

11.17.2024 Trinity 25 (1 John 3:1-8)

At the Annunciation, when the Angel Gabriel appeared to the Blessed Virgin Mary, he proclaimed, “*Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus*” (Luke 1:31). On the banks of the Jordan river, where John was baptizing, he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). In the book of Revelation, St. John describes his vision of the redeemed from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue. They’re standing before the throne of God and the Lamb, and John hears a loud voice saying, “*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God*” (Revelation 21:3).

*Behold*, in the biblical text, is a word that calls us to stop, and recognize an important objective truth: *Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son... Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Behold, the dwelling place of God is with His people.* Now, let us stop, and recognize such a truth presented in the Epistle reading today, in which St. John declared, “*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God!*” (1 John 3:1). Stop, and recognize this objective truth, Divinely revealed in Holy Scripture, you and I, Christians, are sons and daughters of God.

*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us*, pitiful sinners who were once enemies of God trapped in darkness and the shadow of death, have been redeemed by the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of our Savior Christ, and made children of God. The world, the flesh, and the devil aim to keep us in a state of busy, distracted indifference, but in this Epistle, St. John calls us to behold this *manner of love*, and so we look to the Cross, because, while we know that there are many ways to recognize the Divine attributes of God, there’s only one way to comprehend His *manner of love*, and that is through the Cross of Christ.

So, we look to the Person and Work of our Savior as *the* way to behold the heart of God, and there, at the foot of the Cross, we stop, and begin to recognize His *manner of love*. At the Cross we see the Father’s sacrificial

love which “*did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all...*” (Romans 8:32). At the Cross we see a love that arises not from any endearing quality within us, but instead, a love that springs from the very source of love, a love that flows from the nature of God, who is love (1 John 4:8). At the Cross we see a love that cannot be earned, a love we do not deserve, a love that desires nothing more from His beloved than to be loved in return, and at the Cross of Christ we stop, and recognize, to use the words of St. Paul, “*that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from (this manner of love), the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:38-39).

*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God!* St. John calls us to stop, and recognize, not how much the Father loves us, but how He loves us. “*So God loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son...*” (John 3:16). At the Cross, where our Lord freely laid down His life, at the Cross, where the spotless Lamb of God was slain for our sins, we behold this *manner of love*, and the question arises, as recipients of such love, what manner of people ought we to be? As sons and daughters of God, if we stop, and recognize the objective truth that the Father’s manner of love is to hold nothing back, to spare not His own Son, then our manner of living, as His children, ought to follow the same pattern. The words of our sermon hymn concur with that thought, presenting us with the message that having surveyed the wondrous Cross, our response is this declaration: “Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

When we turn away from the busyness, distraction, and indifference that plagues this world, in order to *behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God*, it is then, as children, that our hearts demand we love our Father in return, or to use the words of St. John, “*We love Him because He first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). Our Father was the One who reached out to us. He was the first to embrace us with love. He chose us, and in doing so, His perfect love has cast out fear. As a child of God, and in a particular sense, as a Christian, I need not fear offering my soul, my life, my all to Him, because at the Cross I’ve witnessed how He loves.

A desire to love, to give our heart to another, is often checked by fear, but children of God don't fear. We don't fear being judged or rejected by God our Father, because He loved us first, and He loves us perfectly. The parable of the Prodigal Son, a story about how God loves His children, is a beautiful illustration of that truth. In that parable we read about the younger son, loved by his Father, who was given his inheritance, and *"not many days after... gathered all together, journeyed to a far country,"* and there he wasted it all *"with riotous living."* When his inheritance was spent, *"there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything."*

At this point in the story we find out that hitting rock bottom has finally brought the son to his senses, and he said, *"How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. And he arose and came to his father."*

A desire to love is often checked by fear, but children of God, like the prodigal, don't fear. Notice, in this text there is no indication that the son is afraid to come home and face his father. The son, who packed his bags, left home, and immorally wasted his father's money, at last came to his senses, and simply got up and went to his father. He didn't fear his father's wrath or judgement. He had no fear of being condemned or rejected, because *"perfect love casts out fear"* (1 John 4:18), and having grown up in his father's house, under his care, guidance, and provision, he knew his father's *manner of love* was indeed - *perfect*. The prodigal knew that if he just returned in heartfelt, humble repentance, that he'd be embraced by the loving arms of his father - and he was correct. The father ran to his son, held him, kissed him, and said to the servants, *"Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found"* (Luke 15:11-24).

With the image of that parable in mind, consider once more this objective Truth, revealed in Sacred Scripture: *Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God!* As the children of God we rest in the blessed assurance that the *manner of love*, how the Father loved the prodigal, is how God our Father loves us. Therefore, if any of us ever find ourselves in a foreign land, we must never be afraid to come home, for God loves his children. Yes, God loves you - and He loves you perfectly.