

November 1, 2026
1 John 3:1-3

All Saints Day
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Family Resemblance”

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

Several years ago, my Uncle Russell returned from Denmark with a remarkable document that he shared with my father’s family. It was the family history of the Laustsen family that he had researched, a journey that led him to the two churches that held the records of both my grandfather and grandmother’s families. It is truly a remarkable document; it traces our family’s history back eighteen generations to the 1300s, a genealogy that includes people who were farmers, mayors, and even the vicar of the family church in Janderup in the seventeenth century. It is a document that I treasure, and whenever I flip through its pages, I see the names of people who are a part of my history and lineage, people from whom I have inherited so much of what makes me the person I am today.

But as I look through the pages of this amazing family history, I have noticed something unusual: our family name disappears after a few generations. In its place are ancestors that are known not by a family surname but by their relationship to their parents: they are known as *sen* and *datter*, son and daughter. When communities were more stable and included numerous generations, family names were not necessary; you were simply known as the son or daughter of your parents. It was only when people began to move from their ancestral communities that family names as we know them today became more common, even though Danish surnames still include the designation of “son” in their final letters. It is a reminder of the strong ties to one’s parents and families that is a defining characteristic of who we are even in an age when our names do not indicate the identity of our parents. No matter how old we may be, we are always the children of the parents who raised us and the families from which we gain our identities.

I think of these people whose lives played a critical role in shaping who I am today as we enter into a month of remembrance, both as a nation and as the people of God. Today is All Saints’ Day, the day when the Church of Jesus Christ is called to remember “*all the saints who from their labours rest.*” While we remember the well-known saints of biblical and church history whose names and memories are immortalized in the name of churches, schools, and hospitals, in our tradition All

Saints' Day is when we remember the saints in our lives, those people who taught us about the love of God in Jesus Christ and gave us an example of holy living as a child of God. We especially remember those persons who have died in the past year, thanking God for the lives we shared while looking forward to that day when our Lord will gather us into that place where *"they will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat, for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* (Revelation 7:16-17). As we give thanks for their lives and witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we pray that God will *"fill us with songs of praise until we too are gathered at your side."*

Next week, our nation will pause on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month to remember those who gave their lives for our *"home and native land."* We pause on Remembrance Day to honour those whose lives were lost on fields of battle such as the one immortalized by John McCrae, who saw in the poppies growing in the devastation of Flanders Fields a sign of life and hope as he called upon future generations to *"take up ... from falling hands we throw the torch; he yours to hold it high."* As we pause to remember, we also pray that God will *"help us to be faithful and true to the ideals for which they fought and died"* (Chaplain's Manual, Royal Canadian Legion).

November also includes a personal day of remembrance for me; on November 12, 1999, I received an early morning telephone call informing me that my father had died suddenly that morning. It is a day when I remember the man who taught me so much, the man after whom I have modeled so much of my life, that man who not only gave me my name and passed on my family's heritage but also gave me a role model that has guided my life and for whom I am always thankful. My identity is inextricably linked to the fact that I am a child of my father.

As we pause on this day of remembrance to give thanks to God for the saints, we have known whose legacy lives on in the lives of faith that have been shaped by their example, we are invited to consider what it means for us to be children of God and heirs of God's promises. Our second lesson for All Saints' Day is from the First Letter of John, which is actually more of a sermon or treatise addressed to the community who had received the good news of Jesus Christ through the Gospel of John. While the Gospel was written as an evangelical message meant to draw people to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, the letter was addressed to those who have come to this faith and have been incorporated into the church through their baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. The author (who refers to himself as the Elder) indicates in the opening verses of the letter that *"we declare to you what we have*

seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete” (1 John 1:3-4). He reminds them that “*God is light and in him there is no darkness at all*” and that “*if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin*” (1:5-8). He warns them to turn away from the forces of darkness that seek to draw God’s people away from the true light, encouraging them to “*abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming.*” (2:28).

As the Elder offers words of instruction and encouragement to the community of faith in his generation, so does he now invite them to consider what their faith in Jesus Christ means for their future hope; “*the community’s present experience of the presence of Christ is now placed alongside the sure expectation of Christ’s own appearance.*” (C. Clifford Black). The community of faith is encouraged to dwell for now in that domain that has been climactically defined by Christ, so that later, when he is revealed at his *Parousia* the church may stand before him boldly confident and unashamed (“*And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of the Lord Jesus and all his saints.*” – 1 Thessalonians 3:13). The Elder balances the promise of his readers’ status as God’s children now with a reminder that the future into which they are growing has not yet been revealed:

- “See what love the Father has given 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. Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.” – 3:1-2a.

What the church will be like when Christ appears has not yet been made clear, but that does not jeopardize the church’s assurance that they are the children of God. They live in the blessed assurance that “*what we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is*” (3:2b). This sense of incompleteness does not discourage the community of faith; instead, it spurs Christians’ persistence in Christ and reminds them that their perception of God will someday be perfected:

- “But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.” – Philippians 3:20-21.
- “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” – Matthew 5:8.

- “But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.” – Revelation 22:3b-4.

As Jesus was identified as the Son of God at his baptism (*“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”* – Matthew 3:17), so are all who are baptized into Christ Jesus *“reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the Body of Christ”* (ELW Holy Baptism). As God’s beloved children, we are heirs of the promises of God and the blessings that God bestows upon all who are now children of God:

- “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” – 1 Peter 1:3-5.

As we have inherited the blessings that God bestows upon God’s children through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, so do we also bear the family resemblance of being children of God, for the one who is “begotten of him” demonstrates their family resemblance through conduct that is characteristic of the Father; for *“all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.”* (3:3). The children of God *“resemble their Father. They share in his holiness and righteousness and show their faithfulness to the Father through their obedience to his commands.”* (Ruth Anne Reese). The Elder highlights two family traits that serve as a living witness to the community’s identity as children of God:

- **Doing righteousness**, assisting in that comprehensive rectification whose norm is God’s own justice: *“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!”* (Matthew 13:43).
- **Purity**, which may be understood as “unimpeachable sincerity” or “moral uprightness”: *“Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine love, love one another deeply from the heart.”* (1 Peter 1:22).

- The Elder clearly indicates that human acts of justice and purity are *not* the precondition for God’s favour; rather, such conduct is the apt *response* to God’s prior action, since the initiative for creating children of God belongs entirely with the God gracious love (*“Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love*

one another ... We love because he first loved us.” (4:11, 19). Children do not give birth to themselves, nor does our self-purification stem from misplaced confidence in ourselves; instead, it comes from *“this hope in him”* (3:3). We abide in God, not out of dread that our identity as God’s children will be stripped from us, but in order that our confidence may be bolstered, that at the coming of Christ we may not shrink from him in shame (*“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.”* – Philippians 1:20). What we shall be has not yet been revealed, but that in no way overturns the reality that we are God’s beloved children now: *“the child of God is a responsible agent and is ‘response-able’ – able to respond – by the endowment of God’s prevenient love”* (Black). The Elder is stressing future blessing because they are contingent on the way Christians live, and future hope is not an end in itself but the source of confidence for the future, *“provided that those who are already God’s children continue to live a life worthy of the Father whom they shall one day see face to face.”* (Raymond Brown).

- “We are children, perhaps, at the very moment when we know that it is as children that God loves us – not because we have deserved his love and not in spite of our undeserving; not because we try and not because we recognize the futility of our trying; but simply because he has chosen to love us. We are children because he is our father; and all our efforts, fruitful or fruitless, to do good, to speak truth, to understand, are the efforts of children who, for all their precocity, are children still in that before we loved him, he loved us, as children, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” – Frederick Buechner.

On a recent visit back to my home state, my cousin gave me a few items that she had found among her mother’s possessions following my aunt’s death. Included in these items was a metal box that once sat in my grandparents’ living room that now has a place of honour on my desk; a photo of the family farm in New Market where my father and his siblings were raised; a photo of my grandparents along with their eight children on the farm; and a photo of my grandparents on their wedding day in 1917. As Susan and I were looking through these precious heirlooms, she let out a gasp when she saw my grandfather in that photo and noted the strong resemblance I bear to him. I had only known my grandfather as an older man in the final years of his life; in this photo, he was much younger than I had ever seen, and the resemblance is truly uncanny. It is through my parents, grandparents, and generations of my family that I have been blessed with not only my physical resemblance but also the lessons that they shared that form my resemblance to the values that were defining qualities of their lives and legacy: punctuality, organization, caring for others,

kindness, modesty, and above all a strong faith in Jesus Christ. They bestowed on me the legacy of faith that has informed my life and ministry. They are the saints I remember on this All Saints' Day, persons whose example has given me a guide as to how I might resemble all who have been born anew as God's beloved children and bear the resemblance of those family traits in their daily lives. To be a saint is to live as a child of God, to bear the light of the one who adopted us as children of God before others *'so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'* (Matthew 5:16).

- "The knowledge that we are children of God – and that we may be fully assured of it – is not derived from ourselves or from the law. It is the witness of the Holy Spirit who bears witness to it ... such witness is accomplished in such a way that we are made aware of it and feel the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us through the Word, and our experience with the Word or the message ... This is the true inward witness by which you perceive that the Holy Spirit is working within you." – Martin Luther.

Today is a day when we remember and give thanks for the saints who have blessed us and instilled in us those teachings and values that identify us as children of God. As we give thanks for the lives we shared with them and the hope that is ours through the *"faith of our fathers, living still,"* may we strive to be faithful in bearing our family resemblance before others so that they may know through our acts of grace, care, hospitality, and lovingkindness that we are truly children of God, and that all for whom Christ died are precious in his eyes as well. May we be faithful saints, children of God who bear the resemblance of the steadfast love of God in Jesus Christ so that all may know that they are also beloved children of God, from whom *"neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever."*

Amen.