

Of the Father's Love Begotten

In the name of him who displayed the greatest love by laying down his life for his friends, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Well ... this is awkward. Today is Mother's Day, a Hallmark holiday created to honor those wonderful women who conceived us to life, carried us in their wombs, and then labored in torment to give us birth – which, not coincidentally, God designed to be a portrait of the saving Gospel itself. It's immediately after promising a Savior from sin who would be born of a woman that the Lord tells our first parents that women would undergo great pain in childbirth. There's a message there. It's this: in this sin-filled world subject to the curse, new life comes only through the painful labor of another. You see, it's about Jesus and his cross. Since the fall, God has built into basic human biology this constant reminder that our new lives depend on his suffering and death for us. He gives us this portrait in our mothers. And it's right that we honor them, not just for the pain they endured bringing us into the world, but for all that they did to love and to care for us as we grew to adulthood.

And so today we do honor them—but not (and this is the awkward part) in this morning's sermon message. Because based on today's Epistle by the Apostle John, what I want to talk about is not mothers but fatherhood. That's what the text is about; although that might not be instantly clear from the translation we heard. It said, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father, loves whoever has been born of him." But that doesn't make sense. People are born of mothers, not fathers. A father's part in the miracle of procreation is called *begetting*. So, a more accurate translation of the text would read like this: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, from God he has been begotten, and everyone loving the Begetter loves those who have been begotten of him."

Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior God sent into the world to redeem you? Then *you* have been begotten of God the Father. That might raise a red flag. "Wait a minute, Pastor! I've always been taught that Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God." That's true, we say that; but it's because the Son of God is begotten of the Father in a unique sense. The Son is not a created being. When the Bible says that he is begotten of the Father what it means is this: the Father, from eternity past gives himself in love. He hands over his divine essence – whatever that spiritual substance is that makes God, God – he gives *that* one hundred percent so that the Son is. Thus they are two persons sharing the same divine essence. And understand that this is an eternal happening: the Father is always giving himself in love for the Son; always has been, always will be. From the two together then eternally proceeds the Third Person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. More on that when we get to Pentecost or Holy Trinity Sunday. But this is what we mean when we say that Jesus is the *only*-begotten Son of God.

We, on the other hand, are created beings in time. We're made up of water and the dust of the earth together with a very human soul. We don't share in the Father's divine essence. So, when John says that we who believe that Jesus is the Christ are begotten of the Father, he means it in a different sense. But he *does* say it. And what he means is this: those who believe in Jesus and his saving Gospel are different than the rest of humanity. All people who come into this world are conceived in sin and death. They are subject to the curse. Spiritually they are dead. They are capable only of sin – sins of thought, word, and deed. And they are powerless to change for the better.

But God the Father, in love and mercy, gives his Son for us. The Son himself, in a way analogous to the way the Father gives himself for the Son, gives himself in love for us on the cross. He suffers and dies to pay our redemption price and to satisfy the righteous demands of God's Law. And then God causes Word of Jesus' labor of sacrificial love to come to us. It's living Word, that by the Holy Spirit who attends it, has the power to generate new and holy life in those who are dead in sin. It's the life of faith, faith that trusts in Christ and his work of atonement, faith that apprehends his righteousness: the righteousness of faith that comes not of doing but believing in Jesus. That you believe in Jesus is evidence that God has done this to you. By his Word and Spirit he has begotten in you a new person who is a living child of God.

In *this* sense you have been begotten of the Father's love. And the upshot of that is you will love the One who has begotten you and everyone else whom he has begotten. It's only natural: as the eternal Son loves the Father and delights to do his will, his will which is specifically that he give himself in sacrificial love for sinners, so we who have been begotten of the Father also love Him who gave us life and we delight in doing his will, his will being that we give ourselves in love and sacrificial service for others. And we don't need to die for them. That's been done; all taken care of by Jesus. Our Father's will for us is that we *live* for them, live for them in kindness, patience, generosity, forgiveness, and helpful service.

What's more, St. John tells us that this is not burdensome. It's what we were made for. God who gave us life through his living Word has written these instructions into our very DNA. We're programmed for it. To the extent that we alive by faith in Christ it's what we do by nature. Can't help it.

But you say, "Hold on here. That doesn't sound like me. I'm not like that. Why, I can name people, fellow children of God, to whom I have been rude and unkind. I make it a habit with some of them. I just don't like them. It often happens that I'm impatient and angry with other believers. I resent the things that they do. I see them doing stupid stuff and I think they should have to pay for their mistakes. Why should I help them out? They dug the pit they're in. Let'm live in it. How are they going to learn otherwise? And yes, I can name one or two who have offended me greatly. By their sinful behavior they caused me a lot of harm. Am I angry about it? You bet. I don't want to have anything to do with them. Forgive them? Forget it."

Any of that sound familiar? If so, in one way that's good. It means that at least you're honest about it. But in another way it's very bad; and it's important that you see and recognize it for what it is. That isn't the believer in you who thinks that way. It isn't the child of God. That's the child of this world, the spawn of Satan, the unbeliever; that's the part of you that if left unchecked will destroy what faith in Christ you have and drag you down to hell. It's evil. It's dangerous. When you see it in yourself, don't embrace it. Don't nurture it along. Don't let it grow. And don't try to hide it: cover it up and pretend it's not there. No. Kill it. Destroy it. Put it to death before it puts you to death.

How? By confessing it. By naming it for the sin that it is. By hating it, repenting of it, and by wishing to God that it were not a part of you. And then hear again the Word of your Father's forgiveness in Christ. The same Word by which he begot you at first, begets you again, and again, and again – every time you hear it. This is how he begets in you the living child of God, the child who does by nature his holy will, the child who believes that Jesus is the Christ and trusts him for salvation. This is how the Lord God instills and grows in you the living faith that overcomes the dead world.

And to ensure that you remain and continue to grow in this faith that overcomes the world, the Lord provides three witnesses that testify to the child of God within you. They are the Spirit, the water, and the blood. They are first the Spirit that Jesus gave up when he exhaled his last breath on the cross, and the water and blood that poured forth from the wound of the spear thrust into the side of his bloody corpse. These testify that Jesus did indeed die for your sin. And they are also the Spirit who continues to work through the Word of the Gospel to create and sustain faith in your heart whenever you hear it, the water of Holy Baptism by which you were reborn a child of God, and the life-giving blood of Jesus that you receive in his Holy Supper whenever and as often as you join the whole family of God in the great communion of saints who live by faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

May we who have thus been begotten of the Father's love continue to hear the voice of these three witnesses, for it is by listening to them that our heavenly Father is even now completing in us the great work he has begun: to make us his children who live in his love in time and eternity. And we can be confident that he will bring his work in us to completion on the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!