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### **Ah, To Be a Child Again**

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 3rd Sunday of Easter, April 17, 1994. Scripture Lessons: Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Wow! God loves us so much that he calls us his very own children. It's hard to believe, but that's what we are - God's children! Right here and now, we're God's children. We can grieve God and bring tears of sadness to his eyes when we leave his home like a prodigal adolescent, but we can't make God stop loving us as his children. We can bring tears of joy to God when we repent and turn home again. But there's nothing we can do to make God love us more than he already does.

"See what love the Father has given us." Us!

That's what God said, through John, to a Christian congregation in Asia Minor almost 2000 years ago. God continues to speak to us today through that ancient word. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." The apostle was addressing a group of people as mixed as ours, with every degree of saintliness and sinfulness but united by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (DHC Read).

The rest of the world doesn't think so highly of us. Some people think we're all a bunch of hypocrites, claiming to be somebodies when we're nobodies.

"Hypocrites!" they say. "Look at them! They're no different than anybody else. In fact, I know non-religious people who are a lot more loving and fair than those so called children of God." There's enough truth in what they say to make me feel uncomfortable and guilty. But maybe they aren't the best judge of who we are. Maybe we're not the best judge either.

Other people think that we're all basically cosmic orphans. We live in a god-forsaken world. We arose out of the formless deep and we'll return to oblivion. Matter, time, chance and natural processes explain everything without God. "We're cosmic orphans, not children of God", they say.

The world doesn't recognize us as God's children. But the world didn't recognize who Jesus was either. The world rejected the Holy and Righteous One. The world killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. The world isn't the best judge of who Jesus is or who we are. Don't let the world tell us who we are. You and I are God's children - red and yellow, black and white, we are precious in God's sight.

So we're God's children now. That's good news. But here's even better news: "what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him." We're not only God's children, we're becoming more and more like Jesus, our brother. True, we don't look much like Jesus now. But someday we ~~will~~ look just like him. We grow to look more and more like our older brother because we have God as our Father.

I have a brother 21 years older than I am. When I was one year old and my brother was twenty-two we looked nothing alike. There's no way you could pick us out of a line up and say, "Those two are brothers." But if you compare my high school graduation picture with my brother's high school graduation picture twenty years earlier, it's hard to distinguish who is who. As I grew older I began to look more and more like my brother.

The same thing is true with our big brother Jesus. You and I don't look much like Jesus now. A lot of times we don't act like Jesus when he touched the untouchables, cleansed the temple, and forgave those who nailed him to the cross. A lot of times, we don't sound like Jesus when he preached good news of the kingdom of God, and came saying, "Peace, be with you" to those who forsook him. But God is at work in us to make us more and more like Christ. It's happening already. We find ourselves, at times, doing brave things like Jesus did. We find ourselves, at times, saying courageous things like he said. And one day, we will be like him. People will look at you and look at Jesus and say, "My, they sure do resemble one another."

I know that's hard to believe. When we look into our own hearts and the secret places of our lives we see plenty that tells us that we aren't becoming more and more like Jesus. We seem to go limping along so often, sometimes doing really mean and ugly things, sometimes acting in cowardice, but at other times we surprise even ourselves by doing something courageous. We're not the best judge of what we're becoming. God is though. God says we're becoming more and more like Christ and when one day we see Christ, face to face, we will be like him.

We will be like Jesus Christ - becoming like Jesus who proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel (Brief Statement of Faith).

But does all this really matter? Does what the apostle says about who we are and what we're becoming have any effect on the way we live from day to day? Or is it like a kind of insurance policy that we tuck away in a safe place until the time comes? The apostle answers those questions for us. He says, "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." In other words, this conviction that we're children of God and that we're going to be like Christ one day - this conviction produces within us moral power and energy. It produces the compassion of Christ. It produces a passion for peace and justice. It produces a longing for the kingdom of God.

Somebody has said that we don't know which direction to go in unless we know who we are. Knowing that we are God's children and knowing that God has destined us to be like Christ give us direction in life. Far from making us morally lazy and apathetic, it empowers us. It give us perseverance. It sets the direction for the whole course of our lives.

"All who have this hope purify themselves." God is at work in us making us more and more like Christ, but God makes us more and more like Christ through our own efforts. Children are genetically programmed to do certain things at certain ages; genetically programmed to talk and walk at certain ages. A child doesn't walk at one month old. A child doesn't talk at two months old. Most children, unless there's some illness or genetic defect, begin to walk at about a year old. Some take longer and some begin walking earlier. But it's useless to try to make a child walk before he or she is ready.

Most children naturally begin to walk at about a year old. But the child does not learn to walk without practice and failure. The child is not a robot. The child exercises will power and effort. We are God's children, destined to be like Christ, but we don't become like Christ without practice and failure. Nor do we become like Christ instantaneous, all of a sudden. It takes time. It takes a life time and even that's not enough.

When Pablo Casals was ninety years old, the greatest of all cellists, he kept practicing the cello for four or five hours a day. Someone asked him why, at his age, he worked so hard at the fundamentals of his art. "Because," he said, "I think I am making some progress." (Smedes, A Pretty Good Person)

Life, this present life of ours, is really all about making some progress at being what we're meant to be - the way being a bud is about becoming a blossom, or being a well-born colt is about becoming a thoroughbred racer. We have an inner itch to be more of what we were meant to be, and we never know but that we're on the verge of a breakthrough.

Goodness and badness mingle in the veins of the best of us until we die or until Christ appears. At one moment we'll be more on the good side. At another moment we'll feel a push toward the bad. None of us is going to get beyond our need for the grace of God and the love of our friends. But with a little help from our friends and a lot of help from God, we can become the sort of people God intends us to be (Smedes).

Let us pray: Lord, we want to be a Christian in our hearts. We want to be more loving. We want to be more holy. We want to be like Jesus, in our hearts. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.