

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, December 28, 2008.

I've just returned from visiting with family as I am sure some of you have. I see some of your families visiting with us today. Welcome. Christmas gives many of us the opportunity to gather with family we have not seen in a while. I remember as a child going to visit my grandparents on Christmas and having a distant uncle or cousin say something like, "you must be one of those Hensley's" or "Look at that curly hair. Just like your grandmother." These family get togethers remind us of our parentage. They remind us that although we eventually grow up, we will always be known as somebody's child. We will always be identified in some way by our childhood. "You must be Linda's boy." This morning we gather together in this church for a different kind of family reunion. This morning, the lessons from Galatians and John remind us that those who believe are also children of God. God has given us the gift of Christ, the Word made flesh, so that we might have the freedom and the ability to become God's beloved children.

This is God's amazing Christmas gift. We often imagine this gift coming as the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, a little bundle of joy for the whole world. But the Gospel according to John which we heard this morning does not describe that part of the story. In these first verses we hear not about a baby but about the Word, the Word of God which was present from the beginning in creation. We hear not about shepherds and angels, but about the light, the light which shines in the darkness, the true light, coming into the world, which enlightens everyone. And it is this light of Christ who reveals who we really are, God's beloved children.

But even though this light came into the world, some people had trouble seeing. The scripture says, "He was in the world, yet the world did not know him, did not recognize him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not receive him." This light, this amazing gift of God, walked around among us, talked to us, and still we could not accept the gift. Jesus showed up ready to set us free, but some people had trouble believing.

I think we can relate. Most of us have probably have times when we have difficulty believing. We may have trouble buying this whole idea of Christ as the Word in the beginning with God and wrapping our hearts and minds around all those mystical concepts of who Christ is. But even if we get that, we might still have trouble believing that we are really children of God. Little ol' me? A child of God? I think one reason why we struggle is because as children we are given so many identities. We spend the rest of our lives trying to figure out who we really are. It goes back to the family gathering where people said, 'Oh you must be a Hensley.' Being a Hensley came with a lot of history and expectations about how I would live my life, the choices I would make, and the kinds of people I would associate with. These childhood identities come with a lot of history and expectations. Well, whose child are you? What names do you go by? All of us have a family name or names that we claim, but there are other names. Some of us are known as children of divorce or children of alcoholic parents. Children of the South. Children of the Great Depression. Children of the Sixties...flower children? Are you a child of poverty? Are you a child of noble and high birth? Were you a latchkey child, a troubled child? Were you a gifted child? Or perhaps a special needs child? Or were you just an "average" child? All of these identities from our childhood come with history and expectations. In other words, they come with "baggage." And even as adults, we are walking around carrying these things we were told about ourselves as children. If you were told you are a "gifted" child, then as an adult you still cope with the

inner voices telling you that you have to be the best, got to be at the top of the class. If you were told that you were a special needs child, perhaps you are still walking around with voices telling you that you need help, that you can't do it on your own. Or if you were just an average child, then you are carrying around those voices saying, "oh, whatever!" But these voices stay with us. This is why family gatherings can sometimes make us crazy. We get with the people who have known us since we were "this tall" and they start telling us, "Oh, you're the middle child, I know all about you." And although we're trying not to let it control us, trying not to let it influence us, sometimes we get triggered. We go on automatic pilot. So no wonder we sometimes have trouble accepting that we are God's children. We are still busy figuring out what it means to be human children.

The grace is that being a child of God does not come with the same kind of baggage. It comes with history and expectations, but that history and those expectations are not supposed to weigh us down. They are supposed to set us free. And the history is this: that God made us good. This is why the Gospel writer of John takes us back to the very beginning, because in the beginning the Word was with God and the Word presided with God over the creation, the creation in which God made us and said, "it is very good." We are good, created in the image of God. That's the history and the expectation: that we would live into the goodness that God made us for. Not goodness according to being the child of such and such parent or the goodness of being from such and such place or in such and such birth order or such and such such and such! No, the goodness according to being made in the image of God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us so that we could see, touch, and hear that message of our goodness in human form, so that we could see it, so that we could lay down the half-truths we have been told about ourselves, so that we can believe the whole truth, through Christ, that we can be children of God.

In order to receive our inheritance all we have to do is believe, scripture says. Believe in the name of Jesus Christ. Believe that God would love us so much, that God would become one of us, a person with a name and a face and a heart, so that we might remember who we really are.

It can be hard to believe sometimes. It can be hard to accept this gift. The good news is that God is on our side. God wants us to believe, and the scripture tells us that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. When God became one of us, God opened our hearts in a way that they have never been the same since. I believe that when God entered this world, there was a shift in the very fabric of our being. There was a transformation in our human existence. Somehow our hearts were opened in a way that we could believe. And even though we may rarely if ever feel that shift, even though we may rarely if ever understand how that transformation happens, it is real. It is real. And we can believe it. We can accept this Christmas gift. Even though it is hard sometimes to believe.

I think the process begins by looking at all of the baggage we are carrying around. A first step, maybe, is to be aware of all of those other childhood identities, to think about and reflect on all of the half truths we have accepted about ourselves and then to stop trying so hard to become those half-truths. Stop trying so hard. Another step is to gather together with this family, in this place, to remind ourselves through singing together and praying together and coming to a table together that the whole truth is that we are children of God. "Hey, you look like a child of God. You must be one of those children of God. I can see it." And as we come together, we humbly ask God, again and again, for the light, the light that has already been given and is being given even now, the light of Christ. God give us the light so we can see the whole truth. Give us the light so we can see how you delight in us. Give us the light to see how we are made in your image. Give us the light...so that as your children we can claim our inheritance and give the gift of your love, your peace, your justice and your freedom to the whole world.