

TEXT: 1 John 3:1-8

TOPIC: God's purifying love guides God's children beyond sin to a way of life unrecognizable to the world.

SUBJECT: There is a certain subtlety to how God's children should live, and processes for living it.

TITLE: The Unrecognizable Demand

I will never forget the summer of 2011 when I was blessed to go to Liberia, Africa. I remember asking someone who'd been there what going to Africa was like. She told me that when I go to Africa, I would "come face to face with the gospel."

I came face to face with the gospel the day we visited a re-education center where young men who had been child soldiers and young women who had been forced into prostitution, learned skills for jobs they'd have in a society emerging from a long civil war.

While there, I remember our teaching professor, Dr. Robert Martin, standing at the top of a hill overlooking a valley below. The valley was populated with homes leaning against each other, covered with rusting, corrugated metal roofs. As I stood there in my thoughts, Dr. Martin softly spoke, "For now we see in a mirror darkly, then we will see face to face. For now, we know in part, but then we will know fully even as we have been fully known."

In that moment, the gospel came to life for me. In that moment, I realized ministry is far more than I had let it be up until then. In that moment, I realized ministry has always been more than most people let it be, and until people wrestle with the unrecognizable demand, it is impossible to really experience the resurrection. Before going there, let's pray.

PRAYER

There is an interesting theme in today's reading from 1 John that speaks to our adoption as God's children. The concept of adoption in ancient Rome had little to do with compassion. Adoption at the time, did not just involve children, it also included adults, who would take on the name of privileged, childless families adopting them. The adoptee would sever any ties with

their family of origin and become an entirely new person with a new context, a new name, and a new inheritance.

Adoption as God's children is similar. Adoption means taking on Christlike qualities, which are far more than simply being nice people who think their niceness is a ticket to heaven. One aspect of the unrecognizable demand is seeing that God's ways are often the opposite of our preferences. Another aspect of the unrecognizable demand means serving invisible others ahead of accommodating our comfort zones. Hence the reason 1 John compares our adoption as God's children through the resurrection. First John speaks directly into the words my professor quoted from 1 Corinthians 13:12 repeating them in a slightly different form here. When the unrecognizable demand hits people, the gospel is experienced for the first time.

As God's children – adopted through Christ – it is imperative we let the unrecognizable demand embrace us even when we don't understand it, because doing the same thing over and over never changes anything. The unrecognizable demand insists that we see our lives and our ministry together differently, so it is a ministry that doesn't just accommodate the comfortable things we want religion to be, but the unrecognizable demand requires us to change our hearts and lives, and how we think about ourselves and others. I would even go so far as to say the unrecognizable demand is an open invitation to go to the places Jesus would go, do the things Jesus did, and discover new expressions for how Jesus would be among us today. This takes time, practice, and vulnerability for the sake of courageous trust. God promises us it's well worth trusting ourselves, our lives, and our church to the unrecognizable demand God has in store, so we stop limiting ourselves. The unrecognizable demand is God's way of insisting that we live into a vision God has for our lives.

For example, the unrecognizable demand insists that we exchange our preferences for the needs of our mission field. What if the church got away from Sunday-only practices and welcomed the use of the building for a preschool or a daycare that is supported by grants and community donations? What would happen if money wasn't the priority but people and care of neighbors and creation took priority? What if fellowship was the focus rather than what songs are sung? *What if ministry was worship and worship was ministry?*

That's what it looks like to receive the unrecognizable demand. I believe the unrecognizable demand insists that we see how childhood fears of abandonment and petty grievances keep us from loving those around us who have the potential to change our lives as much as we might influence their lives.

I believe the unrecognizable demand is God's way of resurrecting us. When churches get stuck and unwilling identify with the needs of their mission field, I can't help but wonder if the church has yet to experience the empty tomb because churches empty of real ministry are tombs of their own.

I believe the unrecognizable demand God makes of us asks us get past the ways we limit ministry to identifying and realizing whatever process God has in mind, so we heal and so those around heal because people learn to keep flexible, healthy boundaries that foster integrity and gratitude in a world that can seem to lack integrity and the joy of gratefulness.

As God's adopted children, it is imperative how we be present to the here and now, so everything we do is a source of comfort here and now – not just we like what makes us comfortable – but so our walk with Christ is a walk we take today and tomorrow and every day.

When I overlooked that Liberian hovel – homes of the abject poor – I realized how important it is that I know who I am, what I am doing, and how my contributions make for a better or worse world for invisible brothers and sisters, who are neighbors across the globe.

When I overlooked that Liberian hovel, I realized the unrecognizable demand represented a call of perpetual invitation, so the church takes leaps of faith because God is not just a God of the past; God is a God of the present and the future. That's how God's vision for God's world works, and it's often contrary to how we want it to be. Maybe we'd do good to get comfortable with that. When I did, I saw the gospel for the first time.

When I heard Dr. Martin whisper 1 Corinthians 13:12, I finally understood how the unrecognizable demand has to do with more than whether church folk feel comfortable. Instead, the unrecognizable demand is a call to participate in the transformative process of the resurrection. The unrecognizable demand is God's way of inviting us to lovingly express faith, hope, and love with our actions, our attitudes, our beliefs, and our healing not just because we are children of God, but because everyone is and everyone means everyone. After all, the unrecognizable demand is often what the gospel is about, whether in Africa or Concordia, and when we see it, we may experience our greatest discomfort but that's only because we've come face to face with the gospel.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.