

“Children of God”

1 John 3:1-7

1 John 3:1 . . . “See what love the father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

Children. Grandchildren. Do we call them “grand” children because they are more grand than our children?

When I watch our two young grandsons 5 & 7 years old playing together, I notice that each of them believes they are more than they appear to be. When they received light sabers for Christmas and the lights were turned off in the kitchen, dining room, and living room which is all one huge room, their sabers burned bright as they were suddenly transformed into Yoda’s jedi’s in training, learning the ways of the force. Jumping on to furniture, the floor becomes red-hot lava to be avoided or die. When grandpa Darth Vader appears, breathing heavily, with a cardboard tube from wrapping paper as a sword, he is easily eliminated as his legs melt away in the lava after a hard-fought battle.

What looks like simple fun to them is actually vitally important work in a child’s development. Imaginative play develops important psychological and emotional capacities in children, helping them to learn how to solve problems, eliminate evil, create new possibilities, and — perhaps most importantly — develop the belief that they can one day change the world. Imagination transcends the limits of the present physical world and the limits of a child’s inner world, opening new ways of seeing and being.

Somewhere along the line, however, imagination begins to become less important than knowledge. As we get older, we tend to be more concerned with what *is* than what could be.

Education gives us amazing tools for learning about the present world and about ourselves, but sometimes that knowledge can begin to impose limits on our imagination and our capacity to think outside the box. It's not that knowledge is unimportant; it's that knowledge is limited without imagination. Albert Einstein, who most people would consider the avatar for the pursuit of knowledge, once said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world ... Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life's coming attractions."

What's true for education would also seem to be true for theology and the life of discipleship. We pursue knowledge of the Bible, knowledge of God, knowledge of doctrine — all important things — but sometimes we can become so enamored with that knowledge that we fail to cultivate an imagination of what God is actually wanting to do in us and through us. Plenty of biblical scholars aren't believers, for example. They have knowledge, but no imagination. We need both a strong foundation of the knowledge of God and a holy imagination to live out the vision for eternal life God has for us, both now and in the future.

Perhaps that's why John consistently refers to his audience as "children" in this "epistle" of 1 John, which is more of a homily. It's an invitation to cultivate a childlike imagination for the kind of life God has made possible for them in Jesus Christ.

Children have the ability to imagine a different kind of life. When my wife, Danette, sent two Valentine's Day cards with \$2 in each of them to our grandsons, they reacted very differently. Colton, the 7-year-old had a smile on his face as he held up the two ones and was thinking of buying a big donut with his. Cason, the 5-year-old, had a very serious look on his

face as he handed the \$2 to his brother with these words . . . “Here, you can have these. I don’t need money.” He was right. At this point in his life, he doesn’t need money, so why not give it away? So, he did!

Earlier in the homily, John lays out the difference between the accumulation of knowledge and the imagination that leads to action. It’s one thing to have the knowledge of the truth and say, “I am in the light” (John’s metaphor for walking with Christ). But if one cannot use that knowledge to imagine and demonstrate love for one’s brothers and sisters, that one “is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness” (1 John 2:9-11). “Antichrists” had slipped into the community, denying that Jesus is the Christ, and John urges the community to refute that falsehood with their “knowledge” (2:20). But that knowledge had to become activated in their imagination of who Christ is and who he called them to be: “If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him” (2:29).

Those who are born of him are indeed “children of God.” We might say that the children of God are the product of God’s own imagination going all the way back to creation when God created humankind in God’s own image (Genesis 1:26-27). In the prologue to the gospel of John (which was likely written by the same writer who penned 1 John), we read that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the perfect image of God, the one who has “made him known” to the world” (John 1:18). Those who receive him have been given “power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

All of this is at God's initiative, out of God's imagination, and through God's love. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are" (1 John 3:1). But we aren't merely God's children now, John goes on to say. We are to imagine something more. "What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (vv. 2-3). In other words, the children of God are to imagine that they can and will become like Jesus, the perfect image of God!

To put it another way, the children of God are to imagine themselves in the person of Jesus Christ and act accordingly. Like my grandsons dressed in the costumes of whatever hero they want to be, we are to "put on Christ," as Paul imagines in Galatians 3:27 . . . ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. As a child might imagine being a force for pure good in the world, children of God who imagine that they can be like Jesus also "purify themselves just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3).

And then there's the real superpower for those who believe. The more a child of God believes that they are in the mold of Jesus, the more power they have over sin. "You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin," says John. "No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous" (vv. 5-7).

This might sound less like imagination and more like delusion, given the human propensity for sin even among those who are striving hard for holiness. John admits earlier in the homily that sin is still a factor in the life of the believer: "If we say that we have no sin, we

deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). But sin doesn’t have to be the deciding factor. Indeed, the more we imagine ourselves being formed in the image of Christ through disciplines like prayer, immersion in the Scriptures, accountable relationships with other believers, and regular confession of sin, the less sin becomes a nemesis in our lives. As D. Moody Smith puts it, “The work of Christ brings about the birth from God that is freedom from sin, but a freedom that must be ratified continually by willing and doing what is right, as John never tires of urging.” Martin Luther urges us to remember every day that we are baptized children of God as we do daily battle with sin. When we consciously do that daily battle, then we sin less as we grow older and become more like Christ. When our children imitate us, they become more like us for good or bad. When we imitate Christ, we become more like Christ – a good thing always.

Here’s where imagination becomes critical for the children of God. If we cannot imagine that we can have victory over sin — that we are trapped in a never-ending addictive cycle of sin and repentance — then that’s a good indication that we aren’t living as the children of God, but rather as children of the devil, who “has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). If we believe we are born of God, however, we can imagine a life that is not dominated by the constant cycle of sin because our lives are modeled after Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The proof of our imagination is ultimately found in the results: “The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters” (v. 10).

A child at play believes he or she can be or do anything. A healthy imagination breeds creativity, confidence, and a vision for the best of what life can be. Imagination can lead to discipline in pursuit of an imagined goal, a focus on what to embrace and what to avoid in pursuit of that goal, and the imitation of the kind of people we want to be. Children of God need to cultivate a healthy imagination for the kind of people God created them to be — people modeled on Jesus Christ, who love God and one another — and then develop the habits and practices that get them there.

That's how we change and how God can use us to change the world!

May the peace of God . . .

#781 – Children of the Heavenly Father