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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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1 John 1:1–2:2  
Fellowship with God

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon topic this morning is “Fellowship with God.” It is an idea that comes from our Epistle Lesson. 1 John 1:3 says this:

<sup>3</sup>that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have *fellowship with us*; and *our* fellowship is *with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*. (1 John 1:3, RSV)

The one who is writing this is St. John. By tradition, he is one of the Twelve, and so he himself had fellowship with Jesus, lucky man that he is. But in this passage he speaks of another kind of fellowship: apostolic fellowship with the people. He speaks of fellowship “with us,” the apostles. That is, he tells his congregation that fellowship “with us” - with the apostles - is possible *for them*. Furthermore, he says that fellowship with the apostles includes fellowship with “the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” John is writing to his people because he wants them to have fellowship with God. I want that too. I want it for myself. I want it for you too, and for your children and your friends. Indeed, I want it for the whole world.

## **IN THE BEGINNING**

Such fellowship with God was our original blessing. We were made for that fresh from the hand of God. And it would sure be good to regain it. Then we would live more in the light and we would be better people. Fellowship with God: that’s what I’m after.

Adam and Eve had such fellowship in the Garden. We read of it in Genesis 3. It is a passage that fills me with wonder, to think that God himself would walk in the garden and call out for humanity, as if calling for friends:

<sup>8</sup>And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup>And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? (Genesis 3:8-9, KJV)

“Where are you, Adam? Where are you, Eve?” How many times had the Lord and Adam and Eve walked together in the cool of the day and discussed things? Perhaps ten thousand times, until that sad day when Adam and Eve hid from the Lord.

When a good person comes along, it often makes the rest of us even better, gives us a higher image of what is possible for us, and gives us a chance to learn about more noble ways of life. You might have someone in your life like that – someone who makes you better. I hope you do! Imagine, then, what it must have been like to have had fellowship with God in the garden. We have so many questions about our world that we would love to ask. We have such yearning in our hearts to be good people. If we walked with God and talked with him, then it would be bound to improve us. Fellowship with God would inspire us.

But they fouled it up. Adam and Eve: they disrupted the friendly fellowship they had enjoyed with their Maker. Then they were expelled from the Garden, and cherubim with flaming swords block the way back in.

## UNTIL JESUS

That is, those cherubim with flaming swords blocked the way back to friendly fellowship with God *until* Jesus came along. Then again God called out to people. He came to the fishermen and called to them, “Peter, Andrew, James, John, where art thou? Follow me.” And in the following, those fishermen started upon a path that would change them into fishers of humanity, founders of the church, giants of faith, residents of heaven, and colleagues with the angels. Fellowship with God is not always easy, but if we hang in there, it is bound to make us better.

You and I do not yet have fellowship with Jesus in quite the same way that the Twelve did. They walked and talked and ate with him. They witnessed his miracles, heard his preaching, and beheld the manner of his life – the way “he went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). Our Gospel Lesson emphasizes that after the resurrection of Jesus, he appeared to them as a living man, flesh and blood, wounds and all. He invited his disciples to touch him. You and I do not have fellowship with Jesus in that way.

And yet St. John would have us know that Easter means the renewal of divine fellowship. It is as if the resurrection of Jesus means that those cherubim with the shining swords must step aside, and the Lord himself from within the Garden calls out to us, “Gregory, come in and walk with me again the cool of the evening.” Each of you insert your own name, “*Name*, come here to me. Come, hear my word, walk in my ways, and have peace.”

One day, when the Holy Spirit is laying us to rest, our breath will slow and become a rattle and soon we will be off to heaven, to fellowship with God. The great privilege of these present threescore and ten years is to seek that divine fellowship even now. For each element of that imaginary call back into the garden is available to us now. Even now, we can hear God’s word in his holy Church, walk in his ways in our daily life, and have peace come what may. Indeed, the

trick of the Christian life is to so live in fellowship with God now that it will be natural and in full momentum with our present life that we should have fellowship with God in eternity.

## **THINGS FALL APART**

Things begin to fall apart when we lose fellowship with the best ones among us.

Let me offer you an illustration from my military days back when I was young. It was one of the most intense experiences I had back then, and it forever impressed upon me the importance of fellowship with good people. The military exercise was called SERE. Some other people in our congregation might have gone through SERE too. The word is an acronym for “Survival, Escape, Resistance, and Evasion.” I want to speak briefly of the Resistance phase of the exercise.

We were gathered in a big tent, with hoods over our heads, so that we could see nothing. We lived in darkness. We never knew when we would be kicked in the stomach or whatever. We were given no food or water for the longest time. And we were exposed to continual indoctrination, condemning the United States and praising a mythical land called the PDR – the “People’s Democratic Republic.” These were the days of the Vietnam War.

Our particular tent did well, at first. We made no compromises. We would not curse our land, we would not reveal information, not even for food or water.

But then, some of the strong ones among us were removed for individual interrogation, including water torture.

Some of those strong ones returned to the tent with their honor intact. The problem is that while they were gone, things fell apart in the tent. By the time the strong ones returned, the compromises had begun. Soon there was a continual stream of soldiers heading to the broadcast booth to speak aloud their name and to confess that they had switched allegiance to the PDR. Losing fellowship with the best ones among us did us all in.

Ordinary life is not so full of stress as SERE was. I hope none of you have to go through such stress. And yet, sometimes you do. Sometimes your family or your place of work or your lifelong friends are tempted to yield to the pressure and to go wrong. Then it helps if one of you can remain strong. Above all, it helps if at least one of you can maintain fellowship with God. It can keep things from falling apart.

## **LOVING THE LIGHT**

St. John teaches us that maintaining this crucial fellowship with God means that we must love the light and flee from darkness. He means that we must turn from sin:

<sup>6</sup>If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; <sup>7</sup>but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1John 1:6, RSV)

Glad to say, St. John follows up this call to holiness of life by speaking of the possibility of forgiveness and getting back on track:

<sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9, RSV)

The goal of everything in our Christian life is fellowship with God. That is the point of Baptism, when we commit our lives into fellowship with Jesus. That is the point of Confession and Absolution, that we might swim back to the boat after we have fallen into sin, climb back in and sail again with Jesus. That is the point of reading the Bible, of prayer, and of the Holy Communion: that we will seek the company of the best One among us. Do not underestimate the importance of this, not only for our own spiritual lives, but also for the sake of others around us. Things are tempted to fall apart if no one is trying to maintain fellowship with God, so let us be among those who are trying, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.