

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Southampton, New York**  
*“Do We Really Realize what it means for  
Us to be Children of God”*

**Acts 2:1 – 21**

**Romans 8:14 – 17**

**Pentecost**

**May 15, 2016**

*“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”*

You know, that’s probably one of the most meaningful and important affirmations in the entire Bible... this idea that you and I are actually *children of God! We...* are God’s own sons and daughters!

Throughout the Scriptures, our relationship with the Lord is described in many ways. For example, we’re told that we’re the sheep... and He’s the shepherd; that we’re the servants... and He’s the master; that we’re the disciples... and He’s the teacher. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” and we are the ones who follow His lead. The gospels tell us that God is the great king of all that is... and we are the subjects of His kingdom. And Jesus even describes Himself in the Gospel of Matthew as a hen... who wants to gather her brood, *us*, under her wings!

So, there’s a lot of ways to describe, or depict, or portray the nature of the relationship which exists between us and our God. But the picture that we see this morning, this understanding that God is the Father, the Parent... and we are His children; is maybe the most significant of them all. And this is an idea, an understanding of our relationship with God, that doesn’t just show up once... like, in our Romans text for today. No, the Bible is positively full of examples of *people*, just like you and me... described as in some way being children of Almighty God.

Again, a few examples. In the Old Testament, God repeatedly refers to the entire Israelite nation as “my son.” In the book of Second Samuel, God says to King David, in reference to David’s son, Solomon, “I will be his father, and he will be my son.” The prophet Isaiah, proclaims that “O Lord, thou art our Father.” And the Psalmist, in Psalm 68, describes God as “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows.” In the New Testament, in the Sermon on the Mount, when His disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, He begins by instructing them to say, “Our Father... who art in heaven.” Elsewhere in that same Sermon, Jesus encourages His listeners to have no anxiety because their “heavenly Father knows” what they need. And Jesus, the Son of God, describes as His “brothers and sisters” anyone who “does the will of my Father in heaven.”

And one of my favorite biblical references to our standing as God’s children, one that we affirm every time we do a baptism in this church, comes to us from the First Epistle of John: “*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*” Many more examples could be cited, but hopefully this makes it abundantly clear that, from a biblical and theological perspective, you and I and all people who love the Lord are, in fact, considered to

be *God's children*. And that is a designation which, I believe, we usually accept with great joy and gratitude... as we should.

Which is all fine and good; but the question of the day for us this morning is: what difference does it make? How is that identity supposed to affect us, move us, change us, inspire us? What does it *mean* for you and me to be card-carrying children of Almighty God?

I don't know that we spend a lot of time thinking about that question, and reflecting on it. I think most of the time we probably just accept it, take it for granted, and file it away on some shelf in our soul somewhere... just another pretty ornament to hang on the tree of our Christian faith. But I think that our identity as children of God is important; I think it *is* worth pondering about; and I think that it really does *mean* something to the way in which we go about living our day to day lives as disciples. And what I want to do with my remaining sermon time is to briefly consider just a few of the ways in which being a "child of God" matters to our ongoing life of faith.

And, first of all, we need to remember the deep *intimacy* that's implied by describing our relationship with God as that between a Father and a child, a parent and a child. This is no forensic, sterile, philosophical relationship; a matter of just beliefs, and concepts, and opinions. No, this is a relationship of love, and grace, and presence in which the God we serve really knows us, and cares about us.

To say that God is our Father, and that we are His children, is to say that what happens to us, matters to Him; that what we do, or don't do, matters to Him; that the way we feel *about* Him, matters to Him; that being in a living, breathing, interactive relationship with Him, matters to Him. If God is our Father, and we are His children, then we know that God isn't just "out there" somewhere, distracted, uninterested, and basically just saying, "Ah, whatever!" when it comes to you and me! If God is our Father, then He's not too busy to notice us; He's not too involved with more important matters to think about us; and He's not some heartless deity who gets his kicks by jerking around with us.

The analogy isn't perfect, because you and I aren't perfect; but, those of us who are parents... think about the way in which we feel about our own children. Consider the care, the love, the concern, the interest with which we regard our own sons and daughters. I'm sure I speak for pretty much all of you, when I say that, when my kids were growing up, they were the most important thing in the world to Sylvia and me. We had other things going on in our lives, of course... but nothing, and I mean *nothing*, mattered more to us than the safety, and health, and happiness, and activities, and wellbeing of our children! And all of that still matters to us, obviously... but it's a little different now that they're both married and out on their own. But when they were still "kids..." our universe revolved around them. You know what I mean!

Well, in a very profound and powerful way, that's how our Heavenly Father regards *us*. He loves us. He cares about us. He's interested in us. When we're anxious or hurting, He wants to be there for us. He's often proud of us, happy for us, pleased with us. In God's eyes, we're not just numbers in a heavenly log book; we're not just wayward sinners who need a good zapping every once in a while; we're not just microscopic specks in an infinitely vast and complex universe. No, we are God's beloved, cherished, and highly valued... *kids!*

A little bit of the remarkably intimate nature of our relationship with God as our Father, is expressed in our lesson from Romans, when Paul writes: "*For you did not receive a spirit that*

*makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of Sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."*

Now, that word "Abba," is an Aramaic word which means "father." But some scholarly studies have suggested that it means not just "father," but something more like "dad," or "daddy." There's some debate about that among the New Testament experts... but, in any case, the mere suggestion that we might consider Almighty God to be something of a "daddy" to us, speaks volumes about the level of intimacy which exists between us and our Heavenly Father. So, that's the first thing that we mean when we say that we are children of God: we have an intimate, caring, loving **relationship** with God our Father.

A second thing that it means for us to be children of God, is that our Heavenly Father wants us to be in communication with Him; and He wants to be in communication with us. Or, to put it another way, being a child of God means that our life with Him is living, interactive, dynamic; not merely academic, ritualistic, and a matter of holding various opinions and beliefs. This is why things like prayer and worship are so important to our relationship with God. Worship and prayer, the things that we're doing this morning, and that we do on every Lord's Day... aren't just "motions" that we go through in order to satisfy some heavenly checklist. They're critically important ways by which we keep our hearts and minds open to the living presence of God in our lives.

God wants us to study Him, learn about Him, and understand Him to the best of our limited human ability; that kind of thing will always be important to our life of faith. But more than that, God wants us to seek Him, to talk to Him... and listen, and to trust that He is personally invested in our lives and in the lives of those we love. So that's a second important thing that we mean when we say that we are children of God: God is alive, and present, and active in our lives... and He wants us to be a living and active part of His life, too.

Finally, and this may be the most important thing of all that it means when we are described as children of God; and that is the fact that God loves us... and that He wants, more than anything, for us to love Him as well.

It's one thing for us to say that our relationship with God is personal and intimate; and it's another thing to say that our relationship with God is living and dynamic; but it's something else altogether to say that our relationship with God is founded on **love**, and sustained by **love**. Which can sometimes be a very hard concept for us to get our heads around; this idea that Almighty God, the Creator of the universe, actually loves **you... loves me...** in the same way that we love **our** children and other significant people in our lives.

I think that, most of the time, we can get at least a faint grasp on the concept that God really does forgive us for our sins; and many of us are hip to the idea that God has expectations about the way we're supposed to live; and too many of us probably have an overly developed sense of God being our judge, jury, and presumptive executioner. But to really, truly, understand and accept the fact that God **loves** us? That He takes us in His arms and holds us when we're scared and hurting? That He will stop at nothing to bring us into His presence... just because **we**, you and I, mean so much to Him? That's sometimes a really difficult thing for us to buy into... because we know our faults, and our sins, and our mistakes, and all the other reasons why we shouldn't be worthy of God's love.

We think that God might know us, and put up with us, and maybe even deal mercifully with us if we ask Him nicely to do so. But love us? Could it really, *really*, be true? Well, yes, it *is* true! And one of the ways in which that great and amazing truth is expressed... is by this idea that God is our Heavenly Father, and we are His beloved children.

Over the years there's been a movement in various theological circles, to do away with the whole "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" imagery... and replace it with "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer." The argument being that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is reflective of the paternalistic, male-dominated culture in which it was produced, and therefore might not be as helpful for people today. While the more gender and relationship-neutral "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer" is more palatable... as there is no gender expressed in the equation, but just the various "functions" of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The debate over this issue continues... and I am not without empathy for those who may not be moved, or touched, or blessed for whatever reason by the more traditional formulation. But my problem with the whole thing is that, there's something about the relationship between a parent and child, that's lost in the translation to the relationship between a creator and a creature. I mean, it's one thing for us to be the "product of God's creative action." But it's another thing entirely for us to be God's "children." You know what I mean?

Anyway, the point of it all is simply to say that, when we are described as God's children... we are to understand that we are God's beloved. And I mean, *greatly* beloved. Eternally beloved. More than anything else in all the world beloved. So that's a third thing that it means for us to be children of God: God loves us... and He wants us to love Him, too.

So, there you go. Three important things that it means for us to be children of God: our relationship with God is intimate and heartfelt; our relationship with God is active, living, and dynamic; and our relationship with God is based on love... God's love for us, and our love for Him. May we keep these truths in mind in the days ahead, as we go forth to live as God's faithful, and beloved, children! For that is our quest... and that is our life as disciples! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!