

“Repeat! Memorize! Rejoice!” 1 John 3:1-7

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

You have been given something incredibly precious. Something that every living soul craves for in the depth of their hearts. Something that changes everything. Your God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have given it to you as a free gift.

John speaks about it in his letter, which we read today. What is it? I am talking about your status, about your core identity, everlasting identity, about your significance, about your worth, about who we truly are, namely, children of God. Children of God!

This is an incredible gift, it changes everything, or should we say – it has the potential to change everything, but unfortunately, we struggle to enjoy this gift as fully as we should. Partly it is because of external circumstances, and partly it is because we struggle to fully embrace what this gift means for us.

Let's reflect [1] on **what those external circumstances are**, and [2] **how we ourselves have failed**, and [3] then let's consider **how we could reclaim this wonderful gift** of our Triune God and allow it to transform our lives.

First, external circumstances. This is a well-known fact, and has been for a while, that churches in the Western world have been on decline. Sometimes not just on decline, but vanishing all together.

The brightest minds have tried to understand this situation, and find what could be done to change it. One of the main problems in the Western world is this. The affluent society, and especially so-called elites, that is those people who shape the views of our society, usually have a very low view on Christianity.

They despise Christian worldview and our way of life. They look down on Christians, they publicly mock our faith, they consider us as some sort of remnant from darker ages, less enlightened, superstitious enemies of progress and freedom. As people on the wrong side of history, bigoted, unloving.

We want it or not, but many among the rich and powerful consider Christians as people of lower status. Imagine, how would people look at you if you introduced yourself this way: “Hi, my name is Guntars, and... I am a Christian!” If I said that I am a

writer, or a speaker, or a spiritual person, that would sound acceptable and normal. But a Christian... It is almost like something is wrong with us.

Now, how have we as Christians responded to such a situation? This is about **how we ourselves have failed**. We haven't stood tall and winsomely confessed what we believe and let our lives shine, no! Maybe we didn't know how, instead we have tried to please people and to become what we are not.

You know what self-esteem is? That's how we perceive ourselves, how we value ourselves. Can you picture how people with low self-esteem look and act? They are shy, unsure, afraid to take a stand, vulnerable to critique, they are desperate to please others to gain their favour, they really don't think much of themselves.

This is exactly how we could describe many churches in the West. What about our own LCA? We don't think much of ourselves, for we are often looked down on by society, by our neighbours, and even family members and friends, perhaps, sometimes even feeling uneasy about the fact that we belong to the Church.

Churches have been very vulnerable to critique, to such an extent that they are happy to do whatever it takes, so that only they could get some affirmation from those who criticize them, a little smile from those cultural influencers.

That's why it was thought to be a good idea to change with time, to adjust to the expectations of society, to become more like the world around us, when we embrace the same values and practices and then... then they will like us! Sure...

It has been done a lot. Many churches have tried to become more like the world and have tried to get rid of whatever makes us look different. It is sad to list all the foolish actions that had been done with good intentions.

Many churches have exchanged Biblically rich repentance and forgiveness sermons to shallow feel-good encouragements. Many have exchanged the preaching of God's glorious Kingdom and our eternal hope, New Heavens and New Earth, to little chats about social justice or politics. Many have exchanged God's wisdom to popular self-help psychology. "If we will be relevant, they will come..."

Many churches have exchanged our theologically rich hymns to songs which repeat three words again and again. Others have abandoned the millennia deep traditions of the Divine Service in never ending attempts to entertain ignorant crowds. "If we will be more like them, they will come..."

Many churches have exchanged our beautiful Church architecture to sad looking shed-like buildings. Too many have exchanged Christian virtues and holy life to indulgence of almost every sin, of course, in the name of love and inclusivity. "If we embrace what society values, they will come..."

Haven't Christians acted as people with low self-esteem? And after this was done, we began to wonder – why are our churches shrinking? Because there was almost nothing left that would make the Church the Church. No more repentance, no more forgiveness, no more beauty, no more depth, no more wisdom.

As one of the adult converts in my previous parish said: “Why would I even consider joining a church that doesn’t respect herself and is willing to bend backwards to please me?!” Perhaps we can recognize how much of this has been happening for decades in our LCA as well. We have been a part of the problem.

Thanks be to God, there have always been faithful Christians who have cherished what is true, and beautiful, and holy, and precious, and wise, and deep and pure. The Lord willing, more and more will learn again how to appreciate what is worth appreciation and not something cheap and shallow.

The truth is, those whom the Father draws to Christ, and especially the younger generations, have no problems with what faithful churches look like. They have no problems with rituals, or mystery, or holiness, or beauty, or reverence, or hymns, or liturgy, or virtuous life.

On the contrary, they thirst for it. They thirst for the sacred. Because these things are the answers to our deepest longings. People flourish when they receive these treasures. Just one example. A few years ago, pastor Adrian Kitson shared his experience from his trip to the US.

He visited a rapidly growing church in Chicago. They had to build a new magnificent building as they couldn’t host everyone for their services. Their congregation consists mostly of young people in their twenties and thirties. What was their secret?

There was no secret. They have tried to remain faithful to what is entrusted to us. They summarize their emphasis as – solid Biblical preaching of Law and Gospel and mystery and beauty of the Divine service. That simple.

God’s wisdom that by far supersedes the wisdom of this world, mystery of God’s own presence among us in the Word and in the Sacrament, beauty of our sacred buildings and our sacred music – this is what people crave for in their hearts, and this is what we are called and sent to share with them.

But... somewhere along the line we dropped the ball. We have believed what the world says. Now I want you to pick it up again. This is our last topic, **how we could reclaim this wonderful gift**, how we can embrace it.

I want you to pay attention to what John, guided by the Holy Spirit, says. I want you to memorize and repeat these words to yourself ten times per day. Or twenty, or more if needed... until it fully sinks – who you are, what your status is.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. Beloved, we are God's children now, and [...] when He appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

God the Father values you so much, that He has adopted you as His child. This is who you are. A child of God. This is who you are now, and when Jesus Christ appears in His divine, heavenly glory, you will be made like Him. Think about this! Again, and again! Meditate upon it! Repeat it! Memorize it! Rejoice in it!

See, all human beings are created in God's own image and likeness, and that makes every human being infinitely precious in God's eyes. But you are so much more. Not only God's creatures, but also His children. His own family. Jesus has made you His own. So that you would live with Him in everlasting blessedness.

And when Jesus returns to bring forth the New Heavens and New Earth, you are going to be like Him, and you will see Him as He is. If anyone should be rejoicing in their status, their identity, their significance, it is us, Christians. It really doesn't matter how the world looks at us. They don't know God, they don't know what a glorious future is coming, and they don't know us.

But we know the Triune God. What is even more, He knows you. He is your loving Father in Heaven. Jesus Christ calls you His friends, His brothers and sisters. His family. The Holy Spirit indwells in you and unites you with the Holy God and with all His saints with the most intimate bond.

If anyone on this planet has a supremely high status, it is us, Christians. We are God's heirs and co-heirs with Jesus. Eternal life and eternal reign with Jesus is ours. That is this hope and assurance that has allowed so many of our brothers and sisters to stand steadfast facing ridicule, persecutions, and even death. Because they were full of joy!

They could do it, for they knew who they were. And I want you to know it too.

Memorize and repeat these words to yourself and to one another. You are children of God! And when the Son of God returns, you will be like Him and will see Him as He is.

This is the greatest dream that anyone could dream of, and for you it is not a dream, it is a given reality. Promised by the Triune God. Sealed in your baptism. You can't change how the world thinks about you, only the Holy Spirit can.

But you can be certain about how significant, how precious you are to our God as His children. He is our Father, and which father would want His children to suffer from low self-esteem? Especially, when He knows who you truly are, and what a glorious future He has prepared for you.

We need to learn again to appreciate, to rejoice, to be proud and winsomely share the treasures entrusted to us. Our God has revealed to us His wisdom. He invites us in His presence. He has given us His new life-creating word as Law and Gospel.

He has given us beautiful liturgy where He comes to bestow His gifts upon us, beautiful music and architecture, He has taught us how to lead wise, virtuous and holy life, how to be the light to this world.

This is, who you truly are, this is, what you are called to enjoy and live out in its fullness and share with others. This is why the Holy Spirit dwells with you, to enable you to live this way. This is why the Triune God comes to you every week – to bless you, to embrace you, to strengthen you, to make you wise, so that you could live every day, knowing with your whole heart and mind, who you truly are.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to you, that you should be called children of God; and so you are. ... and you know that when He appears you shall be like Him, because you shall see Him as He is.”

Memorize it! Repeat it! Rejoice! Amen.