

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, April 15, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: 1 John 3:1-7

Sermon: “And that is what we are...”

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are.”

This was a phrase that a good friend and colleague, Linsell Hurd, used to say every time he baptized a child. And, he told us, it didn't matter if he had eight babies all lined up in a row. He said it for each one individually, before he passed them back to their parents. He baptized our daughter Rebekah, 17 years ago – and I still remember that moment when he said those words

Linsell died this winter, very suddenly and unexpectedly, at least, it was to us being so far away. So it seems very appropriate this week, when our hearts are still wounded and feeling broken for a variety of reasons, and for a variety of situations, to hear those words again. It feels appropriate – that we should elevate those words in our consciousness – and be reminded. *“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are.”*

The author of these letters, written two thousand years ago, had never heard of my friend Linsell, or any of those babies he baptized. He had never heard of Humboldt Saskatchewan – or Douma, in Syria, or Kangra India (school bus 27). And yet, he clearly recognized that God was at work in the people he encountered. He clearly saw the light and love of God in each one. *“We should be called children of God. And that is what we are.”*

I've always found that some of the most beautiful words in scripture arise out of situations that are tragic or conflicted or hard to bear. Think of that reading from 1 Corinthians 13, for example: *“And the greatest of these is love.”* The apostle Paul wrote those words for a faith community that was in terrible conflict. But even when he was under quite a vicious personal attack, Paul managed to write the words that we hear read often at weddings, reminding us that: *“Love is patient, love is kind.”*

Today's reading, and Linsell's lovely baptismal blessing, is both a blessing and a very pointed reminder – because this first letter of John was also written for a faith community that was going through hard times.

We know from experience that people in a community of faith can have some very strong theological opinions. The earliest followers of Jesus were still collecting stories of Jesus' life, and they were still putting them together with stories about the risen Christ's appearances after the resurrection. They were trying to understand the meaning of his past teachings, and what they might mean in the present context. They were also debating many possibilities of who Jesus was in relation to God.

Already, within a broad spectrum of Jesus' followers, there were distinct groups. And within those groups, there was a splintering into even smaller groups. Some of the

followers of Jesus wanted to find people who agreed with them on every theological point – which I think we can all agree is impossible.

The fracture that this letter “first John” seems to identify, however, is not about trivial things, however. Whether the Lord’s Supper should be served clockwise or counter-clockwise, whether they should use Aramaic or Hebrew accents to pronounce Jesus’ name.

No, this was a significant issue, and one which made the author of the letter quite angry. Angry enough that by the second letter he was calling his opponents “Anti-Christ!”

The author of this letter had a deeply held belief that Jesus was both *of God and fully human* at the same time. His opponents, the anti-Christ (to use his words), believed that Jesus was much more God, not even barely human at all. They believed Jesus was divinely implanted in Mary’s womb by God, simply disguised as a human baby, but not really carrying any human DNA. For John’s opponents, only God was holy and sacred and immortal. Humanity was sinful and degradable and expendable. And there was no meeting place where both the holy and the human could co-exist in the same person.

These groups could not believe that any human, even Jesus, was be so deeply connected with God that he could be both. And since they DID believe that Jesus was special and holy and unique in human history – they believed he must be God and could not be an actual human being.

The season of Easter finds us pondering all these mysteries of Jesus’ resurrection and nature and his meaning in the world. This passage from First John invites us to focus on yet another aspect.

The author of the letter believed so deeply in Jesus’ mixed-up holy humanity that he was prepared to say: not only was Jesus holy and human at the same time, but that its possible all of us are children of God as well.

See what love the father has given us, says the epistle, that we should be called Children of God. And that is what we are.

That quote opens the door to the possibility that all life is sacred, that all life is holy, that all life in all its beauty, is of God.

The presence of God is not something you earn. It’s not something you acquire, like stars for your crown in heaven (as my mother used to say) it just is – it is part of us - because of the love “the father” has given us.

For millennia, humanity has demonstrated its belief that human life is only expendable. Wars and capital punishment and poverty and genocide are proof of a very prevalent belief that some lives are not worth saving. We have even at times labelled our enemies anti-Christ and sought to remove them from the face of the earth.

Most of us today have a hard time justifying that kind of thinking – justifying war or murder or the neglect of any human life as if some people don’t count. In a month that

has been studied with tragedy and broken hearts we find ourselves grieving the loss of each life as if they were our own child, our own brother, our own sister. We recognize that each life story, each one is a facet of God's own light, and so when any are lost, we mourn the dimming of God's unique presence in our world.

The early Celtic Christian writer, Pelagius, of the fourth century, is best known for being a heretic in the early church, the infamous instigator of the Pelagian Heresy. Apparently what Pelagius got in trouble for was insisting that all people are children of God – regardless of whether they were Christian or not.

He said this because he believed that every life contains the immortal and indestructible image of God. Becoming children of God is not something we are awarded just because we choose the right faith or the correct theology.

According to Pelagius, this glimpse of God in each life, in each person, in each living thing, explained the goodness and the wisdom that we might experience in the lives of others, even those who make no claim to Christian faith.

That was pretty radical thinking for his time. Because, like the people whom John addressed in that first letter, these were people who were convinced that only certain groups, only certain believers, could be true witnesses to God at work in the world.

And yet isn't it what Jesus taught, to choose to see the glimpse of God's love in our neighbor, before we attend to culture and language and social status. Isn't that what the earliest Christian apostles were trying to put into action, when they chose welcome and dignity for the "outsiders" they encountered in their travels? They shared the good news beyond the accepted boundaries of race and ethnicity, regardless of gender and citizenship, because they believed that God's love knew no boundaries.

When we baptize children, or people of any age, as we do in our community, we are not turning them into something that they weren't before. They always were children of God, they always have been a tiny glimpse of that spark which we have inherited from our Creator. If *anyone* is being transformed in baptism, it is we who are the witnesses. Because in witnessing that light, we find ourselves confirmed in the belief that every child reflects God to us, and God in us. In that faith, no life is expendable, no life passes without great loss. To believe anything else just might be "anti-Christian." So...

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are."

Amen