

# Both Why and How

A Sermon on Becoming Like Christ for the Third Sunday of Easter

1 John 3

15 April 2018

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Reading the possible scriptures for our worship this Eastertide, I was struck by the apostle John's letter to the early church as scripture we need now in our age of silos and divisions. John had an enormous writing challenge—to try make clear what he learned from Christ to generations that never knew Jesus because they were born after Christ's resurrection. Still, even though he was inspired to write almost 2000 years ago his words are still current. We live increasingly isolated lives, separated into age related groups, bombarded with media so that we choose what is most comfortable to us, and facing challenges the world has not really seen before. How do we learn to love each other the way Christ loved us?

Pondering this question, my companion as I studied and prayed was Gracie, a cat John and I are caring for as her human faces some very profound health challenges. For a few paragraphs, let me tell you a bit more about Gracie and then how Gracie has helped me better understand what John wrote about becoming like Christ for us all.

Gracie came to live with us as a way of helping our longtime friend, Dick. Dick's career is in health care. Like many other health care professionals, Dick has become his family's caregiver, with primary responsibility for his dad who is now in his early 90's and his stepmom. This winter Dick discovered that his older, single brother had a very advanced form of cancer, and to care for him well Dick needed to move him from another state to the Twin Cities. Dick's brother is a cat person. Dick is a dog person, you may have met him the Sunday last year when he helped us welcome therapy dogs to our service. In this tricky situation, Dick's brother's cat needed a home that did not include Dick's dogs. Since John and I are cat people, we offered foster care to his brother's cat, Gracie, a thirteen-year-old queen.

Have you ever fostered a thirteen-year-old cat? It has been a real education. We began with almost idea of what Gracie's previous life with her human had been like. We knew she had been raised as an indoor cat in a one-bedroom apartment. We knew Gracie had been moved to Minnesota across several states alone and cold in a car being towed by a rented

moving truck. We knew that to visit her person when he was in rehab, Gracie would need a current veterinarian's certificate that she was in good health and all her vaccinations current.

Gracie stayed with her human until the day of his first surgery and came to Hudson the next day. On the morning she moved into our house, Gracie was forcibly pulled from her temporary hiding hole, taken to a vet for the first time in years, examined, injected, and finally sent home with me. This is not an optimal way to start a relationship with a cat. Gracie spent the first month hiding in John's plant room, sunning herself under the grow lights with our wintering geraniums. The first week I physically carried her to her food bowl every afternoon and she growled at me the whole time. Overtime, she learned and accepted that I was the human who fed cats.

But after a few months, her favorite place to be became under the dining table in our family room, a place where she can both see me fill her food bowl and get away from me quickly. Gracie's daily cuddle is sitting five feet away from my reading chair while I pray every morning. When I think about it, whenever I sit in my reading chair she comes and hangs out five feet away from me.

This past week, Dick's brother was finally well enough to come to our house to visit Gracie for the first time. I learned things by watching the two of them that day that I regret not knowing the day Gracie came to live with us. The biggest thing I learned was when Dick's brother, a thin man over 6 feet tall, first walked into our family room he immediately laid down on the floor about five feet away from Gracie while waiting for her to come to him. Since I almost never get down on the floor without a child present, it never occurred to me to lay down on the floor to wait for Gracie to come to me. After her human left, I began modifying my behavior to mimic his. Gracie rewarded me almost immediately by coming closer, even walking between my feet to get to her food bowl!

Mimicking her human, I earned Gracie's trust.

But what does this have to do with John's letter to the early church? What does earning a cat's trust illustrate about becoming Christians becoming more like Christ? Let me see if I can unravel this theological tangle.

By their very nature the New Testament epistles challenge us as readers. Each is a letter that is only one side of a two-sided conversation. As such they leave a huge silence for us to fill with our thinking and experiences. Over and over in 2000 years of church history, their one side of a two-sided conversation reality has proven to be a problem in reading them well, for example their use in justifying the practice of slavery from when the states were British colonies through the Federal Period. Removed from circumstances surrounding their writing by 19 centuries, we truly need some basic information to understand the epistles more fully.

All New Testament epistles were recognized by the early church as “holy writing” or “sacred scripture” conveying the word of God. Therefore, they preserved these letters for our use. Looking at the first paragraph of the letter we call as 1<sup>st</sup> John, we cannot identify a specific person to whom John was writing.<sup>i</sup> Therefore, we read 1<sup>st</sup> John as a general letter written to the entire church by one of Christ’s apostles, the same one who ended his gospel for us with a first-person account of eating fish with Christ on the lakeshore following his resurrection (John 21).

1<sup>st</sup> John doesn’t really give us enough information to accurately place it in a first century decade, but Revelations, John’s other book, gives enough historical markers that we can be certain John survived the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in 70 A.D. and probably wrote Revelations in the early 90’s, the decade before 100 A.D. We also know from written history sources, that John was the only one of the twelve apostles to die of natural causes. Logically then we can safely assume the apostle John was over 75 years old when he died. As one of our Christian fathers, John is certainly a pillar in the bridge of teaching between Christ and ourselves.

All of this leads me to believe that John was the youngest apostle, maybe even the age of a senior high student when he was traveling with and learning from Jesus. Furthermore, John was among the first generation of Christians to pass their understanding of what it means to be a Christian to future generations who did not have the experience of walking with Jesus. Therefore, we need to honor John and his writings as one of our spiritual fathers, and by doing so reap the benefit of keeping the fifth commandment (Deuteronomy 5:6, also see Ephesians 6:1-4 for St. Paul’s commentary the early Church used in its application).

This week’s passage from 1<sup>st</sup> John talks about what it means for us to be children of God. When I read it, the central passage that struck me for us living here and now was “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. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” (1 John 3:2-3, New Revised Standard Version)

As God’s children, we are each other’s brothers and sisters. This is the theology of adoption begun by Jesus and shared by all New Testament scriptures.<sup>ii</sup> As God’s children, we are all beloved. As God’s children, we will be like him. Stop. Look. **“We are God’s children.”** That is the present tense, it is true right now in this very moment. It is as true in the moment John wrote it as it is in the moment we read it. But John went on. **“We will be like him (God/Christ).”** That is the future tense, what we will become. It is as much in the future now as it was in the future when John wrote it. Of all the New Testament writer’s John is the best at presenting God’s redemptive work in human time, bound as we are by both our mortality and our sin.

If you are having a tough time following me on this, I completely understand. I have a tough time following me on this. Like you, I live a very moment by moment life. Everything I do as a mortal I do in a moment we call “now.” Even planning for my future needs when one of my children will need to become my primary caregiver, I do in the present moment of today. So, as I confront various issues of aging living now as a sixty-one-year-old woman pastor and a part of the caregiver generation, I imagine now how I will want my children to respond to me as I will be “then,” whenever “then” arrives in my life.

I understand easily that I am God’s beloved child. Most times I also understand that you too are God’s beloved child, even if in a particular moment I don’t see why God would love you that way. It seems I am not yet like Christ in my capacity to love. But the apostle John assures me, assures you, assures us, that some day we too will be like Christ. Some day we will have God’s capacity to love. Christ’s redemptive work in us will give us an ability to love each other the way God loves us. We will become like Christ as we live each moment believing that we are God’s beloved children.

In his gospel, John recorded Jesus saying this about himself, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away. . . I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my own know me. . .” (John 10:11-14, NRSV) If Christ is the good shepherd, I believe that makes us sheep who are called to become shepherds.

Serving in southern Wisconsin gave me the opportunity to know many shepherds, farmers who kept sheep as livestock and made money doing so. These good men and women taught me that sheep are stubborn and fearful. Shepherds need to lead their sheep to do both things the sheep would not do on their own and things the sheep cannot do for themselves. Sheep and shepherds have a symbiotic relationship, and without a shepherd the sheep will be in danger from both without and from within. (See Psalm 23.) One Sunday a shepherd brought me a photograph of a sheep that had been without a shepherd for years. Talk about a giant hair ball! The poor beast looked like a walking boulder with four hooves barely sticking out. It was as hard for the shepherd who found her to shear her as it was for the her to be shorn.

That lost sheep is like us without Christ loving us into what we will become.

Perhaps you know a shepherd. Perhaps I just don’t know that you either are or once were a shepherd. If so, perhaps you can teach me more about caring for sheep.

However, I do know in Hudson now that it is far more likely that you know a cat person than it is likely that you know a shepherd. Which brings me back around to my foster

cat Gracie and what being her foster human has taught me about what it means to become more like God. The goal for Gracie's care is that someday soon she and her human will be able to move into a new one-bedroom apartment in Minneapolis or St. Paul. Therefore, as her foster human I need to respect and become as much like her human as much as possible.

There are so many ways I will never be like Dick's brother. I will never be a man. I will never be over six feet tall. I will never develop a liking for sitting or laying on the floor without a child or creature who needs me to do so. But for Gracie's sake, I will imitate her human and I will take time to stretch out on the floor every day until she chooses to come over to me.

For the spreading of the gospel to new generations, John asks you and me to imitate Christ in his love for humanity. For the sake of becoming like God, moment by moment we must keep learning to love God's other beloved children the same way Christ has shown his love for us by choosing to be one of us. We are to imitate Christ until we become like him.

After all, it is imitating the love Christ's apostle John invited our generation to embrace as he wrote us. "Beloved, we are God's children now . . . What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." (1 John 3:2-3, NRSV)

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Both 2<sup>nd</sup> John and 3<sup>rd</sup> John are addressed to specific identifiable people just not by name. He wrote in a time when it was dangerous to be a Christian.

<sup>ii</sup> In the past I have preached on the theology of adoption and in the future I will as well. In case this is an unfamiliar idea to you, here is an extensive quote from the Wikipedia article on the theology of adoption I can affirm as theologically sound.

"Adoption, in Christian theology, is the admission of a believer into the family of God. In the evangelical *ordo salutis* ("order of salvation"), adoption is usually regarded as a step immediately subsequent to justification. As a theological word, adoption has similar connotations to the act of legally placing a child with a parent or parents other than those to whom they were born. There are three references in the New Testament to God "adopting" Christians as his own children (Galatians 4:5, Romans 8:15 and Ephesians 1:5) and one reference to the adoption by God, of the "people of Israel" (Romans 9:4). Adoption as a theological term introduces a relational dimension to the consequences of salvation. Adoption as a theological concept is also another consequence of the 'legal' act of justification, alongside redemption and reconciliation. The Old Testament precedent for this term comes from the story of Mephibosheth, who despite not being part of Davidic family was included in the Royal inheritance (2 Samuel 9:7-13). Adoption was an important feature of Reformation theology as demonstrated by article 12 of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

"All those that are justified, God vouchsafes, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God."

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoption\\_\(theology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoption_(theology)). Accessed on 4/14/2018).