

October 29, 2017
1 John 3:1-3
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“Full Circle”

Good morning. At the end of October, we stand at a change of a season. We see this in the world of nature -- at least in the part of the globe where we live -- as leaves change color and fall, temperatures are cooler, and the balance of daylight and darkness tips toward longer nights. We're not the first culture to notice this, of course. Folks who depend on crops and livestock to survive, and who work outside everyday are especially attuned to the rhythm of the year. The cycle of the seasons is embedded in the development of our calendar, and also of our church year and those observances. These are also cycles which are embedded in our lives, and in our lives in Christ.

Let me give you an example: in the pre-Christian Celtic countries of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, October 31 was called a cross-quarter day: it lands at the mid-point between the first day of fall around September 21 and the beginning of winter around December 21. This was a culture which counted wealth in cattle: October 31 was the day the cattle were brought in to be sheltered for the winter, and there were bonfires to celebrate that night. Christianity took over that bonfire night as All Hallow's Eve, and designated November 1 as All Saints' Day.

But there's something deeper going on than just observing the changing of the season: the Celts believed that there was something sacred in times of transition: sunrise and sunset, one season to another, birth and death. Those transitions were called “thin places,” where the veil which separates our world from eternity is so thin we can almost glimpse beyond it. All Saints Day comes at a transition of the year and reminds us to pause at the threshold of life and death and glimpse the great cloud of witnesses which have gone before us,

and are no longer bound by the death and decay which are part of this world. It is also a reminder that transitions are an inevitable part of our lives, whether we welcome them or not.

I find it helpful to think of these transitions in terms of the human life cycle, or the rhythm we go through as families. The pastoral epistles of 1, 2, and 3 John are short, and we're not sure who wrote them -- they have language and themes that are much like the gospel of John. They caution against sin and tell us to follow the truth of Christ Jesus, but they are full of assurance and warmth. The author addresses us as Beloved, or little children, with the same affection we might speak to our own children -- or did when they were young enough that we were actually speaking, and not texting or sending Instagram messages -- or the way I hope we speak to the children in our congregation. Speaking with love doesn't preclude discipline, in fact, it often includes it. "Please stop running with those scissors; you might hurt yourself." If you grew up in a family or are a part of one now that didn't understand the necessity of boundaries as a part of love, then your life was probably pretty chaotic, and you may still have some have scissor wounds. Boundaries are part of God's love, too.

Did your family have rules? Mine did. I didn't agree with them all, I didn't follow all of them all the time, and I learned that not following the rules didn't mean I was kicked out of the family, but breaking the rules meant stress on relationships with people who trusted me. Being a family means that we challenge each other to be our best. Being a family means that we forgive one another when we are our worst. We don't earn the title "children of God," it is given to us because of God's love; if we are children of God, then we are called to live in that love. This means addressing the sin in our lives -- not just being nice or behaving ourselves when we think someone is watching, but actually trying to live so that there is no space in our lives for things which contradict or dishonor God. This is how we demonstrate our love for God.

In 1 John 3, the author is reminding us of the familial nature of our relationships in the family of faith: God is our Father, so we are all children of the same family. There is also an emphasis in 1 John, as in the gospel of John, with what will be *revealed* about Jesus: a sense

that the world did not know him and could not see him clearly, but for those who believe, there is the promise that we will someday see Him clearly -- not only see Him, but be like him. We, too, will stand in that sacred place where we may be in this world, but something of eternity and Jesus will be revealed to us.

Birth and death are the circle of how we come into this world and how we depart from it. Unlike some world religions where that cycle repeats over and over again for the same soul in reincarnation, those of us who believe in the power of God and the promise of Christ Jesus have the assurance of resurrection: eternal life with Christ. Time doesn't simple spin forever: it began with creation and it is headed toward an end when Christ is Lord of all; we live within the trajectory of time. The thin places in our lives are opportunities for us to see the light of eternity.

No transition affects only one person: if we are indeed a family of faith, than what happens to the other children in the family affects us, too. The four people whom we remembered this morning by lighting these smaller lights from the Christ candle -- they had spouses, now widows and widowers, who are part of our family; they had children and grandchildren. They were our friends: some of them friends for decades. We are part of that transition, that sacred and agonizing part of life when someone we love goes where we cannot yet follow them, because there are still things in this world that God would have us do.

There are other transitions which families go through -- usually less traumatic than death. Children grow up, start school, become adolescents, their parents get older and a lot stupider, children become adults and establish homes of their own, parents wise up a bit, maybe even become grandparents. Families come to these transitions in their own way: some kicking and screaming, some with wisdom and grace. What is consistent is that change is always happening, whether we welcome it or not. Change is baked into families.

This is true of families of faith, of course. We can deny the inevitability of change, but that won't stop it from happening. We can embrace the inevitability of change, but that won't mean it's going to

be easy. Here's a way, at least in my better moments, I try to think of changes in my life, my family's life and my experience of the family of faith: if moments of transition are opportunities to witness the sacred, and there are transitions happening all the time, what opportunity is there in this moment to witness and testify to the work of God? What is God trying to reveal to me? 1 John 3:2 says it this way, "Beloved, we are God's children now; 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 know him as he is." How can I see God in this moment? How can I see Jesus in this person? How can others see Jesus revealed in me?

This morning we remember those we loved and the way they touched our lives. But it is also a time to celebrate the generations who are here, now: the children and youth and young adults and not-so-young adults who make up our family of faith. We have come from God as children, and with God's help, our lives will come full circle when we return to God in eternity. I'd like to end with these words from 1 John 2:12-14:

I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven on account of his name.
I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young people,
because you have conquered the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.
I write to you, young people,
because you are strong
and the word of God abides in you.

May it be so! Amen