

Sermon, April 18, 2021
Redeemer, Ramsey
Pastor Michael Linderman

Grace, Mercy and Peace, from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!
Happy Easter to you all! Today, we enter the third week of the Easter Season, and as I explained in last week's sermon, I am preaching a series of sermons on the epistle or 2nd readings for each of the weeks of this season. That means that in this year's cycle of readings, we are tuning in to the 1st letter of John for the season. In particular, today we learn from 1st John the truth that we are God's children because God loves us. As we desire to remain with God, the Holy Spirit gives us hope in the risen life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are doubly blessed this morning because today we celebrate the baptism of Erin Aleda Bradley. When we celebrate a baptism in the church, we get to witness the testimony of Erin's family and her godparents, that links up with the testimony of the congregation hosting the baptism—that's you Redeemer—so that we all come to say "yes" to God who has already said "yes" to us in the grace and resurrection of our Lord.

Jesus' resurrection is the exclamation point on God's yes to us. Death cannot hold our Lord back, it cannot keep him in its thrall, and when we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection, we are released from sin and the fear of death, and are given faith to hope and believe that his resurrection will one day bring in a new heaven and a new earth, as scripture and our tradition testifies.

The second reading today from 1 John 3:1-7 speaks directly to this truth that we celebrate today in the act of Baptism. The writer of 1st John says, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." What a wonderful affirmation to hear, at any time in our lives, and how wonderful to hear it repeatedly throughout our lives, that we are God's children, not in some technical sense, as creatures, but especially because God loves us!

And what a healing balm this affirmation is to us when sometimes, and under different circumstances, we forget that we are God's children. In those times of doubt or forgetfulness or shame, we listen to the negative self-talk, which echoes the devil's attitude towards us, that we are no good, that we are worthless, or of such little value or worth to anybody, and we internalize this pain and despair and walk around in our lives under a cloud. We become dead in our hearts and can even act in self-destructive ways. But when we can be shown that God loves us as his children, and come to understand this in the most personal way, we can be rescued from this despair and set properly on our path to live as God's children, filled with joy, hope and love.

Now I want to make this very personal for a moment for our baptismal family, but don't worry, I will also turn to you dear congregation of Redeemer in the next moment, and put you in the hot seat. To (Erin's) you parents (TJ and Lynsey) and to you godparents (Jennifer and Ryan), your job in life, more important than almost anything else you will ever do, is to artfully and yet persistently remind Erin over her lifetime that she is a child of God, simply because God loves her.

Like the joke about the carpenter's assistant who installed the doorknob wall protector too high for the actual doorknob, I say to you, "You only had one job." Remember parents and godparents, when you get to the pearly gates, St Peter is going to say, you only had one job, to tell Erin repeatedly, along with her sister Claire, that she is a beloved child of God, and do all you can to help her accept this truth and understand it as simply a gift from God to her.

But of course, dear congregation of Redeemer, because you are here, because you have chosen to invest in this church and give of your time talent and treasure to support the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in this place, because you have made this baptismal ministry possible, you too must answer to this charge: You only had one job.

And the writer of 1st John says it is this easy: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." And if you get this wrong, if you don't CALL each other children of God, and if you don't also provide for Erin ways to come to know that she is a child of God, it is so wrong, but if you get this right, by trying and asking for God's help, then you and Erin may just understand properly how much God loves you, and believe in this truth, and

you and she will spread God's love in and through your lives wherever you go, and with whomever you go.

This insight into the simplicity of the blessing of being children of God is one of the reasons this letter of 1st John is so popular. The writer doesn't have a convoluted theory about how this is so; he just points to the mystery of this truth as if it's part of the deal. Being a child of God is not obvious to everybody. It is not always obvious to us, even when we believe we are children of God, and it is not obvious to other people that we are children of God, even when we know it to be true in our hearts.

So, there is a mystery to this reality that still depends on faith, as the writer of Hebrews 11:1, says "...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." But the fact that God works in ways not seen, with truths not fully understood, and with flawed people who don't have their lives fully together, does not speak against God's wisdom. Rather it speaks for it, since working in this way will prove later that it was God working with us and through us all along, and not we ourselves who, somehow acting on our own, managed to bring in the Kingdom of God. To GOD be the glory, as the saying goes, that is the point of it all.

To continue on in this truth and at the same time struggle with our sin is part of the challenge. So the writer of 1st John continues with his teaching about sin in verses 4-7. Especially challenging is verse 6, where he writes, "No one who abides in Christ sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him." The way these verses are constructed sounds like they are eternal realities that never change, that if you sin, you are cast out from ever seeing or knowing Christ ever again.

But the writer of 1 John is trying to express the relationship to Christ more like a state of being, and not as a condition based on moment-to-moment activity. Of course, our individual actions do matter, but if our relation to Christ as Lord and savior is dependent on never sinning, then we are truly lost, as the writer already emphasized in chapter one, in last week's reading, when he wrote in ch. 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Indeed, the whole point of Jesus' life on earth, and his death, and his resurrection, is to account for our sin and forgive it all, *carte blanche*.

So when he talks about abiding in Christ, we should understand that he means standing under Christ's promise of forgiveness. If we sin, we are not standing under Christ's forgiveness, but are standing on our own and will face the force of God's judgement on sin. Think of "abiding in Christ" like standing under an outdoor pavilion in a rainstorm. If you stand under the pavilion, you will not be wet. If you don't stand under the pavilion, you will be wet, and there you will stay wet as long as it's raining.

Baptism into Christ's life, death and resurrection, places us firmly under the cover of Christ's grace in relation to God. And we commit today and recommit every Sunday to reminding ourselves that Christ's love and grace cover us and all our sin, when we begin our services during the Easter season with the Affirmation of Baptism. And we believe this so strongly, and are so grateful for God's grace, that we try harder and harder and with more and more wisdom as we get older, not to sin, but to live righteous lives that show the truth that, as 1st John says, "Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous."

And this should be our Christian hope, by the way, for all non-Christians, those who are not now or may never come to know Christ's grace and love in the personal way that we have. As Peter says in acts 10:34-35, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Other people may not be standing under the same pavilion as we are, protected from the rain, but that does not mean that God has not provided them other shelters that will keep them dry too.

Then what amazing grace it is that we are considering today, that God has called us and all things, and little Erin too, into being, so that we may come to realize and rejoice in this truth... that we are truly God's children because God loves us. What a blessing to consider these spiritual truths, and then together accept and affirm them on Erin's behalf. And for our own sakes too. May our Lord continue to bless us in these truths and nourish us every day of our lives in his baptismal grace. And may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.