

It's been said that if you really want to know what a preacher is all about, what's at the heart and center of his teaching, or if you really want to know what a church believes, teaches, and confesses, just go to a funeral at that church. Watch what happens there. Look at what the pastor does and listen to what he says. A funeral tells you so much because it's in the funeral service that the ultimate questions of life and death; salvation, eternal destiny, and God are addressed. A funeral service is really all about "bottom-line issues." It's where you get to the heart of the matter of what a pastor or a church believes.

What hope is given to those who are mourning the loss of a dear loved one? What's the basis for that hope? What doubts are relieved? What does it all really mean—life and death? What joy is expressed in Christ Jesus in the midst of the sorrow of the loss of a loved one? Are the grieving family members left uncertain about the eternal destiny of their loved one—or worried if he or she did enough to *earn* heaven—or are they comforted by the Gospel? Are they directed to the good life, the good deeds, of the deceased—that the departed was such a wonderful person

who did his or her best—or are they directed to the work of Christ? These are the kinds of things for which you'll find a variety of answers, depending on what the preacher really believes deep down.

Today on All-Saints' Sunday, we especially think about those faithful departed who have gone on before us to be with Jesus and be at rest from their labors. But as we think about those saints who are now in heaven, we should also remember that those bottom-line issues of life and death, of salvation and eternal destiny are extremely relevant for us *right here, right now*. Our text for today teaches us about all these bottom-line issues, starting from the top: We shall see God as He really is—now and then.

The first bottom-line issue is this: God's love for us is beyond human imagination. We find it in verse 1 of our text: 'See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and (that is what) we are!'

Let's take a quick moment to compare God's way of looking at things versus peoples' way of looking at things. Peoples' way of looking at things is to say, 'If somebody does you wrong, you go get 'em back. Get even. After all, they have it coming!' But God says that He loves all people, even

while we're covered in our sins and stuck in them. That's one huge difference between God's way and **our** way of looking at things. If we get caught doing something wrong, we feel that we need to make up for that wrongdoing. And on a human level that can be very good. Like if we say or do something to hurt someone else's feelings, we want to apologize and say something nice to make him or her feel better. But when it comes to our standing before the holy, righteous God, to Whom everyone must one day give an account of their lives, if we think we can make up for our sins, and do anything, or **say** anything to make us right with God, we are sadly mistaken. That's because the more we struggle, the more we depend on ourselves to make things right with Him, the more deeply we find ourselves tangled up, sinking even more deeply.

When we sin, it's also sort of like getting trapped in quicksand. You've seen it in the movies. The more someone moves around in that quicksand, the quicker and deeper they sink. The man who's caught in quicksand needs a helper who can throw him a rope and pull him out. In Christ, that's exactly what God has done. Jesus has provided the rescue for us,

He's provided the way for us to become "children of God," completely free from the power and guilt of sin. Jesus came to live just as one of us yet remained totally without sin. Being fully innocent, He lovingly took on Himself the punishment our sins deserved. At the cross, "God made Him Who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21). Since Jesus made this loving sacrifice, we're rescued from the quicksand of our sins. His perfect righteousness covers over that ugly filth.

To the world, this is beyond comprehension (v 1). It sounds too good to be true for one thing. And for another, we Christians who believe this Good News are often called "hypocrites" because we call ourselves "children of God" and yet, try as we may to avoid it, sin is still in our lives. What it comes down to is that the world can't understand how God can call us His children, because the world doesn't know God, Who He is or how He really works. John puts it like this: "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (v 1b). But God's love is so amazing that, "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). That

is a God whose love is far deeper than anything humanly possible. God's love for us is beyond imagination, that's bottom-line issue number one.

Number two is this: God is the one who provides hope that's sure. A lot of times people think of hope as the same thing as wishful thinking. When we "hope" for something, it is more like: "I **hope** the Twins can make it to playoffs next year," rather than, "I'm **sure** the Twins will make the playoffs next year!" The point is, hope is sometimes seen by people as mere 'wishful thinking, even when it comes to the hope we have from God and in God.

Others see our hope of eternal life in Christ as the mindless chasing of utopian dreams that are impossible to ever reach. As the late scientist Stephen Hawking once put it, 'people who believe in life after death are just afraid of the dark.' Or another example, in our day-to-day lives in this world, sometimes we lose sight of God's promises and can feel that the particular situation we find ourselves in is "hopeless." "I'm never going to be happy." "I'm never going to find a good-paying job that I like." "I'm never going find someone to share my life with." "I'm hopeless."

But “hope” in Scripture is not the power of “positive thinking,” rather it is a spiritual gift. It’s based on something **outside** of us. In verse two John says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

God gives us **true** hope; hope that we and the whole world desperately needs! God has told us in His Word that He has a wonderful plan for us in heaven that goes beyond our imagining. What’s more, as ones for whom His Son died and rose again, He’s promised to never leave or forsake us now on this Earth. Because, we know from His Word that God always has been true to His promises, we have real substance to our hope. He’ll always be true to His promises for us! God has provided hope that is sure! That’s our second bottom-line issue.

Here’s number three: God is the one who purifies us for freedom that’s real (v 3). Verse three says it this way, “everyone who ... hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” We’re purified because we have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. You are baptized into Christ, His blood

shed on the cross has washed you clean through the power of the Holy Spirit working through your Baptism. You are baptized into Christ and that means you've been made pure.

It also means you are free from the power of sin. As John says in the next chapter after our text: "You, dear children, are from God and... the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 Jn 4:4) The devil, who will try to use every trick at this disposal not only to get you to commit sins but to doubt your hope and faith in Christ, is no match for God and His Word. Christ has set you free from the power of sin, death, and the devil. Whenever you're tempted to give up on your hope, or whenever you are tempted to sin, remember Christ! Remember your Baptism into Him! Remember that He is greater than the devil. You are forgiven. You are free! Free to live in God's love, which is beyond imagination! Free to live in certain hope of life in the world to come.

While we hope, while we wait eagerly, for the time when we will see God face-to-face, we can enjoy the freedom He has given us in the here and now. We can enjoy the freedom of a clear conscience that is ours by faith

in Christ. So many of us are often tormented by feelings of guilt and shame. But Christ has removed guilt and shame from us by taking them on Himself to the cross. Now, we can serve our risen Savior because we are free to do so. We can love our neighbor because Christ first loved us.

So, on this All-Saints' Sunday, we have the answer to life's—and death's—bottom-line issues: seeing God for Who He really is. We see Him as a loving God, whose love is impossible to understand for those who don't know Him. He is a God who gives us hope. Not wishful thinking, but solid hope. We are God's beloved children, and we can go to Him at any time in prayer with perfect confidence. And we know that because God's love for us is so deep that He has washed us clean of our sins, we have the freedom to serve Him, the freedom to love our neighbor, and, yes, even the freedom of a clear conscience.

This is the solid truth on which our hope for our departed loved one's rests—and it's the solid truth on which we can live our lives here and now as we see God as He truly is. Amen!