

November 5, 2023 – 1 John 3:1-3

They say that if you really want to know what a pastor is all about, what is at the heart and soul of his preaching, what his congregation really believes, teaches, and confesses, there is one place you will always find it: a funeral. Look at what the pastor does and listen to what he says. Look at what the congregation does and listen to their liturgy. Funerals are a window into the doctrine underpinning that entire church.

They tell you so much because it's in the funeral service that the ultimate questions of life and death, of salvation and judgement, of God and eternity are addressed. A normal weekly service can only reveal so much about a pastor. Even a special service like Christmas or Easter may be clouded by holiday traditions. But a funeral service is always about bottom-line issues.

And so you can find out a lot about a pastor or a congregation or even about an entire church body by attending a funeral. What hope is given and what does that hope rest upon? What doubts are lifted? What peace is given? What joy is there in the midst of their sorrow?

What meaning do they assign to this person's life? What meaning do they find in this person's death? Are the bereaved family members left uncertain about the eternal destiny of their loved one? Or are they comforted by the Gospel?

Are they directed to the good deeds of the deceased? That the departed was a decent person who did their best? Or are they directed to the work of Christ? These are the kinds of things you hear at a funeral. These are the kinds of answers given. And they can vary drastically depending on what the preacher really believes deep down or what a church really believes, teaches, and confesses.

These kinds of questions are relevant for us today as we observe All Saints' Day. This is the day when we think about those faithful departed who have gone on before us to be with Jesus. Those who've left this earthly "veil of tears," particularly during the past year.

It's kinda of ironic, but you can't actually preach about funerals at a funeral. It's inappropriate. It's too personal. It's on a day like today, when there is no casket in front of us, that we have an opportunity to think about what I as a pastor and we as a congregation actually confess at a funeral.

Our Epistle from the First Letter of St. John instructs us in all these bottom-line issues, start at the very first verse: "*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.*"

John in the previous chapter talked about a lot of really depressing issues. Christians who hate their brothers and sisters in Christ and walk in the darkness of their anger. Christians who love the world and cling to the desires of life, which only pass away. Christians who are led astray by the antichrists of this world. Men and women who deny the Father and the Son and deceive the church by their teaching.

All these flaws with the church. All this sinful humanity surrounding us. There's so much wrong with us, as a church and as a species. We are mired in sin and we deserve nothing but punishment.

And yet, after giving this litany of reasons for why God shouldn't love us, John reaches this inescapable conclusion: "*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God.*" We don't deserve God's love. So the fact that he does love us just makes that love so much greater. It is a love that is lavished upon us.

Because it's a love that calls us his children. We hate our brothers and sisters in Christ, yet God calls us his children. We cling to worldly things with greed and pride, yet God calls us his children. We are easily deceived and led astray, yet God calls us his children. God calls us as his saints. That is a lavish love.

And it is one of those bottom-line issues that defines a Lutheran funeral. Because, to be blunt, you don't need me or any other pastor to tell you whether or not your loved one was a good person. You know what that person did in life. You know how they loved God and how they loved their neighbor. And as much as you want to focus on the good things they did, you are also well aware that they were a sinner and failed in many respects as well. You don't need my sermon to tell you all that.

What you need at a funeral is to be reminded that while that loved one was yet a sinner, Christ died for them. That while they were yet sinners, the Father lavished his love upon them and called that person his child. And so they are. That's the kind of preaching that gives you hope. And that hope is another one of those bottom-line issues that defines a Lutheran funeral.

Because the world doesn't know Christ. And so the world doesn't know what happens when we die. And it throws around the word "hope" in a very wishy-washy way. And so the world says things like, "I hope he's in a better place now... I hope she's not in pain anymore... I hope she's looking down on me right now."

That's not hope. That's wishful thinking. It's using the word "hope," but it's actually tinged with a lot of doubt and despair. Because they just don't know. And that is terrifying and saddening and not at all hopeful.

When Christians use the word "hope" we use it in a completely different way. We use the word hope with certainty. With confidence. Listen to the confidence with which John speaks in this reading.

*"Beloved, we are God's children now."* No doubt. No hesitation. This is not John saying, "I hope I'm God's child. And I hope you are too." We are God's children. We are reborn of water and the Spirit. We are called by the Father in Holy Baptism. We are covered by the blood of the Lamb. We are God's children.

And because we are God's children, *"what we will be has not yet appeared."* There is more to this life than what we see. There is a life that exists after life. There is a heaven and earth that exists after all this passes away. We haven't seen all that there is yet. So don't despair. What we will be has not yet appeared.

*"But we know that when he appears we shall be like him."* We know these things with absolute certainty: that when he appears – not if – when he appears, we will be like him. We will be like Christ. In what way will we be like Christ? We will be risen from the dead. We will be alive forever more. We will be the sinless children of God, just as the Father has called us to be.

And so we hope with certainty. We hope with confidence. And in that hope we are purified. Which is the third bottom-line issue that defines a Lutheran funeral. *"Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."*

If you've ever heard one of my funeral sermons, you'll notice that I actually do talk about the person who died, a little bit. And, in fact, I will even mention a good work or two that they did in their life. They were a good mother. They were a good officer in the church. They were a good citizen in their community.

Isn't that a contradiction? Didn't I just say that you didn't need me telling you about their good works and that a Lutheran funeral should be about what God did for them despite their sinfulness? I did say that.

But I'm not bringing those things up to say that they were saved by their good works. No, not all. I'm bringing those things up to say that they were purified by their hope in the Lord. Their hope in Jesus Christ changed them for the better. It made them a better mother or a better officer in the church or a better member of their community. You could see the purity of Christ shining through what they did.

In death we are saints. Nothing more, nothing less. We are saints around the throne of God, with our robes washed clean by the blood of the lamb. But in life we are also saints. Simultaneously saints and sinners, yes. But still saints. Sometimes we only see the sinner. We only see the hate or the greed or the doubt that needs to be repentance and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

But every once in a while, we see the saint. And it's OK to acknowledge that. In fact, it's good to acknowledge that. It's good to praise God that he used this sinful human being to do a saintly thing. Like be a good mother or officer in the church or citizen in the community. Because if God could use a sinner like them, then he can use a sinner like you too.

*"Everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."* Those who have died in their Lord and now rest from their labors, and those here on earth, who continue to labor. We are all purified in our hope. We are all made saints in the work of Christ and the promise of paradise. And that is the bottom-line. Amen.