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Easter 4 (Good Shepherd)

1 John 3:1-2

THE FATHER LAVISHES US WITH LOVE

Why doesn't God have us address Him as our Commander? Our CEO? Or even just God? Why did Jesus instruct us to pray, "Our Father in heaven?" Martin Luther explained in his Small Catechism, "*With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children, so that we may pray to him as boldly and confidently as dear children ask their dear Father.*" "Dear CEO" just doesn't have the same ring, does it? Here on earth it is hard to perceive anything more powerful or profound than the love you feel for our own child. Yet God's love for us far surpasses even the best parent/child relationship here on earth.

We parents are wise not to spoil our children. But the Holy Spirit paints a picture of God's care with this phrase: The Father lavishes us with love. From 1 John 3 let us consider two ways that the Father lavishes us with love: first, by making us His children now, and secondly, on the Last Day, by making us like Himself then.

The Father lavishes us with love first of all simply by the fact that He calls us His children. To appreciate this we must understand that we are not *naturally* God's children –not any more than a rotten potato could be called your child. The Bible's description of our natural status is shocking. It calls us children of the devil, children of the world, children of the flesh (whereas God is spirit).

Jesus said, "*I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*" By means of your baptism, God the Holy Spirit gave birth to you, made you come alive spiritually, by creating in you faith in Jesus Christ to save

you. By means of your baptism, God became your Father. He lavished us with love by making us His children –something we could never have expected on our own.

1 John 3 says, "*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*" It doesn't say, "Should be." We *are* by God's grace. Now.

Humanly speaking, parental love is a marvel. If anyone else acted the way our children sometimes do at home, we'd show them the door. But our own children? We keep them. We hang on to them. We correct them, but we are protective of them. Our heavenly Father is like that. He observes the behavior of every one of us – things that we aren't even aware that we do ourselves –ways we try to manipulate people, ways we try to get our way, ways we avoid having to do the right thing. He also is fully aware of our more shocking behaviors –things that if someone videoed us doing we'd be flush with shame –and yet does God show us the door? We deserve a door –the yawping gates of hell. But like a Father He lavishes us with love. He keeps us. He hangs on to us.

Not for sentimental reasons. He lavishes us with love only because Jesus suffered God's total rejection in our place. God lavished Jesus only with His anger and unforgiving justice as Jesus hung on the cross. Therefore, even now as we have so often abused our heavenly Father's kindness, given Him a hundred reasons to show us the door –even now God lavishes you with His forgiveness for Jesus' sake –more forgiveness than you could use up in ten lifetimes. He is more devoted to you and firmly resolved to keep you than 10 thousand dads here on earth could ever be. The Father lavishes us with love by making us His children now.

But that truth is on faith. You'll have to take God's Word for it. You won't necessarily feel or see it. It isn't abundantly obvious to look at us. Just because we are believers doesn't make us a head taller than everyone else. There's no special glow about us. We're not richer, healthier, less sinful or visibly happier than unbelievers. We don't have fewer issues. We often have more. In fact, to say

you are a Christian is an invitation for scrutiny: “You’re a hypocrite! You’re no different from the rest of us!”

That can wear on us. It seems unfair. The more committed our new self is to God and His truth the more it’s going to cost us. Think how every effort is made in the media to discredit what we believe. Think how it’s off-limits to talk about the most important thing in your life at work –your Savior. Trying to maintain an honest relationship with our heavenly Father only makes our conscience, our friends, all demons, all temptations, all fears, and all the powerful desires of our sinful flesh more relentless. We might get to the point where we wonder, “What good does it do me to be a child of God? It only brings me more trouble.”

To shepherd our souls and quiet these doubts, our heavenly Father points us to a day when our true identity will be glaringly evident. 1 John 3 says, *“The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”* When Jesus returns visibly we will move from childhood into adulthood as it were. The Father lavishes us with love because He will change us. We will be holy like Him. We will be translated into heaven like Him. We will be eternal like Him.

Right now God appears to us only in His promises. But then we will see Him face to face. Right now no sinful person can see God and live. But when Jesus returns we will no longer be weak, earthly creatures who can only have Him in faith. We will actually see and have everything that right now He has only promised us. Just like Christ we will be powerful enough, and perfect enough to bear God’s glory. Martin Luther wrote, *“There will be a true and perfect knowledge of God, a right reason, and a good will, neither moral nor theological but heavenly, divine, and eternal.”* God will lavish us with an outcome that’s good beyond telling.

The heavenly Father lavishes His love on us by giving us this promise to look forward to so that we are cheered, our spirits are

lifted, our shoulders are squared, our chins are set more firmly and some of life’s burden is lightened.

When we finally join Him in heaven we will see that all along He has been far more than a provider, a CEO, a judge, a commander or even merely a God to us. We will see that He has been a Father –a dear Father in Christ who has lavished us in every way with His love.