THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Children of God – Ever-Growing”*

The passage we just heard from John’s first letter to the church is a difficult passage to understand without knowing some of the background. To begin with: it was written about ten years after the Gospel of John was written. This means that the church that had grown-up around that particular Gospel, that particular story of Jesus’ life and ministry. This means they had also learned from it how to be people of faith.

As we read and hear this passage, it is important to know and remember that this is one of those times— that in order to derive meaning for ourselves and our context—we will need to remember that this letter was written *for* us, but it was not written *to* us.

This letter was written to address a particular issue among a particular group of people. The community it had been written for had been fractured, and those who were left behind were struggling with their own sense of themselves, and how they were to regard those who had left. How they were supposed to think of those from whom they had become estranged?

The argument had become so serious that it had caused a schism in the church. Many had pulled out and left because they could not believe that Jesus was human as well as divine.

It is, to me, sadly ironic that this was the argument that caused them to become so at-odds with one another because the main message of the Gospel of John, the most important value that Jesus imparts in the Gospel of John is that we should love one another.

In John 13, at the Last Supper, after he had washed their feet, Jesus gives the disciples a New Commandment. He says this:

*33Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” 34I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. 35By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’*

He gave them a New Commandment, and it was this New Commandment that was to be the very definition of who they were supposed to be, and of who they were supposed to be to one another.

No longer is loyalty or even blood relationships the foundation of our connection to one another. From that point on, we are to love one another *because Jesus has loved us*; and because he continues to love us.

In case we are in doubt about what this kind of love means, Jesus’ own words in the Gospel of John, and John’s words to the church in this letter both speak our relationship with Jesus as being “children of God.” All who receive Jesus and believe in him “he gave [the] power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” [Jn 1:13]

God’s gift to us is God’s love for us.

Indeed, to be called “children of God” implies a relationship as foundational and as intimate as the relationship we have with our earthly parents. Think of it:

To be children of God means we can release all of our hesitation and allow ourselves to depend on God without reservation—the way we did with our own parents; the way our own children were entirely dependent on us.

To be children of God means God is offering us a love in which we can have perfect confidence—God’s love will never be withdrawn; God’s love will never fail to hold us close.

More importantly, we are children of God, not by any merit of our own, but because God has shown such love for us as to bring us into his or her embrace.

Perhaps part of the cause for the division in the Johannine community had come about because of the rise of doubts about who really were God’s children—that would be a very human failing: to raise doubts about whether others “*belong*” in the group.

The author of this letter rises above sectarian concerns and instead reassures the community that if the world does not recognize *them* as God’s children, it is because the world does not know Jesus.

As it is in John’s Gospel, so also is in 1 John, the letter; the “world” often means the realm of unbelief and opposition to God’s purposes. In the letter the author implies that those who have separated from the community belong to the “world” in its negative sense.

Therefore, those who withhold compassion cannot be acquainted with the One who is all compassion. Those who harm, those who relegate others to the margins of the community, who cannot or will not accept others’ humanity must be of the “world” since their treatment bears no resemblance to Jesus and his ways.

Those who feed the hungry, who give care and support to the sick and grieving, those who visit the captive—all of these people who give of themselves so freely and so consistently, these are the ones who surely know Christ because they are living very much the way that he did. They are loving others very much the way Christ did.

Finally, 1 John’s author tells us that these things we know about ourselves—that we are God’s children now—this is not all there is to know about who we are. We are still “becoming.” To be a child of God and to follow in God’s way does bring us closer to God, and this can produce great joy and peace of mind.

However, 1 John says that there is still more to come, more to our joy, more to our peace, more to the completeness of our hearts and our spirits. This is a promise that will only be fulfilled when we see Christ again. *Then,* we are promised, that is when we will be like him.

As one commentator has said, *“The nature of Christian hope is to live simultaneously in the “now” and in the ‘not yet.’ We are called to live into the future reality that God has promised.”*

In other words: as children of God, we are ever-learning, ever pushing back the boundaries that prevent us from showing love for others and accepting them with open arms, ever-growing in love and faithfulness.

Like the people to whom the author of 1 John was writing, we may encounter set-backs. We may not always have the same companions with us. However, as we grow in Christ, what we can be certain of is that God’s claim on our lives will not change. We are God’s beloved children, called into fellowship with the Father and the Son, called to grow evermore into the likeness of the One who called us, and looking forward with confidence to the day when he will be fully revealed.

And so, as we continue to grow in Christ, as we continue to be God’s children and to celebrate that fact, that invitation, I pray that God bless us all as we continue in faith and love. Amen.