

Overwhelmed by God

1 John 3:1-3

Sermon by Joanne Gallardo

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*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. **2** Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears,^[a] we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. **3** All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.*

The first Sunday of every November is All Saints Sunday, also known as All Souls Sunday. I have now been with you here at Berkey long enough for the lectionary to come back around to me, and the Revelation reading for this week is a text I have already preached on! While I'm sure none of you remember the sermon I gave on this date 3 years ago, the great thing about the lectionary is the bevy of texts it gives us for each week. Our scripture this week comes from 1 John.

I also believe this is a particularly poignant time in our history to be reflecting on all saints. As the US nears or has now possibly surpassed 226,000 deaths, many of us are aware of people who have lost someone due to COVID. Our community right now is hard hit with this virus, and we want to also thank and remember those who risk exposure daily to provide essential services and care. We also want to remember that our Latinx and Black neighbors who have been hit particularly hard with cases. As we delve further into this passage, let us keep all these things in mind.

I want you to recall the last time you felt overwhelmed. Was it work? Was it family stressors? Personal introspection? The everyday life of living in a pandemic?

When I get overwhelmed, I shut down, and it really depends on the degree of overwhelmedness I'm feeling. Sometimes I reach out, sometimes not, preferring to stew in my own anxiety and sadness over being in the situation at hand, for better or worse.

For others, you may find it hard to eat. Difficult to relax. You might be kept up at all hours, unable to shut your mind off. You may resort to unhealthy coping skills. You might inadvertently blow up at a spouse or a close friend, like a bottle of Coke with some Mentos thrown in. It is NOT a good feeling.

I use this analogy of being overwhelmed because of a commentary I read on this passage, 1 John 3:1-3. It talks about being rooted in God's love in a midst of an overwhelming world.

Before I talk about the passage, I want you to note that I talked about being overwhelmed as a bad thing. Maybe you caught me on that thinking, “Well, isn’t it possible to be positively overwhelmed?” And YES, the answer is YES!

I want you to now think of a time you felt positively overwhelmed. Were you showered with visits when you had a child? Were you sick and received a lot of cards? Maybe some flowers? Did lots of people check in on you when you were going through a rough time? Was a birthday particularly joyous? Do the holidays overwhelm you but with that good feeling?

I really hope that you are able to think of times you were overwhelmed with good things. I love 1 John in terms of it being a book really focused on love in some parts. Not only did I love it because it was easy to translate from the Greek (the word “love” is repeated many times), but what a refreshing passage in particular to read and remember. It should be noted that this passage comes in the middle of some rather polemical texts, talking about sin, condemnation, and the antichrist. I want to say that I am aware of that, but I also want to save talk of antichrists for another sermon. This sermon is focused on this passage, a passage of love, and a passage of belonging.

It starts off with “See what great love God has lavished” on us. Some translators have commented that a better translation might be “look it!” “Look it! God has lavished great love.” Comedian John Mullaney has a portion of a routine he does about what we think of as the “height” of luxury as a kid versus now. It’s an interesting thought as we think about our faith formation, think about the concept of lavishness and luxury when you were young (or young in faith) and now. And it’s ok if you’re still young in age or faith. But for those who are older, and I speak as someone who’s not there yet but slowly getting there, we tend to focus on things like love, quality time, being surrounded by family and friends. That is what we see as luxury and lavishness. Sure, a vacation on some island somewhere may seem luxurious and lavish, but I bet a lot of it has to do with who you’re with. I think about the holiday comment I made earlier. Lavishness isn’t what’s under the tree or on the table per se, it’s who you’re with. And as we mature in age and in faith, we come to treasure that all the more.

“That we shall be called children of God,” it goes on to say. We belong to God. Not in a helicopter parent kind of way, a way that prevents us from growing and moving on our own, but in a wiser, helpful, nurturing way. We belong in the sense that we have a home base, a safety net, to use Biblical language, a “counselor.” I’m going to push out this theology a bit, only because it makes it sound like “See how much God loves us, isn’t that so great.” And yes, yes it is. But I feel the larger arc of the Biblical story says also,

not but, also “of course.” Of course we are loved by God, yes we deserve it and not because we get everything right, but because God takes responsibility for us as imperfect but trying to get it right children. Children who need a lot of help but are loved nonetheless. We are a part of God, so of course. Of course this love is lavished on us.

“Dear friends, we are children of God, and what we will be is not yet made known.” Once again we are drawn to this child language. In the Greek, the word that’s used is “teknia” or “little children.” In thinking about All Saints Sunday, I’m tempted to think of this passage as having the present as well as the eternal in mind. No matter where we are in our faith, what we will be is not yet made known. Whether we are in our teens or in our 80s, there is always growth to be had, revelations to be made, and new aspects of God to discover. And what will come is uncertain, and we do not know. But as I was saying before, in God we have a parent, a home base, safety, acceptance. No one can know the future, especially now as we near an election, especially now as we face more months of the pandemic, especially now since we are never promised another day. The only thing we are promised is God’s overwhelming love.

It should also be noted that the community of 1 John is in the middle of a schism. What people believe about Jesus and what they are confessing about Jesus are different things, and some have chosen to stay with the community, and others have left. “They went out from us,” the text later says. It even says that those folks hate their brother and sister. They were probably confused as to what it meant to move faithfully into an unknown future. I see this as relating to our context today, especially as we approach the election on Tuesday. It can feel that there have been people who’ve “left” Christianity for ideology, ideology that, as the scripture says, hates brother and sister. Ideology that idolizes money over goodwill, dominance over cooperation, and exclusion over embrace. What does it mean for this message to include the overwhelming love of God? What does it mean to look to the saints who have gone on before us, who fought for the rights of others, who stood up to injustice, and prayed their way through what feels like dystopia? As we are divided, how are we holding on to that overwhelming love, and how are we looking to our departed siblings who sojourned before us?

Part of what makes this love overwhelming is that nowhere does it say that purity, integrity, or certain acts MAKE us children of God, rather, just being makes us children of God. And that is so counterintuitive to us and I think that’s what makes this love so overwhelming. Ever receive an anonymous gift and panicked because either you felt you didn’t deserve it, or you didn’t know who to say “thank you” to, or didn’t know what you now needed to “do.” A gift coming out of nowhere with no strings attached is overwhelming in itself, I would say. We’re quick to say, “No, I don’t need that.” I recently had someone offer to make something rather complicated for me. I automatically said,

“Only if it doesn’t cause you too much trouble.” Because, after all, I didn’t want to be a problem. They responded, as one would, with “I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t willing to do it.” Yeah, of course. Why wasn’t I taking them at their word?

I believe it can be hard to take God at God’s word. And I mean that in terms of what the Bible says, and also from our lived experience of the work of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. It’s too much! Being called children of God, lavish love, love out of nowhere, love for no reason, mercy for injustice, revelation in darkness, kinship in schism, comfort for grief, it’s a lot! But the great thing is, we can take God at God’s word. Both for this world and the world to come. God, even when God feels absent, doles out love for no apparent reason and all we are instructed to do is receive. If we can humble ourselves enough to receive it.

So as we reflect on this All Saints Sunday, we want to remember those who are no longer with us in body. Each of us carry loved ones that we wish were here. We may be walking with loved ones who are transitioning into eternity. And the coming year brings things we do not yet know. This can be, as I said before, overwhelming. But I hope we can also remember to allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the love of God. To be able to fully grasp, comprehend and receive the love that has already been given to us. Not love that maybe we have coming for us, not love that comes from our specific actions, but love for just existing. May we be consumed by it, and may it be lavish.

As a part of our faith formation, and at the suggestion of others as a way to grow in faith, I encourage you to take up the exercise of memorizing scripture. Each month, I will pull out a new passage from the text to learn, and it will be your opportunity to take the next month to memorize it. You can practice this each night at dinner as a family, write it down in a journal before bed, begin and end each work day with it, or even better yet, talk to someone and hold each other accountable for memorizing it. Don’t worry, there will be no quiz, no checking up on you, this is for your own personal relationship with faith and scripture, if you so choose and would find it helpful. For this month, the passage is 1 John 3, verse 1: See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

My God bless the reading and memorizing of God’s word. Amen