

Feast of All Saints • November 5, 2017

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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1 John 3:1-3

“What Kind Of Love”

This past week on Halloween – or the evening of Reformation Day 500, as some of us liked to think of it – I went out trick-or-treating with my children in our neighborhood. We had a fun time walking around, going up and down our block and seeing how folks had decorated their homes. (I think my eldest most enjoyed being able to go from house to house and get all kinds of candy, but that’s probably true for pretty much all trick-or-treaters.) A few of the fancier places set the tone with tombstones out in their front yard and along the walkway to the front door. Some of those tombstones had humorous inscriptions, others were simply spooky decorations that accompanied the bats and skeletons that greeted the evening’s guests.

If you think about it, though, a single tombstone isn’t really all that scary. It’s simply a marker, a reminder that someone has died and (usually) is buried in that place, and sometimes, they’ll tell you just a little bit about that person’s life. Even a lot of tombstones together, as at a cemetery, isn’t really scary, either. Rows of tombstones like the ones you’d see up at Arlington National Cemetery convey solemnity and evoke respect, not fear. There’s something else that makes tombstones scary. It’s not the marker itself; it’s the truth that the tombstone represents: death is real, and it comes for us all.

In a cemetery, the truth of death is all around you. If you’re like most people in modern day America, you probably don’t have to think about that truth all that much. Our culture seeks to insulate you against the inevitable reality of death, encouraging you to think about all the ways you can eat, drink, and be merry today. It’s usually only in exceptional situations that the cold truth of mortality breaks through that insulation. Illness takes the life of a loved one. Senseless violence strikes innocent people, as it did again with this past week’s terror attack in New York and the supermarket shooting outside of Denver. Cemeteries make clear the reality of death. But there’s something else there, too: the truth that, generally speaking, those people were loved enough to be remembered.

How loved are you?

What’s the quantity and quality of the love that you experience? How do you measure it? Can you? You might jump straight to thinking about the feeling of love, what it’s like to have a bond with your parents or friends or spouse or “significant other.” Or maybe you think about how you are feeling a lack of love – or that you don’t think that you’re good enough to be loved. Beyond the feeling of love, though, there’s the experience of love in action: how other people are caring for you, encouraging you, being there for you. This kind of love, the active kind, might be happening even if you aren’t feeling it. So how loved are you?

Our sense of love has gotten wrapped around our sense of self. Love of self runs rampant through our society; how has it worked its way into your life? You might hear that you need to love yourself, but what does that even mean? In a culture that encourages people to see themselves as lacking, not as good as others but simultaneously super-deserving, love of self is never going to be enough to get the job done. You and I need real love, love that’s going to make a difference in a world of tombstones.

“*See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*” (1 John 3:1)
What is the quality and the quantity of the love that God has for you?

God’s love is self-giving. *Agape* (ἀγάπη): that’s the word the apostle John uses for God’s active love. It’s the kind of love which pours out for the good of the other. It the love that moved God to create all things. It’s the love that moved God to promise a Savior after humanity fell to sin. It’s the love that moved the Father to send His Son into our human flesh to live the life that you and I could not live. It’s the love that moved the Son to suffer and die in our place. It’s the love is here for you to welcome you into the Son’s resurrection victory over sin and death. What is the quality of the love that God has for you? It is self-giving love. Why does God love you this way? You don’t deserved to be loved. But you are! You are loved by God, regardless of what others think of you, regardless of what you think about yourself.

What is the quantity of God’s love? Beyond measure. So much so that He makes you to be His own child. That’s not a metaphor! As John reminds us, God gives a new identity with the gift of faith. Our heavenly Father brings you into the family of the Church as brothers and sisters of Christ. You are a part of something greater than yourself, something that stretches beyond the time and space in which we find ourselves.

Last Sunday afternoon, people from all over our circuit here in northern Virginia gathered up at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Herndon for a special worship service marking the 500th anniversary of the launch of the Lutheran Reformation. It was pretty glorious. We heard the truth of God's gracious, *agape* love proclaimed. Choirs composed of singers and instrumentalists from many congregations, including our own, sang out that truth. After the service, talking with a fellow pastor, I remarked that it was disappointing that most of the people in our congregations don't often get to see the larger body of Christ gathered in person – we church workers get to gather for worship at circuit, district, and synod events fairly regularly. Even if we might not see it, that's what you and I get to experience whenever God calls us together as His people, as family in Christ.

This weekend as our congregation observes All Saints Day, we get to remember and celebrate the kind of love that God has for you and me and all people: gracious, self-giving love, love that brings us together, love that makes us His children and brothers and sisters of our Savior, love that is even more powerful than death. Look at today's text from Revelation 7 and consider that great crowd of the saints, those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, who gather around God's throne to celebrate Jesus' victory. Today, you will get to join all those saints, those who have gone before us in the faith, those gathering around with us at the Lord's table in Holy Communion.

Today, we celebrate with all the saints the victory of the Lamb over death. Because of God's self-giving love, the tombstone has no power over you. Life eternal in Christ is yours now: as saints, people redeemed by the Lamb, you go from death to life in a world broken by death – **but it will not break you.**

You are called children of God. You are family. Live out your identity as family by God's gracious power. Bring the care, compassion, and solace of God's self-giving love to those who have lost loved ones in this world riddled with tombstones. Point them to the hope that you have in the resurrection that Jesus brings for you and for them, that day when you and all the saints will be raised in body and soul, imperishable and free from the curse of sin and all its effects. We will be like Jesus, the firstborn from the dead. In that day, death will be buried forever.

As we celebrate the feast of All Saints, come and know the quality and quantity of God's gracious, self-giving love that is here for you. You are a child of our Father in Heaven. You are a member of Christ's family. You are people of the resurrection.

How loved are you!

Amen.