

Sermon: Children of God

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, April 18, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It really all comes down to Jesus. Let me be more specific, it all comes down to the acceptance of Jesus as Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Some may chuckle at such a Sunday school answer. Some may wonder if Jesus is the answer, what then is the question? More importantly, what is the implication?

Friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, as we gather here today, on the second Sunday after Easter, whether you are here in-person, or joining via Zoom, or teleconference, or you are watching this service via YouTube, you are undoubtedly well aware of the COVID storm raging across the province of Ontario. Transmission and infections of the virus have reached an unprecedented level. Correspondingly hospital and ICU admissions are at the break point. In order to stem the tide of this health crisis, we are once again, just like the last Spring (or the last winter), told by the government to stay-at-home, to shelter-in-place, to batten-down-hatches so to ride out the storm.

With the closure of non-essential businesses, schools, and much of the leisure activities, homes are once again where we live, work, and spend the majority of our time. Living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens are once again being converted into offices, classrooms and meeting place interchangeably. In the effort of keeping our individual family bubbles safe physically, the strain and challenges of mental health are increasingly becoming evident. As I wrote this sermon, my next door neighbour in the apartment complex was dealing with a crying toddler, screaming at the top of his/her lung. I shudder to think what the parents are going through. I shudder to think what many parents are going through, keeping the young ones at home 24/7. That may partly explain the spike in real estate prices of houses with spacious backyards outside city centres.

During this past week, I have been dealing with storms of my own family, on multiple fronts. Daisy has already flew to Vancouver to care for her mother. My parents' health are also deteriorating. On top of that, we

found out that we will need to exercise much more care and supervision of my two boys, now living in Montreal by themselves. I won't go into more details, out of respect of their privacy. As PKs — preacher's kids — they have already endured their share of Dad using them as sermon illustrations. It would've been a good illustration, but I digress.

The lectionary reading today offers an interesting term that caught my attention, a term that has preoccupied my mind this past week, that has offered me solace as I grapple with my own family situation, a term that I would like to invite you to ponder as well. I am referring to the phrase 'children of God'. As the Apostle John wrote in his first letter chapter 3:1, "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.*" In the attempt to share with you my scattered thoughts, I have organized this into four broad categories: children as learners; children as dependent; children as reflections of parents; and children are cherished.

First, we are all **learners**. The phrase 'children' conveys not age, but status and belonging — as having obtain such a status, we now belong to God. Yet the teachability of children is highlighted by Jesus himself. When confronted with the question of '*Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*' (Matthew 18:1), Jesus called a child to stand before the disciples and taught them, "*Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*"

The teachability of children applies not only on an individual level, but on a communal level as well. Peter addressed the Israelites in Acts 3, pointing out where the people of God went wrong. They had counted on their status as children of Abraham, relied on the blessing of covenantal community, and fell back on righteousness of the Law. Yet, for all their close scrutiny of the Scripture, for all the rabbinic tradition of encouraging lively debates, they missed out on God's revelation in Jesus, as the long prophesied suffering servant, as the Holy and Righteous One, and as the author of Life. "*And now friends*", Peter assured the Israelites in Acts 3:17-19, "*I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God.*" In another word, learn from your mistake, and turn from your mistake.

Falling Forward by John C. Maxwell deals with precisely such a subject. Failures are inescapable parts of life. However, the author posited that the difference between average people and achieving people is their

perception of and response to failure. Using actual examples of early missteps of those who later went on to climb great heights, the book is quite inspirational, it helped me a lot early on in my life, highly recommended for young people who are just starting out their life journey.

For children of God, the turning away from mistakes is always accompanied by the turning towards God, because as children, we are **dependent** on God. In earthly families, children are dependent on parents for the most basic provisions, for nurture in their youth, and for protection from harm. The dependency works actually both way, as parents are also dependent upon their children as a guarantee of future generations, and in their old age, as provider of their physical well-beings. The psalmist echoed the thoughts of many when he said in Psalm 127:3, "*Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from God.*"

Actions and values of parents do have long lasting impacts on their children. From the perspective of the community of faith, idol worshipping is a sin, akin to hatred towards God. Both parents and children are punished by God to the third and forth generations. However, God is merciful and compassionate, forgiving sins and '*showing love to a thousand generations of those who love God and keep God's commandments.*' (Exodus 20:6)

My grandfather was a tremendously wealthy rice merchant in Taiwan. In those days when the Nationalist government of Taiwan was preparing for a prolong civil war against the Communist China, grandpa's company was contracted to stock up to two years worth of rice for the entire population of the island. However, upon his death, an ugly fight among relatives broke out over how to divi up that wealth. His body could not be buried until the fight was settled. My father, being the oldest son, stood up and made a startling proclamation. He was willing to give up his rightful share of the inheritance, so long as grandpa could receive a proper Christian burial. You see, no one else in the family was Christian at that time. Grandpa was certainly not a Christian, even Dad was not baptized at that time. Yet he chose God, professed publicly as a follower of Christ. He chose to depend solely on God, on the Lord's provision, on God's blessing, and he chose wisely. Much of that wealth that grandpa had amassed has now been throughly squandered subsequently by those who took it, echoing a try and true Chinese proverb that, 'wealth does not last over three generations'. Whereas Dad and his descendants, continue to be blessed by God as we continue to depend on God. It is a story that I never get tire of telling to my

children, and hopefully to their children's children. Yes, I am counting God's blessings, 3 generations in, and 997 more to go.

Children are **reflections of parents**. Apostle John reminds all God's children that, "*What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*" God created humankind in God's own image. However, sin has since distorted it, disobedience has disfigured God's image in us to the point of it being unrecognizable. When I hear people making bold statement such as 'God accepts us as who we are', I cringe because it is theologically shallow, to the point of being hollow.

The acceptance of Jesus Christ is the key to turning things around. It sets us free from the grip of sin and death, yet it is not complete. The process of restoration of God's image in us is life-long, some call it sanctification, John Wesley called it the pursuit of perfection. This process is jointly powered by our desire to be more like Jesus, and by the Holy Spirit constantly at work in us, shaping us, molding us, enabling us to bear fruit, of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

And now the final point, children of God are **cherished** by God. The love of God for all people, for the world is universal. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (John 3:16). The Gospel of John, his testimonials, the good news that John proclaimed were all written down so that we may come to believe that Jesus is Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Furthermore, for those who do believe, not only does God love them, God cherishes them as children. Seven times John addresses in his first epistle to the community of believers as 'dear children', invoking the longstanding biblical motif of God as Father. Psalmist testifies in Psalm 103:13-14 and elsewhere, "*As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.*"

God may discipline, God may rebuke, but God never forget nor forsake the cherished children. So beloved children of God, let us humble ourselves, let us take the posture of a child, let us look toward God as Jesus does. In God as Abba Father, we find care, provision, and protection. In God as Abba Father, we find contentment, peace and ultimately eternal life. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.