a saint, or to put down the angry white crowd...but to put to rest the simple-minded notion of religion as the “opiate of the people.” The words are not just words. The talk is not just talk. The talk goes with the walk, and the walk goes with the talk. And when those two match, it makes all the difference.

During the Civil War in the United States, a chaplain approached a wounded soldier on the battlefield and asked if he’d like to hear a few verses from The Bible. The wounded man said, “no, I’m so thirsty I’d rather have some water.” The chaplain gave him a drink, then repeated his question. “No sir, not now – but could you put something under my head?” The chaplain did so, and again repeated his question. “No,” said the soldier. “I’m cold. Could you cover me up?” The chaplain took off his inside coat and wrapped it around the soldier. Afraid to ask, the chaplain did not repeat his question.

He began to leave, but the soldier called him back. The wounded soldier said, “look, chaplain, if there’s anything in that book of yours that makes a person do for another what you’ve done for me, then I want to hear it.” The 1st Letter of John says that what we believe will determine how we behave.

And it made all the difference in the lives of the earliest disciples. They were locked in an upper room in Jerusalem, scared to death that what had just happened to Jesus might happen to them next. Suddenly, the risen Lord appeared in their midst. The startled disciples wonder if it is a ghost, but Jesus says, “look at my hands and my feet...a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” “Oh, and, by the way, have you anything here to eat?”

To say the least, the disciples are blown away by what they have encountered. They hear again (for the who-knows-how-manieth-time) what the scriptures had said all along about the Messiah, then Jesus says, “you are witnesses of these things.” And, sure enough, the fact that they had witnessed made them become witnesses. Suddenly, they believed, and it made all the difference in how they behaved. As we now know, these children of God would go on to turn the world upside-down.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are...” We will be different because of the family relationship, because with privilege always comes responsibility.

But that is what makes the difference between talking the talk and walking the walk. Any of us can say that we are children of God, and that would be true. But we will be seen and known as children of God when others can see God’s presence through our lives and our actions.

In the same way, anyone can say ABOUT us that we are all children of God, but when you think about it, that says more about God than it says about US. What I think would have more meaning is if others were to say to us, “You? A child of God? Oh yes, I should have known. I can see the family resemblance.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.