

## LOVE MAKES US GOD'S CHILDREN

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1 John 3:1-3

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Community Church Congregational of Corona del Mar

1 John 3:1-3 (NIV translation)

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Labels have been used to define and divide human beings from one another since the beginning of time. But John's letter invites us to take on a label meant to connect, rather than divide, to pull us into communion and community with one another: ***Dear friends, now we are Children of God.***

But over the years, even that label "Children of God" has all too often been used to divide us. Are Christians the only children of God? Are faithful Jews children of God? Are Muslims children of God? Are Buddhists children of God? Are spiritual people who claim no religion God's children? Even within the Christian community, we have a long history of deciding who's in and who's out. Some say Catholics are the only children of God. Or, Catholics are *not* real children of God. Are you Methodist or Presbyterian, Congregational or Baptist? Oh, you're Irish – Protestant or Catholic? All the while forgetting that John's letter defines our membership into God's family very clearly – and in a way that has nothing to do with these labels that divide.

***Love is what makes us God's children. Love is the only label we need.***

This is the only label God wants for us: The label of love. This is the new commandment that Jesus came to proclaim: that love is the only label that matters. But this “love label” begins first and foremost not as a command, but as a gift to us from God. **God’s** love makes us God’s children. It’s not our love that makes us children of God. It is God’s love. God’s love -- not something we do, not something we have to be, but something we just get to receive. This is grace at its very best. Love, pure and simple; God’s love, pure and unconditional; God’s love, pulling us in and binding us together as God’s very own children.

We don’t have to do anything to earn it, to deserve it, or force it to happen. It just is. That’s what we call grace. That’s what we remember every time we take Holy Communion. Love given to us no matter. Love given to everyone no matter what. And just like we don’t have to earn it, we can’t actually chase it away. God’s love is still right here, all the time, no matter what, ready to wrap us up and pull us in to a community called the children of God.

Now, being God’s people wasn’t always understood this way. In ancient times, people drew pretty clear dividing lines to make sure that their label was the only label that made them God’s people. The ancient Greeks called upon Zeus for strength and power. The Romans depended on Jupiter, their god of light and sky, for protection and power. The ancient Egyptians believed their all-powerful God Re lived in their own human Pharaohs, and insisted that citizens and slaves worship and obey Pharaoh. Even in our Judeo-Christian tradition, even we thought of ourselves as “God’s chosen people,” beginning with God’s call to Abraham through God’s call to Moses through God’s blessing of King David the ancestor Jesus, specially chosen and set apart to bless the nations and be a light for all the world. In ancient times, our ancestors took authority from these labels to divide – and then, not just to divide, but to wage wars in God’s

name, conquer and enslave people with the “wrong” labels. Name almost any world religion, Christianity included, and you’ll discover that even in God’s name, we have times in our history when we have labeled some children more valuable than other children – even within our own faith community. In ancient Israel, Priests and Kings were deemed more important than teachers and farmers. Ancient Hinduism demanded that people work only within the caste into which they were born, regardless of their talents, abilities, or interests – and they were judged of certain spiritual worth according to that caste. And Christianity in the Middle Ages was notorious for deeming the richest landlords as head priests and bishops and “saved,” regardless of their religious training or spiritual depth.

God’s people were never meant to be limited or divided by a name or a title or a label. We are simply meant to love. Jesus lived this lesson, preached this lesson, and proclaimed this lesson so prominently that it eventually got him killed. People can get really caught up in preserving their labels.

But labels that divide us are not of God. Love is the only label, and this label is meant to actually unify us in God. This isn’t an easy lesson. It wasn’t an easy lesson for those first Christians. Many of our Disciple Band Bible Study groups are working their way through the Book of Acts. It’s a book about the first days and years after Jesus’ death, as the Holy Spirit started moving and guiding Christ’s followers to proclaim and teach Christ’s lessons of love, and to begin forming communities that would eventually be called “churches.” About halfway through that book, even those first followers of Christ have to wrestle with the label question. Do non-Jews get to be part of the community? After all the 12 disciples were all Jewish, as was Jesus. Good, card-carrying, circumcised Jewish men – or so we’re told! The women named in

the Gospels also come from the Jewish community. Those Jews were Jesus' people. While Jesus preached and taught, he extended barriers to include Jewish people who were outcast from their community – lepers, Samaritans, women caught in sin, men haunted by demons. But still, it was mostly a Jewish crowd.

But as the early church formed, there were non-Jews (Gentiles) in the crowd, more and more often, because Jesus hadn't limited his ministry to just Jewish people. When Jesus walked and taught, there always seemed to be a Roman soldier in the crowd, a Gentile woman asking for healing, or a traveling stranger asking for help. Jesus kept extending his ministry even further – to a Canaanite woman, to a Roman centurion, and perhaps even to Pilate and all who took part in crucifying him when he called down from the cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus lived and taught that *love* is what defines us.

And so, there comes this turning point in the Book of Acts when those followers have to decide, "Does everyone have to be Jewish to be on this journey of following Christ?" They had assumed the answer would be "Yes," but Holy Spirit spoke and kept speaking until they finally realized and agreed – despite some pretty hefty arguments and debates about it – that Christ's message wasn't just for Jews. Being a follower of Christ isn't even about being Jewish. And so, that early group of Jewish followers of Jesus began to see themselves simply as followers of Jesus, "Christians" as they were labeled by others, and the name stuck. But even the name "Christian" was never given to us by God. Perhaps God never even meant for us to have a name or a label other than "children of God." Now days, lots of names are ours – church, Christian, community, religion, disciples, followers. These labels, even the nice ones, are not God's labels. These labels are not what make us God's children. *God's love makes us God's children.* And

that love places us firmly in the household where we most belong: the household of God, the family of God, the children of God. In this household, we are built on a foundation of love. Anything else is just a house of cards, and though a house of cards can be kind of fun to build and look pretty cool for awhile, it eventually will crumble, because it's not a household of God. Any faith, any religion, any label you can put together is nothing more than a house of cards, if that faith, that religion, that label is not built on a foundation of love.

But the good news is that God's love is our foundation, and we don't have to *do* anything to be a part of the household built on that foundation. So, building a household that is strong and true is ours for the making, if we simply build from this foundation of God's love. To build that household, we get to do something kind of fun. We get to love: love God, love each other, love strangers, even love ourselves. God's love is here, the foundation for everything that makes us who we are as the children of God. The foundation is here, ready, waiting, yearning to strengthen our lives, to strengthen our church, to strengthen our world. From that foundation, we *can* build a house of love.

When people ask me, "How do you help churches re-build after a time of trouble?" Or, "How do you help churches grow?" Or, "What's the secret to being a successful church consultant?" there's only one answer: Love. Love is the power that turns troubled situations around, the grows people and churches into even more beautiful and fuller beings, and strengthens anyone's ministry. Whether it's as church consultant, pastor, musician, or corporate executive, love is the foundation of anything successful that can stand the test of time. Love is that powerful. And God's love is all the power we need to build a strong family of God, because God's love is enough to make each and every one of us a child of God.

This means that we get to love, just as freely as God loves us – without labels or boundaries or divisions. Because God’s love makes us God’s children, we get to be God’s family. John’s entire first letter picks up this powerful aspect of love, reminding us that love is the power that binds us together as God’s children. We are family because of love—God’s love for us, our love for God, and our love for one another. This triad of love is like a three-part dance: God dances with each of us, then God invites us to dance with one another, and then together we dance with God. This dance of love creates a synergy that transforms us into a community known as the body of Christ. As we live this love in community together, we become the body of Christ. Christ is in our very midst every time two or three of us gather together in love. Christ shines through our very lives because love shines through our very lives. Resurrection is real, because Christ’s love continues to live through us and through our communities of faith. So let’s come to the communion table today and celebrate this resurrection truth. God is love, inviting us to be love itself. And when we accept this invitation of love, we become the children of God—children of love, dancing with God and dancing with one another, to bring God’s love to life.