

In this past year we have lost so many precious people here at The First Church. With that in mind, and with a strong belief in the “communion of saints,” Kate offers this message to all who long to be connected with those gone before. It is entitled “Children of God” and is based on 1 John 3:1-3 and Matthew 5:1-12.

*“See what love the Father has given us; that we should be called children of God.
And that is what we are!”*

Everyone here is a child of God. Every single one. Today I want to explore a bit what that means. First of all, just a little while ago when you came to the table for communion, how many of you looked into the eyes of the children serving you and were just delighted? You glanced into those little earnest faces and could not help smiling? That is the first thing we need to know about being a child of God – that you are a source of joy, each one of you are as delighted in by our Creator God as we delight in these children. In other words, your being is held very dear in this world. Just feel that for a moment... **No one** escapes the reach of God’s love.

And neither does anyone escape God’s likeness. John’s epistle suggests that the more God is revealed, the more we will see we are somewhat **like** God. Now, how many of us are like our parents? Have any of you had the experience, as I have lately, of passing by a store window and seeing your mother walk by – but it was you? A little disconcerting. Joel is so much like his dad. He looks like him, sings like him, whistles like him, can’t hear like him, and feeds “his” birds just like his dad did! So clearly we inherit and share some of the traits of our parents. But I think John is talking about something deeper than that. Commentator Grace Ji-Sun-Kim writes that “Being children of God means that we are essentially made in the image of God and that we are ontologically somehow like God.” **Ontologically**. In other words, **our being is like God’s being**. But, how is that even possible? We are mortal. We are conceived, we are born, and we die. How do we take part in the Immortal Being, the Eternal Being, who is God?

This day, All Saints, gives us some insight. The saints are those who have gone before us and no longer walk the earth. We can think of them as taking part in God’s eternal Being. But in an important way, they take us

there with them. Here is spiritual author Jan Richardson as she writes about the death of her beloved husband:

One of the things I quickly learned after Gary died was that death has a way of tearing open our hearts toward eternity. We are no longer residents of this world only; we no longer move only in this time. It is one of the strange and beautiful effects of intense loss. Even as I continue to make a new life in this world, I am keenly aware that my heart is held by one who lives beyond this world. And that means my heart lives both within and beyond the borders of what I can see and know in this world.

She then writes about the profound meaning of this day:

It is All Saints’ Day, and I am thinking about how this is a day to name this – how we live in these two worlds. Except that it’s not really two worlds. Somehow, now and eternity are bound together in a deep mystery. This is a day to remember that even in the pain of sharpest loss, somehow we all live in one world, and death **does not release us from being in relationship with one another**... On this All Saints’ Day, as we both grieve and celebrate our beloved dead, may we know how they endure with us, holding our hearts and encompassing us with a fierce and stubborn love that persists across time and distance.”

Eternity, as I understand it, is past, present and future held together as one. There is no interruption. There is no beginning or end. As God is eternal, in God there is no separation of time, of relationship, of the here and the beyond. Not many of us think about that until we suffer a

great loss, and there is no getting around the fact that a part of us has died or passed on or entered eternity with our spouse, our friend, our parent, or our child. They are as much a part of us as they ever were, perhaps even more. Is it so hard to imagine that we continue on also as a part of them? That they, as Richardson suggests, hold our hearts and encompass us “with a fierce and stubborn love that persists across time and distance.”

Christianity lost an important source of its identity for centuries when it set aside its contemplative and experiential dimensions for an almost total emphasis on theology and belief. Those who practice contemplative prayer and reach deep silence within them will tell you, there is a point at which all boundaries and separations seem to dissolve. There is no time, no up or down, no me or you, and all there is, is **love**. A pervading sense of love glimmers as the web of all being. It connects everything to everything else. It gives a taste of eternity, in which all that was, and is, and will be is in communion in the present moment. It is like being held in the heart of God.

I have no doubt that when Jesus withdrew for prayer in the mountains, which he did often, he knew that vast silence of love in himself. Formed in and by it, he could with great authority offer these startling words: “Blessed are the poor in spirit [right now!], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Only one who had glimpsed eternity could see beyond the brokenness of the present, see humanity in its wholeness, and speak such a vision. The two worlds Jan Richardson wrote about, one lived in time and one lived beyond time, are really one in the words and the mind of Jesus. In him, we see and experience the likeness and the heart of God.

For years I have been drawn to contemplatives and their writings. St. Irenaeus from the 2nd century who said “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich who wrote “All

shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” Words that can bring one to silence and peace. 16th century Saint Teresa of Avila would write: “May you be content knowing you are a child of God. Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love. It is there for each and every one of us.” I have always loved the Dalai Lama, not so much for what he says, as for who he is. He walks the earth so lightly, with a smile and a laugh always at the ready, for he seems to have transcended the present where he knows great trouble and lives with an eye to the eternal.

Finally, another of my favorite contemplatives, monk, mystic, and social activist, Thomas Merton, died in 1968. I ran across some of his words on Facebook (yes there is something good on Facebook!) from his book *New Seeds of Contemplation* and would like to close with them. “To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my character. Love is my name.” What better description of what it means to be a child of God. “Love is my true character. Love is my name.” And love is also the **portal to eternity**.

Dear Children of God, we are held with a fierce and stubborn love that persists across time and distance. And we hold others in that same sturdy, timeless love. One communion of saints. All is well. Amen.

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Thomas Merton