

Pure Love
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All Saints' Day

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian, tells the story of a Prince who falls in love with a peasant girl:

Kierkegaard's story begins with a Prince who one day is riding through his fields. The Prince sees a peasant girl gathering the crops. She is beautiful and the Prince falls instantly in love with her. However, he is a noble prince and does not want to overwhelm her with his power and riches. So he dresses in peasant clothes and goes to work side by side with her. Kierkegaard notes that what holds our attention as such a story is told is our curiosity about when the Prince will show his true identity. We know the Prince and the peasant girl will fall in love. After all, she is beautiful and he is noble. But we want to know when and how the Prince will reveal to his beloved that she has fallen in love with the Prince himself. (As told by Stanley Hauerwas at the Duke Youth Academy on July 15, 2005)

Kierkegaard uses the story to talk about how Jesus comes as God in the flesh, hidden -- both fully human and as well as fully God. And we see how God chooses not to overwhelm us with God's presence, which would result not in us choosing God out of genuine love, but by simply giving in because God was so overwhelming. And yet, God's story of sending Jesus is about God's love for us, that at times may seem to be hidden, or yet to be revealed.

Today's passage from scripture is 1 John 3:1-3. It talks about God's love being "lavished" on us, while at the same time it seems to be hidden -- at least from some:

See what great 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. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.
-- 1 John 1:3-10, NIV

From the earliest days of the Christian faith, these three short letters of John have been attributed to the same John who wrote the gospel. But pretty early on some in the church were not so sure either that John wrote these or if he did, which John we're talking about. That's because the writer of these letters never identifies himself as John.

However, at the beginning of the second and third of these letters when where the writer of the letter often identified himself at the beginning, rather than the end which we are used to -- he identifies himself as "the elder." And as you may have heard before, the Greek word for elder is *presbuteros* -- from which we get our word "presbyterian." That is because in our way of organizing ourselves as a church, we are governed by elders. So, we could call him "John the

elder” or maybe even John the Presbyterian, though the Presbyterian Church wouldn't exist for another 1500 years. But it is not knowing “John’s” true identity which is key to understanding these words. No, I think the key to understanding these words is how this passage begins and how it ends. It *begins* with love and it *ends* talking about purity. So, how do we get from *love* to *purity*? And, on this All Saints’ Day, what does that have to do with being a saint?

John reminds these early Christians that God the Father has “lavished” love upon us. The result is that we are called “children of God.” And yet he speaks of a hiddenness -- not only of the world not recognizing that we are children of God, but perhaps in recognizing God and God's lavish love, as well. My sense is that all of us struggle from time to time recognizing God and God's love for us.

In his book, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* author Philip Yancey tells the story of a man named Jim who says this,

Nowadays I don't spend time worrying, “Is God there or not?” I assume God's presence. . . . I've learned to trust God. When I do that, everything else slides down in importance. I used to test God, trying things like, “If you're really listening, have a deer walk past in the next ten minutes.” Sometimes that actually happened! But I began to see how shallow were those prayers. I was trying to control God . . . I don't do that anymore. I've learned that the things I grasp and pursue often turn out to be disappointing and sour. The best things in life are unexpected gifts dropped on me – “grace notes” as a friend of mine calls them.

Like Jim in this story, we may be trying to control God when we demand a sign from God before we will respond. But most often, the signs God gives us in life are like gifts – “grace notes” dropped on us unexpectedly.

A while back, I received an e-mail from a member of a former church, and I asked her if I could share it. This person had been through some tough times of personal distress with her health. One day she made an appointment to come by the office and talk with me. She shared with me some struggles she was having. I gave her a book that I thought might be helpful by a friend of mine named Tom Lewis who is a Presbyterian pastor. Tom went through his own bout with depression and found out that praying the Psalms was one thing that helped him through this battle. His book is called *Praying the Psalms*.

I let this church member borrow the book and later she emailed, telling me of some of her experiences with reading that book and praying. Over Thanksgiving, she went on vacation with her family. She told of a time at the beach when she was sitting alone, and she began to thank God for all the blessings in her life. She said:

As always, I asked God for a sign for him to feel real to me and then I decided that I would stop praying and just sit and listen for God. Within moments [my husband] came walking up behind me to join me. I knew right then that God had sent [him] to me not for just that moment, but for all the years we have been together. [He] has been my stronghold for many years. He has seen me through the best and worst of times and has

never made me feel anything but safe, secure, and cherished. From that day on the beach I have been able to look at many things as the gifts that they are. I am frequently overwhelmed and brought to tears over how much happier I am. I've even been singing Xmas carols in the car! (Even though my kids think I'm nuts).

Now we can read stories of the great saints in the faith from the past, but these two we have just heard about are just “everyday saints” -- folks like you and me just trying to make it through.

The word “saint” has a number of meanings in the Christian faith. In the New Testament, the saints are simply believers or Christians in the early church, which is why Paul often addresses his letters to the saints in a certain city. But over the years, the church has wanted to honor those who lived faithfully in a special way, which is probably how many of us think of the saints. And on this All Saints’ Sunday, we also focus on those brothers and sisters in Christ who have died and are now in the presence of God -- that “great cloud of witnesses” that surrounds us which we have been talking about in previous weeks.

So, as we asked at the beginning of our message today, how do we get from love to purity? And what does that have to do with saints? Well, that link might be seen in the Greek words for “saint” and for “purity.” The Greek word for saint (*hagios*) and purity (*hagnos*) come from the same root word. So, John the elder says that while we are *now* children of God, what we *will be* has not yet been made known. In other words, as children of God, as saints on the journey of faith, we're not there yet -- we are in process and becoming more Christlike. And because of the love that God has “lavished” on us, we have a hope, not only that God is at work within us through God's Spirit purifying us over time to become more like Christ -- we also have hope that one day when Christ returns to set everything right the task will be finished, by the grace of God. We will finally be pure as Christ is pure. But until that time we can have hope and we can follow the light on the path of faith that shines from the lives of the saints who have gone before us.

One of my favorite stories which I have shared with some of you before is about a young boy about nine years old, who went with his parents to Europe one summer. Part of their tour was visiting the great old cathedrals of the past. As he would visit cathedral after cathedral, he saw the massive stained-glass portraits of the disciples and of other saints. He was so impressed as he stood in these great halls looking through the beautiful stained-glass windows. When he returned home, his Sunday School teacher asked him many questions like, “What about the great churches of Europe did he like the most?” The boy thought for a moment and said, “I loved the sense of awesomeness and the hugeness of who God must be.” The Sunday School teacher then asked the boy what he thought a saint was? His mind went back to those massive beautiful stained-glass windows. He said this: “A saint is a someone the light shines through.”

Who are the saints God has put in your life over the years whose light has helped you to see God’s lavish love in your life, and whose example has enabled you to become more purely the person God created you to be? I invite you to say a prayer of thanksgiving for that person today and if they are still alive, to reach out to them in some way and let them know what they have done for you.

But some of those through whom we have seen the light of Christ shine into our lives are no longer with us in this life, even though we may still be surrounded by the great cloud of their witness. We believe they are now in the very presence of God, experiencing what we can only hope for now and look forward to in the future.

I've shared with many of you that I was blessed to have loving, deeply committed Christian parents. My Dad loved Braves baseball and I grew up going to Braves games as a kid because of that. Dad died in 1993, just as the Braves were starting to be very good for a long time. I remember when Mom and I were talking about how well the Braves were doing and how much dad would have enjoyed seeing that. She said she wished she could say to Dad, "You wouldn't believe what's going on down here!" But then she paused and said she imagined that Dad would say back to her, "You wouldn't believe what's going on up here."

Friends, God's great and lavish love is why we are called to be God's children. And while the world may not yet recognize us as children of God or even recognize God's lavish love at work in the world -- in hope we live, believing that one day it will all be revealed to everyone when Christ appears again. And as John says, we shall be like him and we shall see what's going on in the presence of God -- what we wouldn't believe. But until then, we hold on to this hope. And we let God's Holy Spirit purify us so that we can become more fully what God wants us to be as God's children. So, let us follow the example of those saints who have gone before us, through whom the light of Christ still shines brightly, lighting the path of faith we are each following today, step by step. In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.