

## Gospel - John 1: 1-18

### Christmas 1

Sermon 12.27.20

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John, the Gospel writer, declares that **“WE HAVE ALL RECEIVED, GRACE UPON GRACE.”** That indeed is an amazing fact and an amazing promise.

Paul states in his letter to the Galatians, that God has adopted us into his family as his own dear children.

The Greek word for adoption, *huiothesia*, is a legal term for being recognized as a mature son over a household with all the rights, responsibilities and privileges of the ruling father.

Think about the status of the older brother in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. The father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” This older brother had been legally brought in and adopted as a co-equal manager along with his father.

Pretty amazing we have been gifted such a high position in the coming reign of Christ. As John describes, “From his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.”

Grace heaped upon grace. Another way to say it: the same measure of grace God accords his Son is the measure he’s meted out to you.

All of today’s readings remind us it’s not our own strength, but God’s power that blesses, strengthens, fills, gives, and grants peace. God creates family, not because we are God’s blood relatives but through adoption. In baptism we are claimed, redeemed, and forgiven. We receive wisdom and are lavished with grace. We are sealed with the Holy Spirit. We receive an eternal inheritance. Through God’s powerful gift, we are gathered up and become children of God and children of light.

Father Steve pointed out on Christmas Eve that in John’s gospel the shepherds, the angels, the holy family and manger—they are all absent.

But the gospel writers all agree, you can’t tell the story of Jesus without John the Baptist. You simply must have the one who comes solely to point others to Jesus. It is our calling as well. We who are forgiven and redeemed, we who are claimed and called—we are the ones who point to Jesus. We do this with our lives; with our words. We point to Jesus when we feed the hungry, when we invite others to know the gift of grace. We point to Jesus when we allow the holy light of the season to shine through all we do and are.

All that gets me to be thinking about the claim that God through Christ has made on our lives. Beginning when we were baptized, God fixed his eternal mark on us, declaring, “You are mine forever.”

“My sheep hear my voice,” Jesus promises. “I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.” (John 10:27-29.)

God's claim on us precludes any and all effort on our part. "He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:5-6.)

I mentioned to you this week about my stage four cancer friend who intended to pass before the year's end in case the tax laws might change. He got his wish and slipped away in his sleep early on Christmas morning.

Another friend emailed to report his death. "Not necessarily a believer," he wrote, "but he was [definitely] a servant."

Later he added, "I should correct what I said. I don't know about the believer matter, but I absolutely know he was a servant."

So I replied back that he was "a servant indeed. And that's how he expressed his faith. And that's how you do, too. I think of you both as better believers than I will be."

Why? Because in life they both have demonstrated their faith in sincere service to the community in ways I could never match.

It is important to us, and important indeed, to be able to articulate our faith with words. We are careful to do this when we confess the Nicene Creed when we gather.

What is important to God, however, is not so much our claim on him or our claim about him—in confessing the creed for example—but rather God's claim on us—the claim of grace lavished upon grace.

"I have loved you with an everlasting love;" God speaks through Jeremiah, "therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." (Jeremiah 31:3.)

Paul writes that even "if we are faithless, [even *when* we are faithless,] he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself," (2 Timothy 2:13.)

Our claim to Christ is thus Christ's claim on us. God loves us first. (1 John 4:19.)

Jesus Christ has been exalted by the Father to the rank of Lord over All. John reports Jesus is "God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart."

But then God adopts *us* into the same sonship, and we are made close to the Father's heart as well. That is God's own claim, conferred and established by God's own authority.

Martin Luther describes our newly adopted position like this:

"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

But we do fail in our dual role of God-given lordship and God-given servanthood. In this regard we are still sinners, every one of us. This is why we are bold to confess our sins whenever we come together:

The wonder we celebrate at Christmas is that the Word continues to dwell among us—that Living Word of Forgiveness and Restoration—no matter—or even in spite of—

who we are  
or what our condition;  
or our past mistakes,  
or our ethnicity,  
or gender identity,  
or level of education,  
or poverty,  
or lack of housing,  
or anything else—

Christ comes among us in the gathered assembly, in the scriptures, in the waters of new birth, and in the bread and the wine. Through such ordinary gifts we receive the fullness of God's grace and truth.

So we confess. So we receive. So we taste very forgiveness in the presence of Christ at the holy table. "We taste and see the Lord is good." We remember our baptism. In the memory of Christ's exaltation we are renewed in our own adoption as sons in the holy family of heaven.

According to Kathryn Kleinhans, "Some religious traditions distinguish between saints, who obey God's will, and sinners, who disobey. Others set apart saints as super-holy people. Regular Christians like you and me aren't particularly bad, they would say, but we haven't done anything extraordinary enough to be called saints.

"Being a saint isn't about what I do or don't do but about who I am in relationship with God."

Sinners and saints both are our identity. Our identity in the race of Adam & Eve is sinner. Our adoptive identity in Christ is saint.

We're sinful because we have strayed from God's just and loving ways and made the world a big mess. Left to our own ways, we are surely lost.

But then God's way is to claim back through Christ and forgive us, even in spite of ourselves.

We are sinners because we fail and seek forgiveness. We are saints because we are mercifully forgiven. And always it is God who loves us first. It's the only reason why we have any capability to love God back. "We love him, because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19.)

O what an amazing discovery and a freedom to be able to love God back!—especially to be enabled to love and serve God by loving our neighbor.

When you know you have nothing you can lose, then you are set free to be much more tenderhearted toward those who aren't yet able to think the same way. You know you have been forgiven, O so deeply forgiven; so it is possible to learn to love, forgive and welcome and include, to serve and to heal. It is the power of Christ exuding from his—and your—exalted position.

And that is very good news.