

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you O God, my strength and my joy... Amen.

About a year ago, in fact it was on Valentine's Day, 2022, I received a phone call from the synod office with the joyful news that they had discerned a church that they thought would be a good fit for my first call.

I was told it was St. John Lutheran Church in the Village of Maine. Being a Wausau native, and growing up in an ELCA church, I was shocked to realize that I had never heard of, nor been to St. John.

Immediately I tried to find out as much information as I could. I poured over your Ministry Site Profile, I did a deep dive into your website, and I asked around about St. John.

I was fascinated right off the bat, when I read through your history, the details of your ministry, and when I discovered your excellent children and youth programs.

I also loved this line on your website... St. John is a community of faith centered in the words of Jesus from John 15:12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Which, is why I decided to change things up today and why I chose this passage as our gospel reading...

Not because it is Valentine's weekend, but to highlight St. John's mission, to remind us why we come together in worship, and specifically for later, as we gather together for our annual meeting.

When we will look back over the past year, where we embraced life together—life's ups and downs, life's joys, celebrations, and life's sorrows... And where we will look ahead to this next year...

A time when we will be presented with opportunity after opportunity to show what it looks like when we love one another.

And in my time here I have seen that in action, and I have experienced your love.

I know I could go on and on and on about all of the love I have experienced here...

But to honor everyone's time... I would like to highlight the parts of your lives that are also lived out, outside the church...

Because so much of what you all do between Sundays involves a whole other mosaic of life, the good, the not so good, and everything in between...

Which is why our gospel reading is so important to really dive into.

And to do so, I would like to start by highlighting the verses that lead up to this commandment...

Where we hear Jesus saying, I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I am them will bear much fruit.

Beautifully illustrating our dependency on Jesus... Encouraging us to abide with God, by being in relationship with God.

As it is only when we abide with God, that we can actually fulfill the commandment to love one another, like Jesus did...

Great in theory, but hard to truly live out.

Especially when there are broken relationships, which cause deep wounds. Making the idea of love seem ludicrous in such situations.

Which to me, on some level does make sense, because if a relationship is unhealthy, it is important to give yourself some space and some grace, as not all relationships need to be mended quickly...

Instead, what we are to do, at all times... In the good and in the bad... is to turn to God... To spend time abiding with God...

As only God can truly love everyone...

Which Jesus knew intimately... And so, he provides us with this image of a vine and branches...

As branches take time to grow, they take time to produce fruit, and they need proper nourishment... Which can only be provided by God.

And so, God gives us a special kind of nourishment to grab onto... The life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

A specific time in our history, where Christ's life was documented, so that we could experience Christ today.

As Scripture, allows us to discover God's love is deeper than words... As it is the Living Word.

And we will celebrate God's Living Word later in the service, with the giving of Bibles... An experience of love and joy for those receiving their Bibles and for the entire congregation.

Because God's love is not some abstract concept. God's Love is, "deeply grounded in God's decision to dwell as Jesus in the world."<sup>1</sup>

Which in turn, Christ calls us to do, to love one another but the only way we can do so, is by abiding in Him.

So that we can become fruiting branches... Producing love and joy in the world.

As a professor of mine, Karoline Lewis, said...

"Joy may very well be a feeling of grace, the emotion of grace, even the response to grace. Joy is that indescribable sense when you find yourself experiencing abundant grace."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline M. Lewis. *John*. Fortress Press 2014. Page 199

<sup>2</sup> Karoline M. Lewis. *John*. Fortress Press 2014. Page 199

Now I must add... This isn't the kind of joy you find when your team wins the Superbowl... Or maybe that's just specific to this year, since the Packers are not in the Superbowl.

But in all seriousness, I would like each one of you to think of a time when you have experienced God's grace filled joy.

For me, I experience God's grace filled joy every time that the children sing for us, when I shake your hands after church, and when I join you in fellowship.

Joy, of course, that we also experience outside of this building... Through the act of loving our neighbors... Which brings about our mission statement that I shared at the beginning of the service...

That we are called to serve God, serve each other, serve the community, and serve the wider church...

And the only way we can do that, is by grounding ourselves in Christ... To abide in God's presence and to be nourished by God's Word.

To remember why we are here together in the first place... To share God's love and joy, and to do so both inside and outside of these walls... Amen.