

Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 26, 2015
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

How Great is the Love of the Father!

1 John 3:1-2 (NIV)

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.2) Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

In Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep, dear fellow redeemed,

"Nobody loves me." Have you ever felt that way? It's a frightening feeling isn't it? It's a lonely feeling, one that I've always hated. If you've ever felt that way you are not alone. In fact it seems that the Apostle John wrote to a whole congregation of Christians who, from time to time at least, must have felt the same way. How thankful we can be that our God cares enough about his people to address these feelings in his Word, a Word that he has preserved for us, knowing that we could often use the same encouragement that he gave to his people so long ago. So let's join those first century Christians in pondering God's love and praising him for it, as we say with the Apostle John, "How great is the love of the Father: 1) that we should be called his children; and, 2) that we should become like his Son.

"Nobody loves me." While these words are often spoken in self-pity, they usually surface at a time when we've done something to disappoint or anger the people around us. Never far from the mind of a person who feels unloved, is the sick feeling that he or she does not deserve to be loved. And when you think about it, there's truth in that thought, at least when it comes to our most important relationship of all-our relationship with God. The Apostle Paul tells it like it was when he says in Colossians 1:21: *"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior."*

We started life off as God's enemies; and to this very day we often continue to act like his enemies. We do so many things to disappoint and anger him every day. We don't deserve God's love. More to the point, we deserve his hatred and punishment-a truth that leaves us feeling pretty worthless, so worthless in fact, that we are often tempted to spend our days trying to fill them with meaning and value.

Where do you try to find the meaning and value of your life? Do measure your worth in terms of how successful you are at being the best husband or wife, the best mom or dad, the best employee or student, the best son or daughter you can possibly be? How is that working for you? Are you feeling pretty good about yourself? Maybe you do on those days when someone pats you on the back and says, "Good job!" Maybe you feel like you're worth something when a family member tells you, "You're the best." But what about all those other days when no one says anything at all? What about those days when someone tells you "You're the worst!"? What about those days when nothing goes right at work or you bring home a report card with two D's and an F on it? How do you feel about yourself then? Now there's nothing wrong with striving to be our best, unless this becomes the measure of our self-worth. Because if it does, we're going to spend our entire life riding the ups and downs of a gigantic roller coaster that in the end is going to crash and burn.

We sinners can't establish any self-worth on our own. We sin when try to because our value and worth can only come from God who created us. He made us to depend on him for these and all things. To seek them elsewhere is to tell God, I don't you need you. I'll do this on my own." And that is rebellion-a sin that makes us even more deserving of spending all eternity away from God's love in that horrible place called hell.

So are we doomed to live and die in misery? We ought to be, but we are not thanks to God. For what we do not deserve and cannot earn, our gracious Father in heaven has chosen to give us as a free gift. He gives us sinners, we who are his natural-born enemies, his love absolutely free of charge! And what wondrous love it is!

John feels the need to point this out, because "love" has got to be one of the most overused words of all times. We say that we love nice weather, or a delicious meal or even the smell of freshly mowed grass. So is it any wonder that we begin to take the meaning and concept of love for granted? But not today-not when John says, *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us"* (1 John 3:1a). John uses a special word for love-a word that refers not to an emotion, but to a decision that God makes to be loving. God doesn't love us because he find us sinners to be so loveable. He loves because he himself is love. It has nothing to do with us. It couldn't or we would still be in eternal trouble. It is all about God and what he is willing to do for sinners. God's love doesn't express itself in terms of feelings, but in actions and in sacrifice. Listen for the actions that define God's love in these familiar passages: *"God so love the world that he gave his one and only Son"* (John 3:16); and again in 1 John 4:10: *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."* God's love was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice-he was willing to send and give his Son to be our substitute in life and death so that by disowning Jesus in hell, God, for his sake, could declare us forgiven and claim us for heaven. And that is exactly what God has done for all of us, moving us to say, *"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"* (1 John 3:1a&b).

Notice that in this verse also God's love is defined by an action. So as to remove any doubts about our status in God's eyes, John states very clearly that we are "called children of God." This isn't a title or status that we merely claim for ourselves, by ourselves. It is God who calls us his children, and in doing so gives us the ultimate value and worth every moment of every day.

Your value is found not in what you are worth to your employer, or your friends or even your family. Your value is found always and only in the price God paid to have you in his family-and that price never changes. No matter how little you are loved or how much you are hated by anyone else, to God you are always worth the precious blood of our Good Shepherd, the blood he shed to save us and make us God's sheep. This is why we strive to be our best-in thanks to God who gave his best for us.

Think of it! By giving us Jesus, God is telling us that we are worth everything to him. We need to remind each other of this often, because the world has a way of making us forget. We're nothing special in the world's eyes. It doesn't see or know our value. The world doesn't appreciate the great gift we have to offer it. It doesn't recognize us as its salt and light. How discouraging that can be! But John encourages us to go right on living as God's children and sharing his gospel, telling us, *"The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him"* (1 John 3:1c). Instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, we will feel sorry for our world. Its lack of appreciation for us is only a symptom of its real problem, its damning unbelief. Look around you. Everywhere there are people trying to find their worth in the money they have, in the things they own, and in the pleasures they seek. It's not working for them just as it doesn't work for us. These people are hungry for the truth we possess. Go ahead and tell them how much they are worth in Christ. Tell them how great is the love of the Father that we should be called his children; and how great is that love that we should become like his Son.

God's love for us and our world is such great news that John just has to share with us one more time, saying, *"Dear friends, now we are children of God"* (1 John 3:2a). But the news gets even better for all of us. For John continues, *"what we will be has not yet been made known"* (1 John 3:2b). John knows that in spite of God's rich blessings to us in the here and now, life on earth is still filled with a great deal of sorrow and pain. So the apostle does us the favor of lifting our eyes heavenward, assuring us that God has saved us for a better life than the one we have now-a wonderful life with him forever.

What will that life be like? We don't really know-not because our God doesn't want us to know, but because even if he told us we couldn't comprehend it. So instead of giving us all the details about a life beyond our understanding and experience, God speaks of heaven in terms we can appreciate. In 1 Peter 1:4, God refers to the treasures of heaven as *"an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade."* In Revelation 21:4, God says that in heaven *"there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain..."* God even lets us know through the Apostle Paul that we will hold positions of great authority in heaven for Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:3, *"Do you not know that we will judge angels?"* None of us can begin to fathom such a life, which perhaps explains why John says in our text: *"But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2c).* Rather than spending his time trying to tell us what heaven will be like, John shows us what we will be like once we get there. We will become just like God's Son, our brother Jesus.

Jesus became human like us to save us from our sins. He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant so that he could live for us and be punished to death in our place. The Father accepted Jesus' sacrifice as payment in full for the sins of all; and in order prove it, God raised Jesus from death to a glorious life in heaven. God will see to it that we have a share in his glory. Paul says in Philippians 3:20-21: *"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."* We will all become like Jesus, having a glorious body like his. John explains what this means when he says, *"we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."* God once told Moses, *"you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exodus 33:20).* We sinners can't look at God's holiness without it destroying us. So the very fact that we will be able to look at our Savior in heaven, seeing him in all his glory can only mean one thing, that we will become like him, just as sinless, just as holy as he is. There is so much about heaven we can't understand right now, but it is enough to know that once we're there, sin will never again be part of our lives-not ever.

"Nobody loves me?" It's not true! What a loving Father we have, one who calls us sinners his children right now and one who promises us a sin-free eternity in heaven. Just think, my friends, in spite of all our unworthiness, such great love is ours, always for Jesus' sake. Amen.