

**TROUBLED HEARTS: When Life Feels Fragile (I John 3:1-3)**  
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**WATCH/LISTEN:** [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/troubled-hearts-when-life-feels-fragile](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/troubled-hearts-when-life-feels-fragile)

I don't have children of my own, but I am blessed to be an aunt, and to be super involved in the lives of my niece and nephew from the moment they were born. I remember how nervous I was at first to hold them – the hand off from my sister to me equaled a bomb squad's delicate maneuvers to disarm a bomb. Whatever you do, support the neck! I envisioned their heads snapping off and rolling away if I did it wrong. Babies seem so fragile when you are inexperienced. The more I was around them, the more faith I had in my abilities and, more importantly, in their resilience.

One of my favorite memories from the first year of their lives was rocking them to sleep. My niece was especially fussy, dealing with colic, and it was a battle many times to get her to sleep. I remember different members of the family taking turns rocking her, holding her tight while she wailed and wrestled and fought against us and the thing she needed most which was sleep. As I paced with her, I would whisper in her ear, as I did with my nephew, that she was a child of God, that she was loved, and every other beautiful promise from her Creator I wanted to be a core memory for her. No matter how hard she cried, I just held her tighter, kept on walking and rocking and whispering until she gave up the fight. My favorite moment, a moment I can still sense and almost feel is the moment she would become a dead weight in my arms because it was the moment of surrender –the struggle was over, and she was asleep; an expression of absolute, unconscious trust in the one holding her. It was fragile and holy at the same time.

Often in those holy moments before I would set Morgan down in her crib – again, with the same maneuvers of a bomb squad dealing with a highly volatile explosive – in those moments, the Holy Spirit would whisper in my ear – Child, this is how God holds you. You fight, you whine, you resist the one thing you need. Yet, God is holding you tight and will not let go.

So much in life seems fragile. Relationships are broken. Conversations are minefields. Illness is an ever-present reminder of our physical fragility. We find ourselves holding our breath, afraid to exhale for fear we might unravel some last remaining thread holding all of it, and ourselves, together.

When you're feeling fragile, easily broken, vulnerable, it may seem strange to lean into our identity as children of God. The idea of being like a child might reinforce among many of us a feeling of vulnerability, fragility, dependence which we often associate with weakness. Just as Morgan resisted sleep, fighting against my embrace, we often resist and fight against trusting

and being dependent on God. Yet, when we surrender to our God-given identity as children of God, when we live dependent on God, when we trust the One who holds us, we find exactly what we need for our fragile lives. We find a safe place to rest.

Our text today is from 1 John – a writing that Professor and Priest Martin Luther said, “... is an outstanding Epistle (letter). It can buoy up afflicted hearts.”<sup>1</sup> May it buoy or sustain our fragile hearts today. Let’s read verse 1-3 in chapter 3.

*What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we’re called children of God! That’s who we really are. But that’s also why the world doesn’t recognize us or take us seriously, because it has no idea who he is or what he’s up to. But friends, that’s exactly who we are: children of God. And that’s only the beginning. Who knows how we’ll end up! What we know is that when Christ is openly revealed, we’ll see him—and in seeing him, become like him. All of us who look forward to his Coming stay ready, with the glistening purity of Jesus’ life as a model for our own. 1 John 3:1-3, MSG*

We are children of God. But what does that mean and how will it help when life is fragile and broken?

**The text begins first with the truth that we are marvelously loved.** *What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it—we’re called children of God! That’s who we really are. (v.1)*

Author and preacher Tony Campolo told the story of his friend who had a 5-year-old daughter. One day during a thunderstorm--lightning flashing, thunder roaring--he went to check on her. He found his little girl standing on the windowsill leaning spread eagle against the glass.

He said, "Jennifer, what are you doing?"

She said, "I think God's trying to take my picture."

Here's a little girl who knows who she is; she knows her value; she knows her worth.<sup>2</sup>

As we get older and find ourselves sitting in the windowsill during storms, many of us struggle to see the flash of an adoring Parent. Instead, we see the flash of a disappointed god, a hard-to-please god, an angry god. Our shame, our loss of innocence, our experience with judgmental humans has changed the story, and we struggle to remember who we are and to believe we are worthy of love. We struggle to believe God likes us and wants to take our picture. For many of us, God’s love for us feels fragile. Our identity as children of God seems vulnerable and easily broken.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Campolo, "If I Should Wake Before I Die," Preaching Today, Tape No. 124.

Yet, our text today whispers into our ears: “You are children of God! You are loved.” We’re reminded love is extended to us by God. It is a gift to us from the One who loves us and calls us children. We can’t request it; we can’t earn it. And we can’t decline it. Because it has nothing to do with us and everything to do with God. The status of being children of God is a gift or the outcome of receiving the gift of God’s love.

As the text today continues to embrace us and pace with us, it whispers, “You are loved. You are children of God. Now, as children of God who have received God’s love, live in response to God’s love.” Let’s read verse 2 and 3 again.

*But friends, that’s exactly who we are: children of God. And that’s only the beginning. Who knows how we’ll end up! What we know is that when Christ is openly revealed, we’ll see him—and in seeing him, become like him. All of us who look forward to his Coming stay ready, with the glistening purity of Jesus’ life as a model for our own.*

The Christian life can be regarded as a response to God’s love, as obedience to Christ’s commands, or as purification (or preparation) in hope.<sup>3</sup> But the key to the obedience and to the hope is first receiving the gift of God’s love.

When I would whisper into my niece’s ear as a baby, she would sometimes listen, and other times, she’d fight against me even more. I love her fiesty spirit. My nephew’s response was different. When I would whisper into his ear, he would listen. And when I stopped, after a moment, Blake would push his ear up against my mouth as if to say, “keep whispering”. I would smile and start again, “You are a child of God. You are loved. God has great plans for you.” I know he didn’t understand the words or what I was saying, but I believed then as I do now that God has the power to plant those truths into the depths of Blake’s mind and heart so that when he needs them most, when life seems fragile, the Spirit of God will resurrect them, whisper them again, and Blake will press his ear close and remember who he is and how deeply he is loved. And the undeserved gift of that love will be the cause for his obedience and hope in Christ.

When we view God as a disappointed god, a hard-to-please god, an angry god, then our relationship with God seems as fragile as the world around us. Of course, it would feel fragile, because we know ourselves too well. We are broken. We are weak. We are, as author Brennan Manning says, a bundle of paradoxes. “I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games.”<sup>4</sup> And we’ve lived enough life to know that there is not much grace for these paradoxes whether grace from others, grace from ourselves. Our

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<sup>3</sup> D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press, 1991), p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out*

brokenness is something we're trained to hide from others for fear it will end in rejection. So, it is quite easy to project this upon God, and to expect that our relationship to God, too, is fragile and vulnerable. And when God's love feels conditional or any relationship feels conditional, we usually respond in one of two ways: we either try harder, living a vicious, fruitless cycle of works that leaves us exhausted and still feeling fragile; or we reject before we can be rejected, which honestly also feels fragile and vulnerable as we constantly live with walls up.

There is a better way being whispered into our ears today, if we will press our ears in to hear. "What marvelous love the Father has extended to us! When we receive this gift of God's love – because of who God is and God alone – we can truly rest in God's embrace because we are children of God. We will see Christ and our hope is in Him. While life may be fragile, God's love for us is not."

Today, some of us may feel like we can't get back to the place where we can declare in faith like that 5-year-old girl in the windowsill that God loves us and wants to take our picture. We've lived a lot of life and child-like faith seems impossible. But let me share a story of a man on the other end of the life spectrum as told by Brennan Manning in his book, "The Wisdom of Tenderness."<sup>5</sup>

Several years ago, Edward Farrell of Detroit took his two-week vacation to Ireland to celebrate his favorite uncle's 80th birthday. On the morning of the great day, Ed and his uncle got up before dawn, dressed in silence, and went for a walk along the shores of Lake Killarney. Just as the sun rose, his uncle turned and stared straight at the rising orb. Ed stood beside him for 20 minutes with not a single word exchanged. Then the elderly uncle began to skip along the shoreline, a radiant smile on his face.

After catching up with him, Ed commented, "Uncle Seamus, you look very happy. Do you want to tell my why?"

"Yes, lad," the old man said, tears washing down his face. "You see, the Father is fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me."

My friends, God is, indeed very fond of you. God is trying to take your picture. God is embracing you ... even while you thrash about and cry and reject what you really need because it feels too risky and fragile. You are safe in the arms of Jesus. You, all of you – every paradox within you – is safe in the arms of Jesus. While life may be fragile, God's love for you is not.

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<sup>5</sup> Brennan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness* (Harper San Francisco, 2002), pp. 25-26.

As we conclude this Troubled Hearts series today, our prayer is that when you feel fatigued, fearful, or fragile, you will remember and claim this truth: The Good Shepherd will never stop holding you tightly, whispering into your ear,

“You are my child. I love you. Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in me.”

“You are my child. I love you. Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in me.”

“You are my child. I love you. Do not let your heart be troubled. Believe in me.”