

Family Resemblance

[1 John 3:1-7](#)

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April 14, 2024

Newborn babies look strange. I'm sorry, but it's true. They've got weird, misshapen heads, swollen faces, blotchy skin, all covered in slime and blood and mucus. I know you're supposed to look at them and marvel at the miracle of birth, but honestly, a freshly born baby looks like a cross between Yoda, Winston Churchill and a microwaved burrito. And yet inevitably, when you bring this ugly little slug thing home and show it to people, the response you get is – He looks just like his daddy! Which is not really a compliment. Telling someone “Hey, you and this tiny screaming gremlin look exactly the same”, that isn't flattering. But of course, newborn babies don't stay that way. After a few weeks, they start to fatten up, the swelling goes down and the complexion evens out, the resemblance to Don Rickles starts to fade and the resemblance to their actual parents starts to emerge, so that by the time they're a few months old, babies are actually pretty cute, and then you can start to see a real family resemblance – you start to see how the nose and eyes and lips and ears look awfully similar to noses and eyes and lips and ears that belong to parents and grandparents and siblings and extended relations. Babies start out pretty ugly, but over time, they grow into a family resemblance, every day they look more and more like the family where they belong.

Keep that in mind when you read today's passage from John's first letter to the church, where John tells us that we are children of God. Now, as soon as you hear that, you should be a little skeptical - more

than a little skeptical. We've heard that phrase so many times that we can forget how surprising, how unexpected it is for human beings to call themselves Children of God. Even in this passage, John has to convince his readers that it's true – See how much God loves us, that we should be called children of God. No really – that's what we are! And then one verse later, John reminds them again – Dear friends, we are already God's children. John tells the church over and over again, you are God's children, because the idea that we are God's children doesn't make a lot of sense. I mean, just look at us. And then look at God. God is the creator of the universe, the great source of all life and strength and being, the one who exists beyond time and space, a being so vast and infinite beyond our comprehension, and we are tiny, screaming gremlins, weird little meat creatures, ugly bags of mostly water. God designed the entire universe out of nothing, invented the taste of strawberries and the sound of falling rain. We invented reality television and the sound of bagpipes. God sustains all life and energy throughout the cosmos, keeps every star and every electron spinning in their orbits, and we are so fragile and vulnerable, all it takes is one tiny little virus and our entire civilization comes crashing to a halt. God showers down love on creation, passionately and unendingly, God cares and nurtures and sacrifices for the good of this universe and every creature in it from greatest to least, and we kill each other at the slightest provocation, we concentrate wealth and power in a few hands and let the rest starve, we get so acclimatized to injustice and cruelty that we don't even notice all the pain all around us until it happens to us. When you look at God, and then look at humanity, there is no family resemblance. We don't look like God's children. We don't act like God's children. There is no family resemblance.

And yet God still insists that despite all appearances to the contrary, despite how we look, despite how we act, we are children of God. The Bible tells us that we are made in the image of God, but there is nothing intrinsic about human beings that makes us deserving of that status – no genetic material, no genealogy that we can trace back through history to find our true heritage. The only reason we are God's children is that God has decided that it's true. God chooses to make it true. God says, you are my children, made in my image, and therefore, that is who we are. If you look at humanity, there is absolutely no evidence that we could ever claim the title of children of God – the only way you can discover that we are God's children is by looking at God, by seeing just how loving and forgiving and gracious God truly is, knowing that God is someone who could decide to bring these ugly little creatures home and decide that from now on, they're family, from now on, they're children, from now on, they're mine. If you don't know God, if you don't understand God, you will never understand how human beings could ever consider themselves God's children – the only way it begins to make sense is when you look and see how much our Father loves us, when you look and see how deep the Father's love for us truly is. It still doesn't make sense – it is still beyond belief that we could honestly claim such a lofty title for ourselves, despite ourselves. But it is true. God says it's true, so there it is. This is who we are. We are children of God

And yet even though John tells the church that this is true, you are children of God, he also recognizes that we don't look like it yet. John assures and reassures the church, "dear children, we are already God's children, but God hasn't yet revealed to us what we will one day be like, when Christ appears – but when that happens, we will be like

Jesus. We will look like Jesus.” Right now, when you look at humanity, and look at God, there is no family resemblance, but John promises the church that this won’t always be true. God’s plan for us is that we will grow up and become something new, something different, something more than what we are now – we are called children of God here and now, but God is planning on making us look the part. God’s children will look like Jesus, we will look like our Father, we will look like God. And that may be hard to understand, and harder to accept – when we recognize how broken humanity is, how we fall so very short of God’s glory and purity and love, it is hard to imagine that we could ever look like God. But God’s promise to us is that we will grow into the family resemblance – not because of who we are, but because of who Jesus is. In Jesus Christ, humanity became who we were always meant to be – through his death and resurrection, in the light of Easter Sunday, we can see humanity as we are meant to be, all grown up into the fullness of God, with God’s image shining clearly in the face of the resurrected King of Kings. Looking at ourselves, looking at our world, it’s easy to see all the ways we fail, all the ways we fall short, all the ways we have tarnished and destroyed God’s image that we were created to carry, but when we look to Jesus we can see who we are meant to be, and we can see who we will one day become – we can see the family resemblance of God in Jesus Christ, and know that through the power of Christ, through his death and resurrection, we will one day be like Jesus, look like Jesus, carry the image of God clearly and plainly for the universe to see.

And knowing that this is true – knowing that God will keep that promise to make us grow into our family resemblance and make us one day look just like Jesus, that gives us the strength to start looking like

Jesus here and now, start living like Jesus today. John calls the church to live the way Jesus lived, to love the way Jesus loved, to act in the world in such a way so that the people around you will get a glimpse of what God is like when they see how you live and how you love. The ways we live in the world – our words and our actions, the ways we treat one another – they are meant to reflect our identity as God's children, the family resemblance we carry. Instead of living like orphans, in lawlessness and chaos, chasing after short term solutions and comfortable falsehoods, we have been given a family, a home where we belong, a relationship that brings stability and structure to our lives, and the more time we spend living in the light of that relationship, as children of God, claimed and defined by God's love, the more we start to look like the rest of our family, the more we look like Jesus Christ and all those who belong to him. When John calls the church to be pure and righteous, it isn't about following a long checklist of all these dos and don'ts, living in fear that God's going to punish you for not getting everything exactly right. Being pure and righteous means following the example of Jesus Christ in everything we do as best as we can – doing our best to look like him, to grow up into the fullness of who we are meant to be, to grow a little less like those selfish little gremlins we once were and a bit more like the Father who claimed us as children of God. And we know we can do this because God has already promised us it's going to happen. God has already promised us that this transformation is already on its way, already at work in us. We're already God's children, and God's spirit is at work in us to make us look like it's true, make us look more and more like Jesus every single day. When we stop looking at ourselves, and keep looking to Jesus Christ, keep looking to our heavenly father, keep our eyes fixed

on God's love and grace and power each and every day, we start expecting to see the image of God here in this world, in the faces of God's children all around us. Every single day, we have an opportunity to become a little bit more like Jesus, to grow from spiritual infancy into children of God, bearing God's image, sharing Christ's love, using the Spirit's power to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is here. We can do that today, right here, right now. Today, may we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, so that his light and love will shine in us, so the world will see that we are children of God, they will know what God looks like because they can see God in us. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!