

Date: November 1, 2020 *All Saints' Day*

Scripture: I John 3:1-3

Title: NFL

If I were to ask you to name someone whose character inspires you to be a better person, who would you name? I hope we all know someone, a parent, a teacher, a colleague, a neighbor, a church member, whose inspires us to live better lives.

This morning we celebrate All Saints' Day. It's a day to remember and honor all those believers who have passed away. We set aside this day to remember their examples of faith, character, love and service. And this is also the day when we remind ourselves, that we are called to be saints too. The word "saint" simply means "set apart for a special use."

All Saints' Day, is a reminder to us, that we are part of the worldwide Church, the family of God, that exists in Heaven and on earth. If we really understood that you and I are set apart for special use by God, it would transform our lives.

But before we can wrap our heads around the idea of being saints, we have to go back to the beginning of our relationship with God. Nobody is born a saint. Our first relationship with God is, as God's beloved children. Our Bible passage for today reads, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (I John 3: 1) Last week, we considered how much we're to love God, and our neighbor. Today, we want to consider how much God loves us.

God loves us so much, that He has given us our identity as His children.

What does it mean, to have a relationship with a God, who loves us? First, think about this: of all the world religions, only Judaism and Christianity reveal a God who wants to have a relationship with human beings. That's a critical part of our faith. But what kind of relationship? The relationship of a loving Father, with his child, or a loving mother, with her child. That's the image we see in the Bible. That's the kind of relationship Jesus had with God. The same kind of access and closeness that Jesus had with God, is available to us.

The Bible passage we're studying today, was written to a diverse group of believers, all throughout the Roman Empire. Many of these believers had been brought up, with an entirely different view of God. But, the idea of God as a loving Father/Mother, who gives us our identity as children, was life-changing to new converts in the early Christian church. I hope it's just as life-changing for us. God offers each of us love, without limits.

I read a story this week that made me think of what it means to be a child of God. It's about a dad named Wil Smith. No, not the actor and singer. This Wil Smith was serving in the Navy when he learned that his girlfriend was pregnant. He didn't want to be away from his child for months or years at a time, so he resigned from the Navy and enrolled in Bowdoin College.

A few months after Wil's daughter, Olivia, was born, Olivia's mother decided that she couldn't take care of her. Wil took over custody of Olivia. She was only a baby, but he brought her to class with him. He brought her to work with him, at his night job, and hid her in a closet while he cleaned offices. Wil was a member of the Bowdoin College basketball team. His basketball teammates were Olivia's first babysitters. Wil reports that taking care of Olivia gave him strength. He was working to create a better life for her.

By the time Wil Smith graduated from Bowdoin College, most of the students and faculty had witnessed the devoted love of this father for his daughter. So, it was no surprise when Wil carried Olivia in his arms, to cross the stage at graduation, or when the dean announced, "Wil and Olivia Smith" as graduating from the College. But it was a surprise when the whole student body, rose to give him a standing ovation.

Olivia Smith, has never had to question, her father's love. He built his life around raising her and providing for her. She refers to him as her "rock." And when Wil Smith was diagnosed with colon cancer, Olivia didn't hesitate to come home from college, to care for him. Sadly, Wil passed away in 2015, but he left behind a legacy of love, that will shape his daughter's identity, for the rest of her life.

Knowing that we're loved, that God wants us to have a relationship of trust and caring with us, is more than enough to give our life meaning and purpose. God loves us, so much, God has given us our identity as God's children. But, this passage promises a second gift.

God loves us so much, He has also given us our destiny. Our Bible passage says, that God is shaping us to be like Jesus. We can't know for sure what the future holds. And we can't know for certain, what eternal life will be like. But we know that God's plan is to use every moment of our lives, to create in us, the character and spirit and mind of Jesus.

There's nothing random or pointless about our lives. God is at work in the big and small moments of our lives, opening our eyes to new truths and new opportunities for love, service, insight, and wisdom. No experience in our lives will be wasted. Every experience, every moment, is a new opportunity to grow our character, to reflect more of Jesus.

Let me tell you about a man named Sam Yapa who came from Sri Lanka to the U.S. to attend college. Sam was not a Christian. In fact, Sam loved to argue with the Christians he met. He studied the Bible so he could debate them. He tried hard to convince his Christian classmates and professors that their faith was a big joke.

Everything changed for Sam in his junior year. He ran out of money and had to drop out of school. His girlfriend broke up with him. He lost hope for the future. One night, he sat in the college library and contemplated the different ways he could kill himself. And in his worst moment, Sam Yapa says that Jesus spoke to him. That's right. Jesus spoke to him.

As a consequence, Sam left the library and headed for the science building, hoping to find his biophysics professor. This professor was a devout Christian, and he had always been willing to share his faith with Sam, even when Sam showed contempt for him. The professor was working late that night, but he was eager to listen to Sam's experience and share his faith in Jesus with Sam. That night, Sam Yapa prayed to receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Sam says that he noticed God changing his heart and character right away. He stopped worrying about the future. Sam's friends and classmates noticed that his arrogance and anger changed into humility and gratitude. As he says, ". . . after my conversion, I felt humbled by God's power to change me . . . I was almost grateful for my struggles, because I knew God was using them to keep me humble and focused on God. I wanted people to think, 'Hey, if God can change the life of someone like Sam, I wonder what God can do in my life.'"

The Bible promises us, that on the day when we see Jesus, we will be like him, for we shall see Jesus as Jesus is. And Jesus' union with God, is our destiny too. We don't know for sure what eternal life will be like, but we know, that its source is found in God's presence and power.

Author Philip Yancey tells the story of the great scientist Sir Michael Faraday, whose work contributed to the world's understanding of electromagnetism. When Sir Michael was dying, some journalists questioned him as to his speculations about life after death.

"Speculations!" he said, "I know nothing about speculations. I'm resting on certainties. 'I know that my redeemer lives, and because He lives, I shall live also.'"

God loves us so much, God has given us our identity as God's children, as well as our destiny, to be like Jesus. But there's a third gift promised in this passage. **God loves us so much, that God has given us a sure hope, to empower us every day.**

How sad, is a person without hope. It's difficult to seek to do anything worthwhile, if you can't see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Trent Shelton was a star wide receiver on the football team at Baylor University. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't secure a permanent spot in the NFL. He got picked up and then cut from the Indianapolis Colts, the Seattle Seahawks and the Washington Redskins. After giving up on the NFL, Trent tried out for Arena Football, and the United Football League. Football was his life. It's where he found his identity and purpose.

When Trent finally did give up on football, he turned to drinking and partying to fill the emptiness in his life. And then, Trent's college roommate Anthony Arline, who had also failed to achieve an NFL career, took his own life. That's when Trent woke up, to the direction his life was taking. And so Trent began to pray. *God, who am I now without football? Why did you give me this dream, just to take it away?*

Then Trent smartened up. He decided to take a more positive approach to his life. He created a new rule for himself, that he would begin each day with prayers of thanksgiving to God. Regardless of what life was sending his way, he resolved to begin his day by thanking God.

This one act gave him a whole new perspective on his life. His despair changed to hope, as he saw God working in his daily life. He began reading his Bible and working out with a Christian friend. And he began posting short videos online sharing his spiritual and physical journey, out of hopelessness and failure, to a closer relationship with Christ. He got an opportunity to speak at a major youth gathering. And Trent discovered that God was using his failures and heartbreak to help others.

Not long afterwards, he came across an old Bible his mother had given him in high school. The front of the Bible had the letters NFL printed on the front. Trent had always assumed this was a sports-themed Bible. But when he opened it up, he saw the real title on the Bible flyleaf: New Found Life. NFL: New Found Life. God hadn't really taken away Trent's greatest dream. Instead, God had a better dream in store for his life. Today, Trent Shelton is a husband and father, and a successful author and speaker.

If you were a random collection of cells, in a meaningless universe, then you could ignore today's Bible passage. In fact, you could ignore everything I've said. You could create your identity and meaning, out of your achievements, or your image, or your family connections, or your possessions. But, what if you were made by a loving God, who wants a relationship of love, and trust with you? What if you are actually, a saint, set apart for the special purpose of knowing God, and sharing God's truth and love with others?

And, what if a loving God, has plans to give you a destiny of joy, and purpose far beyond anything you can imagine? Wouldn't that give you hope to face any circumstance in life? That's exactly what God wants for you. You can have a new found life, with a new identity, a new destiny, and a new hope. It all begins, with trusting and loving God, every moment of your life. Hey, that's a sure path to the NFL, a New Found Life! Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.