

## Children of God's Love

### 3rd Sunday of Easter, Year B – 1 John 3:1-7

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, April 19, 2015*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.” I told you last week that the First Letter of John is one of my favorite books of the Bible. And this verse right here, 1 John 3:1, has to be one of my absolute favorite passages.

All y'all know that Jenny and I have children of our own. But most of you don't know, because none of you has any reason to be keeping track, that our older boy, J.D. is celebrating his 30th birthday this week. Now, never mind how old that makes me feel when I really do the math, I have spent much of this week looking at my favorite passage in the Bible, and thinking about what it means to be a father.

James Dawson Martindale, though we debated in right up until the last minute, Jenny called him J.D. before I could call him Jimmy, came into the world, as they say, at Baynes-Jones Army Community Hospital at Ft. Polk, Louisiana, thirty years ago this Wednesday. One look at him and I knew that I was born to be a father. Jenny was a card-carrying, sign toting, class teaching member of the breast feeding militia, and J.D. quickly grew out of some early concerns for his health to become an efficient and prolific eating and pooping *machine*. He's still an adventuresome eater, and his birthday trip to San Francisco this weekend was partly built around acquiring one of the best lobster rolls in Northern California. But his first taste of solid food did not go particularly well.

Shortly after our son had developed his first two teeth, Jenny and I were enjoying a meal at one of Leesville, Louisiana's finer eating establishments – I think it was the Ponderosa – and one of us decided we would let our boy try out his new chompers on a baby carrot from the salad bar. He very much enjoyed working on that carrot, but his system apparently rebelled at the prospect of anything so solid. Such rebellion became apparent in a projectile stream that shot across the aisle to the (thankfully) empty booth across the aisle in full Linda Blair style. I was never particularly fond of having to clean up baby spit-up, much less great streams of it. But I loved my son, so I really didn't mind helping, *whenever* he bit off more than he could chew.

By a few years, and another child later, the Army had moved the Martindale family to Germany, and I as the father of two sometimes *very* active boys, had to lay down some rules. Why the PX in Baumholder would put their collection of no-doubt profitable, and certainly highly breakable, porcelain figurines right inside the main entrance I will never know, but we had a rule that when we went shopping together, the boys were to immediately put their hands in their pockets and leave them there until we left the store. One day in particular, the limits of that rule became apparent as I looked down to find J.D.'s arms shoved into the waistband of his shorts so far that his fingers were visible from the bottom of each leg. I quickly looked around in that way that embarrassed fathers do, and asked, “What are you doing?” My maybe-three-year-old grinned up at me, “Daddy, these pants don't *have* any pockets.”

J.D. did not always understand what I was trying to teach him, and sometimes he didn't *want* to understand. But I loved him, so I just *kept* telling him what I knew to be right, and I *kept* telling him, and I *kept* telling him – and I kept telling him I loved him.

My boys have generally gotten along okay, but J.D. has not always been kind to his brother, Kyle. In particular, he was never too fond of sharing. Each of you has probably formed a different mental image

of what he did not share, and *all* of you are probably right, because he didn't like sharing food, or clothes, or his mother's attention. But one of the earliest manifestations of that problem involved a Tupperware bin full of little Matchbox and Hot Wheels cars that I *think* Jenny and I still have. At less than a buck a piece (back then, that is), the cars were easy gifts to bring home, and by the time J.D. was four or so, he had quite the collection. In what I now regard as precursor to his adult strengths (he's the one with a PhD in applied mathematics), he would sort and categorize and organize for hours on end.

On the occasion that I remember, his toddler brother had other play plans for the cars, and J.D. did not like it. He first expressed his displeasure with the kind of shrieking one sees among other primates on those nature shows. When *that* did not work, he tried to sweep up his prizes and pull them out of the reach of the interloper. The somewhat surprised, though apparently undeterred Kyle simply crawled over to where the cars had been corralled and once again reached for whichever four-wheeled shiny had caught his fancy. That's about the time that I actually took full notice of the situation, just in time to see J.D. shove his brother out of the way hard enough that his head bounced on the (thankfully) carpeted floor. I snatched up wailing toddler as I looked disapprovingly at his older brother who looked back at me with what I think was the same look that was in Cain's eyes at *almost* the beginning of time. I never understood how brotherly love could apparently turn so quickly to its violent opposite, all too often over almost trivial matters. But I loved my sons, *both* of them, so I tried to make sure both of them *knew* that.

I had planned on telling a few more stories... uh, I mean sermon illustrations. But I really do try to keep my sermons within certain limits, so I'll just tell one more. It was a few years, four moves, and a big, big change in vocation later by the time J.D. and I had to face the biggest challenges to our relationship. I know some of it was just hormonal changes that mess with adolescent heads as much as with adolescent bodies. I know some of it was the evolutionary fallout of jockeying for the alpha position in the pack. I know some of it was resentment of being moved from friends and support system right in the middle of the difficult changes that go along with being thirteen and fourteen. But there for a while, my son was a real jerk. There were times when he was an even *bigger* jerk with his mother, but there were times when I really needed him to back out of my face because I *felt* like ending him.

On one occasion when I had had enough of his contempt and disrespect I had banished him to his room upstairs in St. Mark's Deanery. I'm not sure banished is the right word, considering he had more electronics in there than in the rest of the house. We had had the kind of rowel that in other times and in other cultures might have ended in physical violence between father and son. In this case, J.D. had sworn that he was *not* going to do what I commanded, and that he didn't have to put *up* with my arbitrary and unreasonable demands, but cursing and muttering all the way, he *had* gone to sit in his room to contemplate what *I* was fully convinced were the errors of his ways.

It must not have been more than ten minutes later that I needed to go upstairs to retrieve something from our bedroom, a route that went directly past the open door of my son's Elba. I was still fuming, and had no intention whatsoever of addressing my wayward and recalcitrant teenager, but as I walked by, I was hailed from the *sanctum sanctorum*. "Hey, Dad," came a calm, almost cheerful voice I hardly recognized, "Love you!" I have never gotten used to how quickly we can forget how much we care for each other. But I loved my son, so I was just happy when he turned around again to love *me*.

I have been James Dawson Martindale's father for thirty years. I haven't always been the best father, sometimes not even the best father I *could* be. He is, however, as he always *has* been, my child, and I love him. I love him as much today as I did when I first held him. And that's just me, a really, really poor imitation of the love that created everything that is.

"See what love the Father has given us," John said, "that we should be called children of God;" "and that is what we are." When we bite off more than we can chew, our Father loves us more than the stars of the universe. When we are not able to understand what he wants from us, and when we are not *willing* to understand, our Father loves us more than the night and the day. When we want what *we* want, and are willing to get it or to keep it by treating each other with indifference, or contempt, or even *violence*, our Father loves us more than this wide world. When we've turned to him to receive his love,

and to *return* his love, and to share his love, and even when we once again turn our backs on his love, our Father loves us with the love that left heaven to become one of us. Our Father loves us with the love that went to the Cross and the grave to pay *whatever* the cost for our love. Our Father loves us with the love that broke death's power and set us free to love him and to love one another in the power of the Resurrection.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!