

Easter 3B
1 John 3:1-7

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Marked with the Cross

Like for many of you, my mother was a primary authority in my young life. While very loving and kind, she functioned largely as my teacher, moral guide and legal authority. I both feared and loved her. But it was the glimpses behind mother as authority that made it possible for me as I grew older to be in a real relationship with my mom as a person.

I remember one particular incident when I was in high school. It's an event so small that I wonder I didn't simply forget it. My sisters and parents and I were at the dinner table. Where two or three Bellefeuille's are gathered, there will be volume! So conversation was loud and lively as always. My mom is by nature quiet so it wasn't uncommon for her to spend a good deal of time just listening. But on this particular night I glanced over at my mom. She had slid a piece of orange peel in her mouth, and she sat there smiling her orange smile waiting to see how long it would take us to notice. We laughed long and hard at my mom. Not because making an orange peel smile is such a funny or even original idea. But because this was so uncharacteristic of my polite and proper mom.

I told you this was small. But it was these small glimpses into my mom as a person of quiet humor who loves to have fun and to laugh, a person with mountains of patience and a tolerant heart; it was these glimpses that drew me into deeper relationship with the person behind the authority. Make no mistake, she was and still is a powerful authority in my life. But now my desire to please her stems from our mutual relationship, from the love that comes from knowing. Throughout much of history God functioned as overseer and guide, providing safety and direction for his people, fighting battles on their behalf, giving words to their prophets. God was a fearsome authority that kept God's people safe and directed their steps. Then came Jesus. In Jesus we get a glimpse of the God behind the authority. We get to see a God who looks upon us with grace and mercy, a God who would sacrifice all to show us how much we are loved, a God who delights in our laughter and aches with our tears. Make no mistake here either; God still is the primary authority in our lives. But through Jesus we are invited into relationship with the God behind the authority. And it is upon this God that we are invited to look and see this evening/morning.

When Jesus appears to his disciples unexpectedly, they are terrified. But Jesus says, "Look, see it's me! See the wounds in my hands, the wounds that I bear out of love for you." Then they see that he is indeed their compatriot and friend. And he eats with them like he has countless times before and they draw comfort from his presence among them. Jesus reminds them of who he is and who they are and why following him matters.

John writes similarly in his letter when he says: "See!" He uses the imperative here, almost as a command: "See what love the Father has given us..." Pastor Wayne told us last week that John is writing to people who have decided that they are above the sins of the body because the body does not matter. People who claim that special knowledge is the key to the kingdom of God. But John says no! What is key is to see, in Christ, how deeply God has loved us and to see, in Christ,

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

Now for some of you being called a child of God is not a compelling image. But being a child of God is not a return to the naiveté and powerlessness of our youth. Being called children of God describes God’s love and care for us. God’s claim on us is not one of ownership but of relationship.

John wants us to look and see this love of God, poured out in Jesus, to remind ourselves who we are in relationship to God. John captures this sense that we become what we look at. Think about this for a moment. A baby only learns to smile by being smiled at. Nearly every facial expression we use has been learned from the faces of those closest to us as we were growing up. For example, my friend Brian is a short stocky redhead. His 17-year-old son Vince is long-legged and slender with silky jet-black hair and the distinctive features of his native Korea. But in facial expression, speech and countless other mannerisms, Vince is the very image of his dad. Vince has, on the surface and more deeply still, been profoundly shaped by the man into whose face he has daily looked for his whole life.

John understands these profound shaping forces. They come not just from family but from culture. We become what we see. Or perhaps we become what we choose to look at. We can look to culture or we can look to Christ. But we will bear in ourselves the image of that which draws our attention.

So John says that if we look to Christ, we will be reminded of our identity as people in relationship with God. An identity forged at the cross and splashed on us in baptism. We are shaped in ways superficial and deeper still by looking at the love of God given to us in Christ. When we look in the mirror we can see more than the imprint of our childhood, more than the creases or the pimples or the hair that is being stupid. When we look in the mirror we can see the very image of God imprinted there.

Now, John talks a good deal about sin in this letter. He says that no one who abides in Christ sins, because in him there is no sin. It sounds as if he is setting an impossibly high standard. If you believe, you will not sin. But John is writing to people who claim that they do not sin because they are above the body. They say they believe but because they say the body does not matter, they feel free to conduct their bodies in any way they choose. And they claim that it is not sin. But John opens his letter saying, “If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves.” John’s readers were in denial about the reality of sin.

We cannot afford to be in denial about sin. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. The challenge, I think, for us is not to stop at the acceptance that we are sinners. If we are guilty of anything in the modern Lutheran church it is that we all too readily resign ourselves to our sinful natures and throw ourselves at the mercy of the cross. And of course, we are invited to do this. But it is not sufficient to leave it at that. We are vigilantly cautious about saying that we do not merit salvation in striving to please God. That much is true. But compliant resignation to our sinfulness makes for a very stagnant life of faith and frankly does little to imprint the love of God on the world around us.

John calls us to remember who we are and let the love we see in Jesus shape us into the kind of people for whom sin becomes unnatural. Sin is not just disobedience; it is a failure to act for the sake of the world. If we look on the love we see in the cross our desire to please God, our desire to act will be born of our mutual relationship; from the love that comes from knowing the love

that God has for us in Jesus Christ.

John challenges us to let that reform, remold, re-image our sinful selves into selves that truly bear the family likeness, the likeness of God's family, to the world.

Regardless of what earthly form your image takes, regardless of who shaped you when you were young, you are marked with the cross of Christ forever. That cross is not just a source of mercy and forgiveness, but the cross is a mark of a relationship that shapes your identity not just for your own sake but for the sake of the world.

Amen.