

CHILDREN OF GOD

TEXT: 1 John 3:1-7

I don't read much in the realm of science fiction and fantasy, but the two books by Mary Doria Russell, *The Sparrow* and *Children of God* are two exceptions. In her second book, which is the sequel to the first, there is some dialogue between the Jesuit Priest Emilio Sandoz and some others.

“They were quiet for a time, alone with their thoughts, but then John sat up straight, struck by a thought. ‘There’s a passage in Exodus – God tells Moses, ‘No one can see my face, but I will protect you with my hand until I have passed by you, and then I will remove my hand and you will see my back.’ Remember that?”

Emilio nodded, listening.

“Well, I always thought that was a physical metaphor,” John said, “but, you know – I wonder now if it isn't really about time? Maybe that was God's way of telling us that we can never know his intentions, but as time goes on...we'll understand. We'll see where he was; we'll see his back.”

In other words, we see more clearly in hindsight than we can ever be aware of in the moment. Even God seems to be hidden behind his hand and it is when we see his back, after he has moved past, that we gain understanding. What is difficult for us to see and comprehend in this life will be clear in the life to come.

In the United Methodist Church, we gather annually in what we call Annual Conference. It is a time of doing church business, but also a time of gathering together as the family of God. Many years ago, the sitting Bishop asked us to sing a hymn that he particularly loved. This hymn has come to be known as “The Bishop's Hymn” and is sung each year as we gather together. The words are meaningful:

“Beloved, beloved, we are the children of God
And it does not yet appear what we shall be.
But we know that when God appears; but we know that when God appears
We shall be like God, We shall be like God. We shall see God face to face.”

These words come from the book of 1st John. They are some of the words that we have just read. And they have great meaning for us today.

In this passage John develops his twin themes that God is light and God is love. These themes are worked out in two separate groups which claim allegiance to God. One group, “the children of God”, is lavished with the love of God. They purify themselves as God is pure. The other group is found in habitual rebellion against God, in lawlessness. How could John so clearly see what has happened to God’s children so many years in the future?

Over 25 years ago, a campaign of vicious genocidal slaughter began in Rwanda. In just three months, 850,000 Rwandans were killed. Theologian and ethicist David Gushee asked how such brutality could have occurred in “the most Christianized country in Africa”. Churches, seminaries, schools and benevolent organizations were scattered all over the country. Ninety percent of Rwandans claimed to be Christians. “And yet,” Gushee writes, “all of that Christianity did not prevent genocide, a genocide which church officials did little to resist, in which a large number of Christians participated, and in which, according to African Rights, ‘more people died in churches and parishes than anywhere else.’”

Thinking about the failure of the church and Christians to prevent Rwandan genocide, Gushee also reminds us that Germany was a pervasively Christian nation, yet the vast majority of German Christians were loyal to – or at least silent in the face of – Adolf Hitler and Nazism. Christians were complicit in the Holocaust. Gushee could likewise have noted that white South African Christians were the architects of apartheid, that most American slave holders were Christians, and that, during the Crusades,

Christian soldiers, marching behind the banner of the cross, killed thousands of Muslims and Jews.

Who knows how much damage has been done by Christians who have failed to live by the ways of Jesus? Priests abusing children committed to their care; ministers committing adultery with their parishioners; church officials pocketing money they pilfered from the offering plate; and angry demonstrators waving placards that blaspheme a God of Love by claiming that God hates. And what of the damage we do to our own hearts and minds when we are driven by greed more than gratitude, by pride more than humility, by competition more than mutuality, by selfishness more than service?

So where is the church in all of this?

The presence of churches in a country guarantees nothing. The self-identification of people with the Christian faith guarantees nothing. All of the clerical garb and regalia, all of the structures of religious accountability, all of the Christian vocabulary and books, all of the schools and seminaries and parish houses and Bible studies, all of the religious titles and educational degrees – they guarantee nothing.

Gushee asks: Why is that?

- Because not everyone who claims to be Christian has yielded to Jesus' command that "we love our neighbors as ourselves" and has not understood the lesson of the Parable of the Good Samaritan: Everyone is my neighbor.
- Because we can never be sure of the motivations that bring people to worship, we are here for more reasons than we know, probably for more reasons than we can imagine.
- Because Christian people are influenced, not just by Jesus Christ, but by social, economic and political systems and by assumptions, ideas, loyalties and feelings that are at odds with the gospel.

In other words, it cannot be assumed that Christians are actually following Jesus.

In our reading today we are assured that we are all the children of God. We are also told that the reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know God. Is this the reason for the atrocities of the world by those who profess to be Christians? Is it that they profess to be Christians, but they do not know God? Here is a wake-up call for all of us who claim to know God, through our intimate relationship with his Son, Jesus Christ. It is essential – even urgent – for the sake of the church and of the whole world, that we become people who are unswervingly committed to the will and the way of Jesus. People who are using their energy to become more and more like Jesus, to be agents of reconciliation and understanding, of healing and hope, of love and mercy. Simply put – “Jesus people”, the children of God, are called to make the world a better place.

Gushee tells us that Jesus is the pattern and the power, the model and the source, of authentic human life. We are meant to have what he had and has:

First, a radical and liberating faith in God;
A childlike trust in the grace of God;
A trembling wonder before the mystery of life;
A durable hope that, because we are in God’s hands, death and sorrow and pain and tears are not the end, but joy and wholeness and laughter are;
An astonishing confidence that we and the world are headed, not toward midnight, but toward sunrise; and
An undimmed awareness that the heart of all things is unconditional and compassionate love.

Until the church of God, until the church of Jesus Christ, until the church that has been established for the children of God, until we who are God’s children, recognize and own the all-encompassing love that has been showered on us through God’s grace, until we all acknowledge and embrace this love, we cannot look at the rest of the world and share God’s love and the empowering message it carries.

That deep down assurance that we are loved empowers us to join Jesus in his compassion for our broken planet, his passion for peace, his hunger and thirst for justice, his welcoming embrace of the excluded and his tender mercy toward sinners.

How, then, do we know what it is to be the children of God? First we might ask what it is like to be a child. Every person here in this room knows what it is like to be a child. It's fun; it's play. We've all played with sticks, balls, run races, learned to ride a bike, hide in the bushes and know the thrill of being "found". To be a child is to be creative, imaginative, to explore the world around us. Every child is basically helpless and needs to be taken care of. Each child needs someone to meet its needs for food and water and warmth and clothing. Every child is vulnerable. A child needs nurturing. A child is dependent.

In our text John writes: "See the great love the Father has given us, that he has called us God's little children". When a child is your own, you love that child deeply. That love is there in spite of the problems. Even the quirks of our children, which occasionally drive us up the wall, do not change the deep love we have for them as human beings simply because they are our children.

And so it is with God, our heavenly Father. We are God's little children. We are his. We belong to him. And by calling us his little children (as one translator has put it) this reveals the patient and intense love that God has for us, for all of us, because God loves his children just like a parent loves his or her own children in a way that another parent cannot love them.

So who are God's children? Those who do what is right, and those who love their brothers and sisters of the world. This is the theme which is repeated again and again in John. Those who do what is right, and love their brothers and sisters are those who demonstrate that they are children of God.

What about those who professed Christianity in Rwanda? Not just the perpetrators of the atrocities, but those who stood by in silence. What about the thousands throughout history who have committed crimes against their brothers and sisters in the name of Christianity? What about those in today's world who push aside the love of God for their own ends and at the expense of others? Aren't these also the

children of God? John makes no such distinction that some are and some are not, except that those who sin, those who do not know God, do not know God as the Father.

God makes no distinction about who his children are. God's love is beyond calculation, for not only does God call of us his children, he makes us his children. The day is coming when we, the children of God, will not only know him, but we will be like him. No matter how great are our weaknesses or failings, they can't get in the way of God's gracious love for us.

Our standing as God's children rests on his grace alone. We cannot earn it or buy it. But we must acknowledge it. When our lives and our actions reflect God's will; when we live in the world as God's children and work as members of God's family for the good of others, we find our place as the children of God today and look forward to our family reunion in God's presence. Praise be to God! Amen