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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
Easter 5B, April 28, 2024  
John 15:1-8  
The Vine and the Branches

- ☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!  
☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

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

At the start of this sermon, let me extend greetings to you from a person who is very dear to us here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. I mean our longtime Pastoral Associate David Lotz. Pastor Lotz and his wife, Norma, are retired in Florida. I spoke to him recently by phone and he asked me to pass on his love to you all.

Pastor Lotz was Pastoral Associate here for 27 years, starting in 1974 and finishing in 2001. Can you believe how quickly time passes? That was almost 23 years ago now. A good number of you probably do not even know Pastor Lotz. Sunday by Sunday, he was with us here at Immanuel. But his day job was that of a theology professor. He was Washburn Professor of Church History at Union Theological Seminary on the Upper West Side here in town. He was a distinguished professor.

And he had a number of faculty colleagues who were distinguished professors too. One of them was Catholic Bible scholar Raymond E. Brown. Fr. Brown wrote massive, learned, and respected commentaries on the New Testament — especially on this morning’s Gospel, St. John. Let me tell you one of Fr. Brown’s themes about St. John’s Gospel.

He says that of all the evangelists in the New Testament, John is the one who most emphasizes the relation of the individual Christian to Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Certainly John believed in the Church as a collective, a body, *a people* among whom our risen Jesus is pleased to dwell. But St. John taught that praise of the Church as a whole should not set aside a personal relationship between Jesus and us. Jesus loves us and we are to love him. The sermon hymn we just sang is very much in the spirit of John’s Gospel, “Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart” (LBW 325). We are fond of saying that Jesus loves *us*. Now, in this sermon, we are rather reversing things and lifting up the importance of our loving Him!

Fr. Brown points out that St. John shifts the image of the church away from what he calls “construction” language to more living and intimate language —

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, Chapter 6 (Paulist Press: New York, 1984).

“construction,” as in buildings. So, in Ephesians and in First Peter we read that Jesus is the “cornerstone” of the church. In Ephesians, for example, we read this:

<sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup>in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup>in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22, RSV)

This “construction” language is the basis for a hymn we love so much here at Immanuel, “The Church’s One Foundation”:

The church’s one foundation  
is Jesus Christ, her Lord;  
she is his new creation  
by water and the word.  
From heav’n he came and sought her  
to be his holy bride;  
with his own blood he bought her,  
and for her life he died. (LBW 369, verse 1)

I do not doubt that St. John believed this too. He believed that Jesus Christ is the church’s “one foundation.” But the problem with construction language like this is that a foundation can do its job, and we can more or less forget about it. I mean, I am delighted by the cornerstone of our church building and the date of our church’s construction: 1886. But so long as the cornerstone does its job, the life of the church goes on, pretty much unmindful of the cornerstone.

So, John shifts his image of the church toward more living things. Last Sunday, St. John spoke of the flock and its Good Shepherd. The relationship between the Good Shepherd and the individual sheep is intimate. There is a knowledge back and forth. The sheep value the voice of the Shepherd. They will not heed the voice of a stranger. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and they him. And so Jesus says:

<sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me... (John 10:14, RSV)

Furthermore, the Good Shepherd wants his sheep to have life — even eternal life. And Jesus says this:

<sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; <sup>28</sup>and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:27-28, RSV)

So, that is last Sunday. John compares Jesus not so much to a cornerstone, but to a Good Shepherd.

Now, this Sunday, St. John compares the relationship of Jesus and us to that of a vine and its branches. Again, it is a living, intimate relationship. The branches cannot live without the vine. *We* cannot live — not really — unless we abide with Jesus. He is the source of our life — not just in heaven, but day by day, week by week.

Fr. Brown points out that St. John and his church certainly knew that Peter was the preeminent disciple and the leading figure in the early church. And yet, St. John will not let Peter get away with leading the church without first swearing that he *loves* Jesus and *loves* the people. It is a moving passage at the end of St. John's Gospel. Three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him, Jesus. As far as John is concerned, you can't be a true pastor in the church if you do not love Jesus. Three times, then, Jesus presses this question upon Peter. It is a breakfast conversation along the sea shore:

<sup>15</sup>When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." (John 21:15, RSV)

And if Peter does love Jesus then Jesus says that Peter must "feed my lambs" (John 21:15), "tend my sheep" (John 21:16). If Peter is a believer, if *any* of us are believers, then we must be people of love, loving both Jesus and our fellow lambs and sheep in the church.

St. John is the one who especially speaks of "love." And so, we have that great introductory line to the footwashing story:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (John 13:1, RSV)

Indeed, the whole start of the human story is that our Maker *loves*:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, RSV)

As John tells the story, Jesus loved his friends:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Laz'arus. (John 11:5, RSV)

And is it pretty clear that Mary Magdalene loved Jesus. We see that by her grief at this tomb and by her joy and impulse to rush forward to Jesus when she realizes that he is alive (John 20).

If you have a Bible concordance and look up the word "love," you will find it appears in St. John's Gospel far more than in any other book of the New Testament. And the next most frequent use of the word "love" is in a letter of John's — First John. We have a great example in the opening words of today's Second Lesson:

<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

<sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8, RSV)

So, I bet you get my point: St. John believes along with the rest of the New Testament that the Church is a group. It is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9, RSV). He believes along with the rest of the church that to be baptized brings us into the church. But John also believes that *as members of the church, one by one*, it is our job to love Jesus and to love one another.

I have seen this before: When we sing "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart," some of you get tears in your eyes. Yes, even sophisticated New Yorkers get tears when they think of their love for Jesus. That is how it should be.

In the wee hours, there are mothers and fathers in our land who pray for their children. They shed tears for their children, they are so worried for them. I think St. John would have us believe that in the wee hours, Jesus prays for us and weeps for us. The Bible says that Jesus is our great "intercessor" (Romans 8:34, Hebrews 7:25). He intercedes for us because he loves us.

And through the centuries, there have been Christians who have loved Jesus in return. They have longed to hear his voice, because that is one way of going about loving someone. You seek the voice of your beloved. And so, Christians read the Bible and sing the hymns of the Church, listening for the

voice of their Good Shepherd. Again, Christians through the generations have been grateful for Jesus. That is how it is when you love someone. You are glad that this world contains that one. When Christians think of what a good Man Jesus is, and then ponder that Jesus died for them, they should not remain unmoved by this, but find themselves loving Jesus for his goodness.

When Christians through the ages find themselves at the grave of a loved one, their tears of love for the one who has passed should mix with their tears of love for Jesus who can receive their loved one and raise that one up to life again.

And finally, as we become elderly and ponder our end, we should love Jesus even more, for soon we will see him, with our own eyes, and we will understand things better by and by.

St. John would have us understand that there is no real life for us apart from Jesus. And so he speaks of the vine and the branches:

<sup>4</sup>Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (John 15:4, RSV)

To abide in Jesus means that we maintain our connection to him. We do not wander off. What better way is there for us to abide in Jesus than to love him and to make it our business to love him even more as time goes by? Abide, then, in Jesus. Let your heart grow warm thinking of him. Altogether, love Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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