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Patricia had it easy; she is receiving Mother's Day cards and gifts, but she is not a mother, and she did not have to become a mother in order to have these four grand-daughters. What is equally unfair, in this case, to me, is that for the three that were born after we were married, she got to hold each before I did!

Our oldest grand-daughter, Emma, was almost six and one-half when she became our grand-daughter, but the younger three, separated by just under two years total, are another matter, and all three are in dance recitals in just a few weeks, Grace (Emma's younger sister) in three weeks, Violet and Siena in five.

The latter two, my older son Michael's daughters, live in Tampa, and from just after Christmas until just before Mother's Day, that puts them not all that far from the winter home in Orlando of my best-friend and college roommate, Emerson Lacey, and his wife Martha, with whom Carol and I double-dated in college. And while I could blame it on my daughter-in-law Angie's pride in her girls, an annual highlight for Michael and Angie and Violet and Siena is the chance to see Martha and Emerson once or twice during the latter's winter in Florida.

Last year was the first year that Violet and Siena had a dance recital, and when visiting with Martha and Emerson, the girls said that they could not show Emerson any of their dance moves "because you might tell Grandpa John."

And there is a near mirror image of Martha's and Emerson's relation with my kids and grandkids in my relation with theirs. While early in their marriage I had the dubious honor of being godfather to — get this — Martha's and Emerson's Siamese cat, Emily, Carol and I later became God-parents — OK, "sponsors" in Presbyterian language — of their first-born son (and not quite two years later, they of Michael). I did the wedding of their youngest child, and baptized two of their grandkids.

Oh, and as I probably mentioned around the time of their 50th wedding anniversary last October, which led to my taking a Sunday off to attend church with them at the University of Illinois campus in Urbana, Illinois, Carol and I and the pastor were the only people with them in that same church when they secretly eloped. Secretly, because their families were expecting them to have a big wedding the following June, but seeing Carol and me married, by then for a year, even though Emerson was at Illinois in Champaign-Urbana and Martha at Northwestern's School of Nursing in Chicago, they wanted to be married "now." They figured they could go through a fancier wedding the following spring, and no one would be any the wiser.

It was a romantic idea, a great plan, but! Emerson had relatives in central Illinois, and an aunt noticed in the public records in the newspaper that Martha and Emerson had received a marriage license, and the aunt let his mother know. Although I cannot recall exactly when the aunt conveyed that news, one day during spring break the following April, I drove from Urbana to Chicago to go to a White Sox game with Emerson. I stopped at the Lacey family's home in the close-in western suburb of Oak Park, where,

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Emerson's dad came to the door and said, "John Johnson, I don't know if I should let you in"; Emerson's mother greeted me with, "John Johnson you naughty boy."

When, a year and one-half later, Carol and I returned from our year in England and I was to begin law school at the University of Chicago, which is on the south side of Chicago, Oak Park, where my step-mother had grown up and my grandparents then lived, was the only area reasonably close to the University with which I was familiar. We ended up renting an apartment that was only about 200 yards from Emerson's parents' house. On Halloween, 1968, we "dressed up" five week old Michael as a pirate and took him "Trick or Treating" to Emerson's parents.

. . . Oh, and I should tell you, when my dad was in the hospital in Elgin, Illinois for a heart operation in summer 2001, Emerson stopped to visit my dad while on a motorcycle ride (he has since given up motor-cycling).

My parents loved Martha and Emerson, and i know the feeling was reciprocated. Their kids and grandkids know me or first knew me as "Uncle John," and it goes the other way as well.

Giving Hilary Clinton her due, it takes, if not a village, *an extended family* to raise a child, and an "extended family" does not have to have any shared *bloodline*, as I hope you can gather from what has grown out of Emerson's and my beautiful college friendship.

This *extended family anecdote* is all brought about from that amazing little letter, 1 John, the focus of my second semester of Greek back in seminary. I defend my translation, which Amanda read, "*everyone who loves the one – God -- from whom he has been born loves the one born,*" but the less literal Greek translation of the NRSV is what provoked my musings: "*everyone who loves the parent loves the child.*"

I love Emerson's kids and loved his parents first because I loved — love — Emerson; Emerson loves my granddaughters because he loves me. But in a larger sense, what I think the writer of 1 John is trying to say is not just that we love Jesus the Son because we love God the Father, but rather, we love one another *because we love God!* In the words of that great — but sadly unacknowledged as so — translator from the Greek, "*we know that we love the children of God, because we love God and keep his commandments.*"

"*[W]e know that we love the children of God, because we love God*" "*and,*" the writer continues, "*keep his commandments.*" . . . or so did I translate the passage.

But I like also that somewhat looser translation of the NRSV: "*everyone who loves the parent loves the child.*" After all, it is Mother's Day, so the gender neutral *parent* works every bit as well as *father*. It works every bit as well because we are using human terms and applying them to God

so that we can better understand our relationship with God and God's relations with us! So that we can better understand *God's* love — and can better understand as well *why* we love.

I am never completely sure how to handle Mother's Day. Some years I enjoy reading about Abraham's wife Sarah's slave girl, Hagar, as I did with the kids, and how through the tears of Hagar the mother, God heard the voice, the cries, of her baby, Ishmael. But both to avoid too much saccharine and because not all mother-child relations have been good ones — I would hope Patricia would share her story with you, — I tread tentatively on Mother's Day. Sometimes, as with Patricia, a grandmother was the key figure in raising a child, and other times a grandmother's role, if not the most central, is highly crucial, such as with Heidi and those three wonderful granddaughters whose presence when they are here enriches all of us. Indeed, I want to use three items related to Heidi to complete my discussion of this wonderful passage of Scripture from the epistle of 1 John.

Allen Saunders, please stand up long enough for people who might not know you to put a face with your name. Now sit down; please do not steal my pulpit! Sandra was telling me how last Sunday, Heidi's youngest, Holly, who is four, was sitting on Allen's lap during worship before he and Sandra took the kids downstairs where Allen and Sandra were teaching. Holly loves Allen, and why? Because in Allen she senses unconditional love. And why does Allen show that love? He hardly knows Holly. He shows it because he loves God. Allen might not be willing to say it quite that way, but as a member of *this* extended family, Allen is aware of something different in our presence even from his comradeship when he was in the Navy. Allen loves Holly because that is the kind of person Allen is, a person who knows that he himself experiences God's love.

Now, I said I was going to say something more about Heidi. Heidi came to us — three years ago, four, I do not remember for sure — because a friend of mine at the church of which Heidi was a member, the Presbyterian church in Casa Grande, asked me to see if I could be of help to Heidi. I do not have any interest in pirating people from any other church, but I also do not have any interest in limiting pastoring to members of this church — as our Acts reading shows, our call to serve God's children is not limited even to *extended* family. So I called Heidi, but never, ever asked her if she would have an interest in joining. But she liked it here, and asked to join, and, well . . . Heidi was covered with tattoos! I have a nephew with even more tattoos, and I just do not understand the concept. Now it might seem as though that is completely irrelevant, except that as Sandra and I were talking this week, I realized that *I had completely forgotten that Heidi has tattoos* — and I bet most of you had forgotten as well, and when you look at Heidi, you see not a woman with tattoos, but a child of God, like each of us, an imperfect yet beloved child of God. And my point is simply this: we have all taken Heidi into *our extended family* because she is a child of God as are we. We love God; we love the parent, and so we love the child.

And what has come of that? Anyone who does not feel blessed by what Heidi has brought, and not just in the form of these three granddaughters, is, shall I say, “missing out.” Heidi, like another member of our church family of whom I have spoken, has helped us to experience the highest form of love, which is not simply a vague love *for* God, but the necessary element of love for God: *God-like love for the children of God!*

And the third aspect in which Heidi figures is this: she experiences, in a more difficult form than most, the kind of mental-emotional health issues I discussed a few weeks back — and is willing to have her struggles be shared so *that others will not feel they must hide their own*, but can come to seek help. In that, her love for you is equally God-like.

We have all had mothers, yet not all of us have known from our mothers what we think of as motherly love. Yet, we have it in a loving God, the proof our loving this God who loves us is to be found, I think, in that each and every one of us can give a kind of idealized motherly love to others *because we love God*. It is not that we have bloodline relationships of the form Amanda has with Paris or Doug with his kids or Heidi with her granddaughters, and yet it is a *blood* relationship:

“For who is the one who conquers the world if not the one who believes that Jesus is the son of God? This is he who came in water and blood. Jesus Christ,”

Conquers the world! Its shortcomings, its hatreds, its prejudices, its problems.

I John is the same epistle that tells us that we love because he loved us first, but because he did so, with him as an example, it is easy to view all God’s children as part of our extended family, an extended family that shares not so much a shared bloodline as a shared parent, God the Father — and Mother, maybe Grandmother and Grandfather — of us all.

Allen, can *we all* sit on your lap?