

Children of God
1 John 3:1-7, Easter 3, Year B
22 April 2012
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

On June 9th, 1995, I stood in the rotunda of the state capitol building in Little Rock, Arkansas, as the rehearsal dinner for my wedding, which would occur the following day, wound down. It was a glorious (if echo-y) place to have a rehearsal dinner, and I was on a bit of an emotional high that evening. As I stood gazing at my future bride across the room, grinning like the Cheshire Cat, my uncle sidled up to me. He nudged my chin to the right, so that my gaze was averted from Jill. My uncle pointed instead to my future mother-in-law across the room, and whispered, “Take a good, long look there, because *that’s* who you’re marrying.”

He didn’t mean it negatively. My mother-in-law is a good and lovely woman. But my uncle’s point was well-taken. By entering into the marriage covenant with Jill almost seventeen years ago, I was grafted—*adopted*, we might say—into a new family. All the Benson family dynamics would become part of me. Their love would be extended to me. I would become their son, brother, uncle. I wasn’t just marrying Jill. I was, indeed, marrying my mother-in-law. Put another way, I was becoming, along with Jill and Jill’s brother, one of her children.

This is a neglected aspect of our Easter blessing, and it’s one that St. John points us in our first reading today. In his first letter, in an expression of pure wonder, John says, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are.”

In our twenty-first century world, the magnitude of John’s exclamation is lost on us. But Holy Scripture repeatedly makes the serious claim that we are not, by mere virtue of birth, *children* of God. Make no mistake, we are surely and certainly by nature *creatures* of God, just as the soaring eagle, mammoth blue whale, and beloved family dog are God’s creatures. What’s more, we human beings are the only creatures who are made in God’s very image. As such, we are doubly blessed. God counts every hair on our heads. God cherishes us and says that we are good.

Even so, St. John attests today that, in light of the Resurrection, something essential has changed in our relationship with God. Something is new. John recognizes in his own experience that he has been grafted, wedded, *adopted* into the very life of God. He is no longer merely creature. “Beloved,” he says, “we are God’s *children* now!”

John is not alone in this epiphany. St. Paul says, “God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ...For all who are led by the Spirit are children of God.”ⁱ

Subsequent Christian theologians throughout the ages have been equally tantalized by this distinction between our creatureliness and our adoption as God's children.

Some of us were fortunate to be raised in loving and nurturing families. Others of us were raised in homes where a pale imitation of love was given conditionally or not at all. Regardless, we all crave real, authentic parental love. It may be the most important thing, as psychologists who work with people who have lacked parental nurture tell us. We all want and need the love that claims us irrevocably, that says, "You are with me, and I am with you, always and forever. You are never alone, because I love you. Nothing you can do, and nothing the world can do to you, will ever diminish my love one iota."

What's more, when one is adopted into a family, as the parents of adopted children will relate, that child is extra special, because that child is *chosen*. Through the Resurrection of Jesus, when God returns his only Son to life and promises us that Jesus' eternal life is also his gift to us, God says, "In all the starry cosmos, I choose you. You are no longer anonymous in the world. Jesus my Son is wedded to you, and through him you also are my sons and daughters."

If the promise stopped right there, it would be utterly and completely life-changing. Right there, it says the world's two prevailing narratives—that we are alone in the abyss or that the cosmos actively conspires against us—are untrue. The truth is that we are, deeply and ultimately loved. But the promise doesn't stop there. There is even more.

Some years ago my father gave me a frayed and yellowed old pamphlet entitled "The History of Desha County, Arkansas." In a few pages it chronicles the founding era of the rural, Arkansas delta county of my grandmother's people with anecdotes about important events and vignettes about early settlers. As I flipped through the pages I came to a full stop at a small, grainy photo of Dr. Jasper Stuart. Even before reading his name, I knew he was my ancestor. I look just like him. I don't mean that I resemble him slightly. The photo of him could easily pass for one of those amusement park, dress-up-in-old-clothes-from-a-bygone-era, tin-type photos of *me*. The cheekbones, the hair, the setting of the eyes, are the same. I embody the physical characteristics of my great grandfather. Beyond that, I've been told I share his temperament as well. I am him. We are one.

That, too, is what it means to be part of a family. We are not generic. We are born or adopted, each of us, into a *particular* family, and as time goes on we are formed by the things that make that family idiosyncratic, special, different from all others. The characteristics of our forebears manifest themselves in us more and more as we grow. That is, by the way, the other thing my uncle meant when he prophesied that I was marrying my mother-in-law. As any mom

or dad will tell you, parenting is nothing other than the repeated experience, always surprising and sometimes discomfiting, of hearing our own parents' voices coming out of our mouths! We spend fifty percent of our time striving to emulate the best of our own parents and the other fifty percent of the time struggling to avoid embodying the worst of them. In other words, just as we bear the physical resemblances of our kin, we ultimately have flowing through us their values, their concerns, and their virtues.

St. John extends the promise of our adoption by God to include this. John says today, "What we will be has not yet been revealed. [But] what we do know is this: When [Jesus] is revealed, *we will be like him.*"

From the moment we are wedded to Jesus Christ, from the moment of our adoption as children of God, from the moment of our grafting into this family, we begin to be conformed to the image and likeness of Christ. If we listen and we learn, if we receive the gift of adoption with our hearts and minds, then we will discover that the things God values, we begin to value. The concerns of God become our concerns. The virtues of the Savior will be our virtues. We'll look different. We'll act toward all of God's creatures differently. We'll begin to understand that the name "Christian" is more essential to who we are than Thompson or Smith or Anderson or even American. And we may discover, to our surprise, that when we speak the very voice coming out of our mouths is not our voice, but a voice of grace. It will seem as if it comes from beyond us, but we'll also know that it is ours because we share in it as God's sons and daughters with Jesus.

Just as I knew at a glance that Jasper Stuart was my kin, those out in the world who see the children of God formed by God's love will know intuitively that we belong to an idiosyncratic, special, and different family. Others will want to know the family history and even come to this family dinner. God's family will grow in size and in grace.

Jesus Christ who was dead has been resurrected, and through him we creatures of God have been adopted, chosen as God's own. Beloved, we are God's children now. And there is no greater gift. *Amen.*

¹ Ephesians 1:5 and Romans 8:15.