

EASTER VI
Church of the Master, Troy
May 23, 1976

"HOW'S YOUR LOVE LIFE?"

This is my commandment: That you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. "a John 15:12-13

I doubt that I need say anymore when holding this up: (Ultra - Brite TPaste).

Madison Avenue says that if you and I use it -- we'll have a great love life. ~~How~~ about that for an instant guarantee toward happiness! Amazing - isn't it - how insulting advertisers can be and we still buy their products.

Ultra-Brite claims that it's the Way to a great and lasting love affair -- and amazingly, we buy it by the millions. Jesus Christ makes the same claim -- that he is THE WAY to a lasting love affair -- and millions of people laugh.

Some of you know that I have used the Ultra-Brite illustration in a wedding homily or two. I have done so because most young couples aren't aware of the number of ways that they have been seduced by the world's definitions of love.

For instance, the Playboy mentality equates love with how a person feels --- with how excited a person can get. They say - if you feel good, then it's the real thing!-

Obviously - this is not totally contrary to the Christian definition of love. Christian love is often a good feeling. But NOT FEELING alone. Love is more than an emotional ~~state~~ of affair--- more than tingling sensations of the body.

Christian love is NOT synonymous with the romantic notions of "falling in love" or being "struck by lightning." These emotional of erotic notions of love are what the Greeks called "EROS,"

meaning "love." All of us have been given the gift of this kind of love -- we all have EROS. But this level alone NEVER leads to an ultra-brite love affair.

Sad but true, many young lovers today have been MIS-led to believe that eros is the ultimate. Nothing could be further from the truth -- as they soon learn after the early months or years of their relationship.

But the Greeks also had a second level of defining love -- this is called philia or philios. This love expression is that of compassion or sympathy for a friend. Again - most people have been given this gift of love -- ~~and~~ it is a higher level than eros -- and of course, varies from individual to individual.

~~But~~ although this expression of love is offered to another who has suffered a crisis or setback, it is still NOT the ultimate level of love. Philios is very contextual -- usually only offered under certain conditions. It's the kind of love offered at Oakland Co. Hospital -- which of course most of us do not do regularly.

There is yet one more level identified by the Greeks -- agape love. When John has Jesus saying! "This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you" -- he is using the AGAPE meaning of love. Agape love is ultimate concern for the other -- a sacrificial commitment like Jesus' which does not waver with feelings -- it is not based on likes or dislikes.

Frederick Buechner in his book "Wishful Thinking" puts it this way: "In the Xan sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbor, he is not telling us to love them in the sense of responding to them with a cozy emotional feeling. . . .

On the contrary, he is telling us to love our neighbors in the sense of being willing to work for their well-being even if it means sacrificing our own well-being --which sometimes may mean

leaving them alone. Thus, in Jesus' terms - we can love our neighbors without liking them. We like someone BECAUSE OF -- we love someone in spite of

This does not mean that liking may not be a part of loving - only that it doesn't have to be. How often the Christian confuses liking and loving. God calls us to love -- to be concerned about our neighbor even if we don't like him.

Such are the levels of love -- so, How's Your Love Life?" Still trying to build an ultra-brite relationship on EROS?? Still thinking that a sympathy card or hospital visit now-or-then is God's ultimate expression from you or me???

I don't know about yours, but I do know that my own love life often falls short of Christ's goal for me -- to be like him -- an agape lover.

So it is that I must continually be reminded of his love for me -- even when I do fall short. Reminded of his commitment toward me -- that this is ultimate love. Reminded that he layed down his life for me -- this is ultimate love. Yes, continually reminded that when he was facing the worst in life, he STILL offered his best -- the gift of God's forgiving love.

He has chosen us to be lovers according to that example. That's more than a toothpaste variety of love -- more than romantic sentimentality -- more than an occasional friendly expression of sympathy. To be an ultra-brite lover like Christ - we will be willing to actually lay down our lives for one another.

It is this model that the church must share in the world -- and it is this model that our seminaries seek to share with prospective pastors. The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago seeks to be more than a training grounds for sentimental or sex lovers. It seeks to give men and women deep roots in the love of God -- biblical, historical and pastoral roots of Christ's love.

That doesn't make the seminary product perfect -- I am a living advertisement of that truth. But it does offer the essential foundation for growth.

LSTC, like other seminaries, is an important link in God's "love relay" team. Jesus said: "The Father has loved me -- I have loved you -- you love one another." Through the seminary and the church -- that message is relayed -- kept alive.

God help us to be a vital part of keeping that relay alive.

AMEN

EASTER VI

Luth Church of the Master, Troy

May 15, 1977

"AN IN-BETWEEN OFFER"

"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." John 14:26-27

There is a story told that shows God's great love and purpose for us. It goes something like this.

There was a young angel having conversation with an older angel, as the older was taking the younger on a guided tour of the universe. He took the younger angel past the spiral nebula, past galaxies upon galaxies, past the planets Saturn, Jupiter, Mars -- and finally they came to this tiny, seemingly insignificant planet. And they stopped.

The younger angel puzzled. "This looks rather small and dirty to me. What's so special about this one??"

Solemnly, the older angel said: "That is the Visited Planet" and then went on, "Our Young Prince of Glory once visited this earth, because he loves all of its human residents. So he went down to share his life with them. But only a handful of the residents accepted his offer. The majority preferred their darkness to his light, and in the end they killed him on a cross."

"But" continued the old angel, "this tragedy didn't end the story. The Prince of Glory conquered death and rose from it and appeared to many people. And they became devoted to him - even taking his name - "Christians"

"And from his light, other lights were kindled." And it that point the older angel paused -- and the younger looked over the earth and noted that a glow covered many parts of the earth.

"The bright glow" said the old angel "is the company of loyal followers he left behind. These are the ones who are

in touch with his life, and even now, know some of the joys that we know. And with His help, they spread the glow over all the earth - and new lights begin to shine as they are in contact with him.

Then the younger angel interrupted: "But what about all the dark areas?? What will happen to all these people? How will it all end? Will their darkness join with our Lord's light and everything be as Light as it is in heaven?"

Here the senior angel shrugged and said: "We simply don't know. We know that God wants this to happen. This is why he visited the earth. But we simply don't know. This is the reason people are born on earth -- and this is the only decision they really have to make. So - you see -- it's really up to them."

"I must admit" continued the older one "it's often agony to watch -- and sometimes sheer delight to see many points of darkness begin to glow with his light. But my younger brother - the end is not yet. Our Lord is still at work in this world, even though many do not yet know him."

"He's still at work -- calling, guiding, waiting for the moment for all people to say 'Yes' -- AND THEN he will come and dwell with them and make his home with them -- and that point of darkness will become light."

"So, now, my younger friend, you understand why this planet is so important. It is the visited planet -- where our Lord has come, and where he is still at work, calling all people to himself."

So goes the story. A brief restatement of the 14th chapter of John's gospel.

So it is that Jesus says -- that he will leave his disciples -- but the Comforter, the Helper, the Holy Spirit, will come to dwell within his church - his people -- and we will be left with peace. Because we will be showing forth his eternal light -- his love now, and resurrection for the future. But as the story illustrates -- the Comforter comes to those ONLY who have opened themselves to the Prince. If our human minds and hearts are closed -- the Comforter cannot enter. For he enters - as the gospel of John says -- through the process of teaching and hearing the Word.

When Jesus says -"the Spirit will come" -- he is not talking about some kind of private ghost that will somehow scare us into a relationship with God. Granted - we can be privately confronted by God as Paul was -- but too often we have made this reality A MUCH TOO PRIVATE AFFAIR.

The New Testament goes into great detail ALL OVER about the corporate nature of the Spirit -- namely, the Body of Christ, the Church. The Spirit confronts us through books and churches, through Sacraments, sermons and seminars, and other means which convey the presence of God.

It is not only the private encounter, but the corporate confrontation which unlocks the mind and heart of humanity to the Comforter. Jesus says, "He who loves me and keeps my word" will receive the Comforter.

As the story earlier illustrated, there must be an open, obedient human spirit in order for the Divine Spirit to comfort us.

Which brings us to the clinching point. Why do we need the Spirit? Why do we need Christ's presence within us? Why do we need Bibles, churches, Sacraments, sermons, seminars, and all the rest? QUITE SIMPLY - we need an IN-BETWEEN OFFER.

We need an offer between the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and our own life, death, and resurrection. There is a great gap⁴ between those moments in history.

It is the Spirit of God that gives us this IN-BETWEEN OFFER. Through word, prayer, sacrament, sermon, study and the other means - God the Holy Comforter gives us the PEACE which the world cannot give - namely, the forgiveness of sins and the promise of the resurrection. Only Christ can offer us that peace.

It may sound pretty empty to some of you right now -- but when confronted by guilt, by loss, or by impending death -- there is no greater peace than Christ's OFFER through the Comforter.

Christ's offer won't eliminate all the hassles of this world -- but his offer is the only one which will KEEP

OUR LIGHTS GLOWING even in the midst of death, suffering, corruption, guilt, and all the rest. God help us to always see this reason and purpose for our obedience to the love of the Prince of Glory - Christ our Lord: who has said:

"I will send you the Counselor who will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you... Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

AM EN

EASTER VI
LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE MASTER, TROY
APRIL 30, 1978

"ANOTHER TEACHER OF THE THREE R'S"

"IN YOUR HEARTS REVERENCE CHRIST AS LORD."
I PETER 3:15

I'M TOLD THAT THE THREE R'S ARE AGAIN GAINING GROUND IN EDUCATION TODAY. READING, 'RITING, AND 'RITHMETIC -- THE THREE BASICS -- HAVE OCCASIONALLY TAKEN THE RUMBLE SEAT TO SO-CALLED PROGRESSIVE TEACHING METHODS IN RECENT YEARS. BUT COLLEGES HAVE BEEN FINDING THAT TOO MANY OF THEIR STUDENTS ARE BORDERLINE ILLITERATES. SO THE THREE R'S ARE GETTING NEW ATTENTION THESE DAYS.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ALSO HAS AN EDUCATIONAL BIAS TOWARD THE THREE R'S -- NAMELY, REVERENCE, READINESS, AND RESPECT. PETER IS NOT COUNSELING US TOWARD PERFECTION -- HE IS NOT ESTABLISHING AN ABSOLUTE ETHIC BY GIVING US THE RULES OF THE THREE R'S OF RELIGION. BUT PETER IS SAYING THAT THESE THREE R'S ARE THE SPONTANEOUS RESULT OF BEING REDEEMED BY CHRIST. WE DO NOT HAVE TO BE DRILLED ON THESE THREE R'S LIKE READING, 'RITING, AND 'RITHMETIC -- REVERENCE, READINESS, AND RESPECT ARE THE NATURAL BY-PRODUCT OF REDEMPTION.

LET ME ILLUSTRATE WITH THE STORY OF THE EXASPERATED PIANO TEACHER. SHE KEPT TELLING JUNIOR -- "YOU JUST DON'T HAVE IT RIGHT!" AND YET JUNIOR WAS HOLDING HIS HANDS THE WAY HE'D BEEN TOLD; AND HIS FINGERING WAS EXCEPTIONAL. HE MEMORIZED EVERY PIECE PERFECTLY. HE HIT ALL THE

PROPER NOTES WITH DEADLY ACCURACY. HE ONLY HAD ONE PROBLEM -- HIS HEART WAS NOT IN IT, JUST HIS FINGERS. HE WAS PLAYING MUSIC -- BUT NOTHING THAT WOULD START VOICES SINGING OR FEET TAPPING. HE HAD SUCCEEDED IN BORING EVERYONE TO DEATH -- INCLUDING HIMSELF.

REVERENCE FOR CHRIST IS MORE THAN SIMPLY PLAYING THE RIGHT NOTES. ^{Religious} THE SCRIBES AND THE PHARISEES PLAYED IT BY THE BOOK PERFECTLY -- THEY DIDN'T SLIP UP ON ONE "DO" OR "DON'T". BUT THEY WERE GETTING IT ALL WRONG. THEY DID NOT HAVE REVERENCE IN THEIR HEARTS -- IT WAS ALL AN EXTERNAL THING OF THE HEAD AND HANDS FOR THEM. THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST HAD NOT LIT THE FIRE OF THEIR HEARTS.

REVERENCE - LOYALTY - FROM THE HEART IS ALWAYS A NATURAL RESULT ^{FOR} OF YOU AND ME ^{OR WHAT CHRIST HAS DONE} WHEN ~~JESUS CHRIST IS OUR~~ ^{FOR US} LORD. THE GREAT TEMPTATION OF EVERY CHRISTIAN IS TO PLAY THE ROLE ON THE OUTSIDE WITHOUT ANY CONVICTION FROM THE INSIDE. THAT'S ONE OF MY GREATEST FEARS EVERY YEAR AT THIS TIME AS WE PREPARE TO CONFIRM OUR YOUNG PEOPLE. SO OFTEN THEY ARE PRESSURED INTO CONFIRMATION FROM THE OUTSIDE -- BUT THERE IS NO REVERENCE IN THEIR HEARTS FOR CHRIST. FIVE YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE CONFIRMED AT THIS ALTAR IN TWO WEEKS -- I ASK YOU TO PRAY WITH ME THAT THEIR HEARTS WILL BE BURNING WITH LOYALTY TO CHRIST WHEN THEY PRESENT THEMSELVES.

BUT HEART-FELT REVERENCE IS NOT THE ONLY BY-PRODUCT OF RESURRECTION FAITH: IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO CHERISH CHRIST IN OUR HEARTS -- HIS POWER IS NOT ONLY FELT IN THE HEART, IT'S SPOKEN BY THE MOUTH AS WELL.

THAT'S THE SECOND R -- A READINESS TO DEFEND WHAT WE BELIEVE IN: NAMELY, THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS AND THE RESURRECTION OF LIFE.

REGRETABLELY - TOO OFTEN CHRISTIANS BECOME LIKE ROCKET SHIPS THAT SIT, READY TO BE ORBITED, BUT NEVER LAUNCHED FROM THEIR PADS. TOO OFTEN WE'RE LIKE PAINTINGS NEVER HUNG - LIKE A BRIDGE NEVER CROSSED - LIKE AN APPLE NEVER EATEN. WE SPEND A LIFETIME STUDYING GOD'S WORD, LISTENING TO HIS COMMANDS, AND FELLOWSHIPING WITH HIS PEOPLE IN HIS CHURCH! AND THEN WE FORGET WHAT HE'S CALLED US TO DO: TO SHARE HIS LOVE STORY WITH OTHERS.

TOO MUCH OF OUR DEVOTION TO CHRIST IS THE DON MACNEIL BREAKFAST CLUB VARIETY -- SILENT DEVOTION. AND SILENT DEVOTION IS TOO OFTEN JUST A GOOD COVER-UP FOR NO DEVOTION AT ALL. *(ADULT CLASS - SOCIAL STATE MEETS)*

LIKE THE CHOIR WILL SOON SING -- ONCE THIS JESUS CHRIST CHARACTER HAS TOUCHED OUR LIVES WITH HIS POWER OF FORGIVENESS -- ONCE WE'VE RECEIVED THE WORD OF HOPE THAT EVEN WITH DEATH THERE IS NO LASTING DEFEAT -- ONCE THAT REALITY HAS PENETRATED OUR CONSCIOUSNESS -- THEN THERE'S ONLY ONE REASONABLE RESPONSE: WE'VE GOT TO PASS IT ON. THERE'S NO WAY THAT YOU CAN HOLD THAT KIND OF POWER TO YOURSELF.

BUT IT'S AT THIS POINT THAT THE RABBI PETER GIVES US SOME LEARNING IN THE LAST OF THE THREE R'S -- NAMELY, RESPECT. HE SAYS, WHEN YOU DEFEND THE FAITH DO SO WITH GENTLENESS AND RESPECT. THE WORD RESPECT AND REVERENCE

IN THE N.T. ARE REALLY ALMOST THE SAME -- THEY COME FROM THE GREEK ROOT "FOBUS" - WHERE WE GET OUR ENGLISH WORD, "FOBIA," WHICH MEANS "TO FEAR." WHEN THE BIBLE TALKS ABOUT "FEARING THE LORD" THE MODERN IDIOM IS EQUAL TO "RESPECTING THE LORD."

SO PETER IS SAYING THAT AS WE NATURALLY HAVE REVERENCE FOR CHRIST, WE JUST AS NATURALLY HAVE RESPECT FOR ONE ANOTHER EVEN WHEN WE DISAGREE. ARROGANCE AND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS GO CONTRARY TO REVERENCE FOR CHRIST. THE REDEEMED PERSON IS RESPECTFUL TO OTHERS OUT OF REVERENCE TO CHRIST.

IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT IN OUR SOCIETY TODAY SOME OF THE MOST ENTHUSIASTIC RELIGIOUS PEOPLE SHOW LITTLE OR NO RESPECT FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE HAD DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES. THAT WOULD SEEM TO INDICATE THAT JESUS CHRIST IS POSSIBLY NOT THE LORD OF THESE PEOPLE -- THERE'S MAY BE AN EGOTISTICAL RATHER THAN A CHRISTOLOGICAL CONVICTION. PROBABLY ONLY TIME WILL TELL THE TRUE STORY.

BUT AS FOR US, THERE ARE NO ^{DRILLS} ~~RULES~~ TO FOLLOW TO GAIN THE THREE R'S OF FAITH. THERE IS JUST THE SINGLE BELIEF THAT CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS ONCE FOR ALL -- SO THAT HE COULD BRING US TO GOD. THE RESULT OF THAT SACRIFICIAL ACT IS LOYALTY TO CHRIST, A CONSTANT READINESS TO SHARE HIS FORGIVING POWER -- AND AN ETERNAL RESPECT FOR HUMANITY, EVEN PEOPLE WHO CHALLENGE US AND CAUSE US TO SUFFER FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.

AMEN

EASTER VI
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
May 20, 1979

"CHOSEN TO LOVE ... UNDER ALL CONDITIONS"

"If God thus loved us, dear friends, we in turn are bound to love one another." I John 4:11
did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide ... This I command you, to love one another." John 15:16-17

Each of us has heard hundreds of sermons on the 11th commandment "TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER." But it's especially hard to HEAR and to PREACH on this theme today.

For many of you - it's especially hard to hear God's Word of Love today -- because many of you are probably thinking that I'm a phoney in the love department. After all - you've shown your deep love and concern for me - and then I turn around and leave you. I'm certain you're feeling like the shafted-lover. You're feeling like you've been kicked in the britches for all your efforts.

I hope you understand that has not been my intent -- and yet I can fully understand your disappointment - your hurt - yes, even your anger. Obviously - I am sorry that I have been the cause for this hurt and disappointment. I have been praying for your forgiveness -- and I know that among some of you, that forgiveness has not been forthcoming.

And yet - I must commend many others who have expressed their hurt and disappointment over my resignation -- and yet they have offered me a deep and supporting love. They have understood that my decision was not intended to HURT -- even though its affects are somewhat hurtful. I especially thank you for loving me under these conditions -- because it has been a very lonely week for me as well.

Yes - it has been a tough week for most of us. Because we all know that God has chosen us to love one another UNDER ALL CONDITIONS, at ALL TIMES, in ALL PLACES ... and yet so often we end up hurting the very ones that we love the most.

When the first telephone call came to me -- I said to the caller: ~~.....~~ I can't leave this congregation! I love these people too much! And I think they love me! Aⁿd furthermore, they can't get along without me right now!

And it was that last statement that really forced me down on my knees to ask for God's forgiveness. Because that last statement was not a statement of Christian love -- it was a statement of egotistical pride and arrogance. When a pastor thinks that a congregation can't get along without him - then he has lost his proper focus of love.

Because we don't come together here to merely love one person -- we come together to reflect the love of God. And that love is equally given and received BY ALL PERSONS. The 11th commandment IS TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER -- not to LOVE JUST ONE ... or be loved by just one. A church is a sick body of Christ if it loves only its pastoral leader.

Yes - it was after I made this fateful statement that I began to reflect upon the true character of God's love -- and upon the true character of this congregation's love.

God loved mankind WHEN THINGS WERE AT THEIR VERY WORST -- when Jesus was hanging on the cross. And thinking about that reminded me of the nature of this congregation when I came as pastor. The congregation was literally down to less than 30 REALLY supportive families. Literally - the congregation was at its worst! BUT OH - HOW THESE FAMILIES LOVED EACH OTHER!

There was no one ring-leader who was calling the shots of love. Everybody was pitching in equally! Everybody was giving equally! Everybody was loving everybody -- as God had commanded through his son Jesus Christ.

That's what turned me on as a prospective pastor -- that even in their weakness, the Master's people really loved one another. And that's what has turned a lot of people on to the Master's people since -- that they have continued to love one another.

Yes - even as this body has become stronger in numbers and outreach -- even as she has become one of the top four congregations in the Michigan Synod in per capita growth -- even as she has among the top 40% of congregation's in Benevolence giving -- even as she has reached out to give a home to strangers from Indo-China -- her love for one another has not changed.

That is why Church of the Master has been a growing body for the past half-decade -- not because of any one person - but because the whole body has been committed to LOVING ONE ANOTHER as God has commanded!

And I hope that even though many of you are disappointed -- and possibly hurt by my resignation -- I hope that you have seen that same kind of love for everyone in my pastoral ministry! And I hope that it has been seen as a sincere love -- one that continues to care -- and will continue to care for years to come.

But I also hope that it has not been identified as the major love of this body. Because if that's the case - then we have turned the pastoral ministry into an idolatry -- and then I have totally failed in everything that I have said and done!

And yet,
for the most part - I feel confident that the majority have not idolized my leadership. Because in recent months - I have again heard people who have joined our body SAY THAT THE MAJOR REASON WAS DUE TO THE LOVE OF SO MANY PEOPLE HERE.

And I hope on June 10th - when we again receive new members - that these people will become disciples at the Master because THEY SEE THIS BODY FULFILLING THE 11th COMMANDMENT -- they see Christians loving one another.

Yes - that has been the strength -- and still is the strength of the people of the Master! And quite frankly - that is a strength that I will not experience as senior pastor of Hope Lutheran Church. No doubt - God's love will be there -- but not in the full dimensions that it is *been* offered and shared at the Master!

And so I would like to tell you -- that you are not the only ones that are hurting. I too have ~~already~~ known the loss of the Master's love -- in fact, some people have even got so angry that they have insulted me. Some people have even threatened to leave the church -- or no longer be deeply committed to her mission.

God

But I know that as ~~FORGAVE~~ people for hanging his son on the cross -- he will surely forgive these same people for their anger and insults. And if God forgives them -- then I too must forgive them -- because it is his mission that I am here to serve -- not my own.

Yes - I thank God that he continues to love me even when I offer him my worst -- even when I hurt those who I deeply love. And as he has loved you and me -- even at our worst -- I pray that we will continue forever to love one another -- UNDER ALL CONDITIONS.

amen

EASTER VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 16, 1982

"WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW"

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends ... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit ...
John 15:11-14,16

This past Thursday morning, Pastor Camlin and I met with the cluster clergy for our monthly breakfast meeting. As usual the topics were many and diverse. But eventually we began talking about the tremendous support that we as clergy feel from our congregations. I commented on how helpful Hope had been to us in the past couple of months.

That stimulated one of our pastor brothers to tell how his 13-yr old son was killed three years ago by a semi-truck. He had just left his son; five minutes later three semi-wheels had rolled over his son's body killing him instantly.

The pastor then related how the community of faith had kept his family afloat through the next several days. Area clergy spent much time with the pastor and his wife. More than 2000 people offered support at the funeral home. More than 700 people came to the church for the funeral service -- a sanctuary that held only 400 (like our own). To this day people from that congregation regularly visit and write.

The pastor concluded his story by saying that they never experienced denial or anger in their grief -- because they were overwhelmed with the love and support of the people of God. That community of faith was doing what God had chosen them to do -- they were bearing the fruit of the Father. I hope they did the same for every family that experienced a significant loss.

That congregation appropriately illustrates the meaning of "being chosen to bear the fruit of the Father." And bearing God's fruit specifically means 1) we are chosen

for love, 2) we are chosen for joy, and 3) we are chosen for friendship. What the world needs now is what the world has always needed -- to be loved, but also to be joy-filled and friendship dominated.

The problem with texts like these before us today is that their truth is so simplistically clear that its elusive. Every kindergartner knows that God has chosen us for love, for joy, and for friendship ... but yet we see only a limited amount of this fruitfulness in the world.

We sing all the love-songs by heart -- we know all the right cliches that lead to happiness -- we put on smiles and play the game of friendship.. but down deep we're often more like the little girl who hid from her mother in the closet.

This little girl had gotten very angry with her mother, so she ran and locked herself in her mother's closet. The mother, being very concerned, stood outside the closet inquiring as to what her daughter was doing. After a long silence, she heard her little gathering up spit in her mouth and throat. Finally, the little voice came through the door: "Mommy, I just spit in your shoes!" There was another long silence, then gurgling noises, and finally: "Mommy, I just spit on your new dress." Then a long time passed. Finally her mother asked: "Honey, what are you doing in there now?" The little girl answer: "I'm waiting for more spit to come."

*didn't
get
new
way*

Obviously, a nasty story, but not without some humor. The sad reality is that far too many people live their lives waiting for more spit. One only needs to read the daily paper to see the preponderance of revenge, of getting even, of getting my fair share, of showing the other guy his faults.

Christ's way is so different. He takes the spit in his own face and then responds to it by saying: "Father, for-give them of their foolishness. He listens to the anger of our damnation of Him and one another and yet responds joyfully by saying: "Peace I leave with you." He cringes over our self-proclaimed arrogance and desire to be destructive, and yet he still chooses to be our friend.

God offers love... and joy... and peace ... and friendship NOT BECAUSE the world deserves them, but because he knows we need them. And that's the foundation of fruitfulness for God's people. We love as he has first loved --

not according to merit,
not according to good deeds,
not according to credentials or status,
but simply according to need.

A father once told his little daughter, "I love you, honey, when you're a good girl." His little girl quickly responded: "I love you all the time, Daddy." It was the little girl who was reflecting the love of God; she loved because she knew her daddy needed her love.

God has chosen us for this purpose in the world, to do what sounds so simple - to love as he first loved. That kind of love is a love which leaves no one out of our fellowship -- everyone is acceptable. That kind of love is one which is visible -- it causes people to be present and supportive. That kind of love is one which does something -- it serves the least and the lost and the lonely and even the unlovable. That kind of love has the vintage of our Father.

And that kind of love always results in joy. To be loved by God and to love like God is to know the joy of life. Jesus said: "I have loved you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

It is true that we are sinners, but we are redeemed sinners. Therein lies our joy. Jesus likened life in the church to a wedding reception; life together as his people radiates with joy and praise. Christian fellowship and worship is either upbeat or it lacks the pulse of its Lord. Joy is what we have received through Christ's love; and joy is what we have been chosen to offer to one another.

Is it any wonder then that Christ's love and joy lead us to friendship. We are more than servants; we are God's friends. In the courts of the Roman Emperors, only a very select group were called "friends of the king." He talked to these persons before he talked to his generals, his rulers, or his statesmen.

The friends of the king were those who had the closest and most intimate connection with him. These persons had the right to come to him at anytime. Such is the privilege of being a friend of God.

It's not a popular song among modern musicians, but it tells the story far better than many hymns: "What a friend we have in Jesus ...all our sins and grief to bear ... what a privilege to carry ...everything to God in prayer."

In real friendship, there is always trust in the other that believes in him ... risks on him ... and never doubts his loyalty. It is this intimate and assuring relationship that God has offered us,

There is no room for a vengeful, much-to-be-feared God -- that is a mis-reading of the New Testament. In Jesus we meet a warm, welcoming, accepting reflection of the Father. In spite of all our failings ... all of our false starts, Christ assures us that he still considers us friends. By his choice, not by our deeds, he has made us permanent friends.

Celsus, an early critic of the Christian church once said: "These Christians love each other even before they are acquainted."

Let us hope and pray that our critics today might say the same about us. For God has chosen us NOT to wait for more spit, but to love as he has first loved / so that our joy and friendship may always be complete.

AMEN

*That's what the world needs,
now so that our joy and
friendship might be complete.*

EASTER VI

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 8, 1983 (Mother's Day)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you." John 14:26-27

"D E A R M O M"

Dear Mom,

It's May 8, 1983. Mother's Day, 1983! It's now been a little more than seven years since we last shared any conversation on earth! How time flies! But Mother's Day hasn't changed much for me -- at least in terms of ownership preparation. I still have the same struggle every year -- even a worse struggle since you have died. Maybe you remember me asking the question: Who should get the glory on Mother's Day?? God or Moms? Should it be the Lord's Day or Mom's Day?? Knowing you, mom, I already know the answer-- it would go something like this: "Moms deserve a little credit one day a year from the pulpit; after all, God can have the other 51 Sundays." Good ole practical mom!

Well, mom, as you can see -- you've won the day again! But don't let me be too flip! It's hard to draft this God-centered/mother-oriented letter (which, of course, is intended to be a sermon). It's very hard to do this without sounding like pure sentimentality and slush. I hope you comprehend the difficulty, mom. These civil-religious holidays are tough on preacher-sons and the Son of God as well.

As you can see, mom, the times and the place has changed. We've left Michigan behind us. That was a good place ... and those were good people. But the last four years have brought us into contact with the Buckeyes instead of the Woverines or Badgers. We have truly been blessed through Holy Toledo and the people of Hope. Of course, you always were always one who said that "God will always provide wherever there are faithful and dedicated followers."

But you know, mom, we never know quite what to expect from God's dedicated followers. We were told before our interviews

in Toledo that the people of Hope had great potential. We were told that we would be dealing with a people of considerable talent and sophistication -- with tremendous leadership and material resources. We were told that these people of Hope had been blessed with a half-century of outstanding pastoral leadership. It was quite an overwhelming story, mom -- and it remains quite authentic. But I kept on wondering - "Why me, Lord?" "Why do you want me sharing your Word, Lord, amidst all that wealth and power and cultural religion??" "Why me, Lord -- I've come from just common Wisconsin stock?"

But mom, then another one of your so-called famous biblical sayings came to mind: "Don't judge a book by it's cover -- take time to get to know God's people from the inside."

So, we came ... and we conversed ... and we realized that mother's again know best about God's people. Because no matter how bullish things appeared on the outside -- these were still God's special people with the same basic need of all other people -- they wanted to be taught ... they wanted to remember his Word ... and they desperately wanted his Peace.

Yes, mom, the people of Hope are really no different than any other people of God. In a very real way - they need most what you and so many other mothers have always given to their sons and daughters -- an Advocate for God ... the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, the one who helps the other.

It's interesting, mom, that this should be the text for this Mother's Day - Jesus says: "But the Counselor, the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit - whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you."

Unfortunately -- too many sons and daughters have just never realized that the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, the Advocate so often comes to them in the form of their mothers. I'm sorry to say, mom, I was much like many other sons and daughters while you were alive -- I just didn't realize nor give you credit for what a tremendous Counselor and Advocate of God that you were.

Because like Christ says -- "the Spirit will teach you all things." And it was your example and teaching, mom, that always confirmed that God's teaching advocate was in our home. And it was you who would bring to remembrance the Word of God. But most especially it was you who offered the Peace of God which passes all human understanding.

You made so clear, mom, that God's peace was not absence from conflict -- I know only too well the many conflicts I had with you. Peace is not an absence from conflict -- but it is the presence of a forgiving and understanding spirit even in the midst of conflict.

That's the peace of Christ -- a power and spirit that is not afraid of conflict and disagreements, but yet seeks to be forgiving and understanding even in the midst of disagreements and conflicts. How badly, mom, we Christians need to learn to be Advocates of that kind of a spirit with one another.

Yes, mom, being a mother means being an Advocate for God and His Spirit -- being an advocate for his teachings, for his Word, and for his Peace. Above all, being an Advocate for God means that we who are sons and daughters never have to fear being or felling alone. Even when our earthly mothers and fathers have died -- they have taught us that we are never fighting battles alone in this world -- God is always with us, his presence and power have become a part of us through the helping Advocacy of our families, *and His family, the Church.*

Is it any wonder that we baptize infants?? We don't want one of God's children to even feel alone. Regardless of the circumstances of the parents ... of the sponsors ... of the congregation -- God's presence and peace has been given to that child. It's not the peace of the world -- it's not an absence of conflict; but it is an everlasting power of forgiveness and understanding from God himself!

And as parents, and sponsors, and faithful people of Hope-- it is our responsibility to be Advocates of God every day we are in the presence of that child and one another. And so on this day, mom, we especially lift up those special people who have fulfilled that role of Advocacy for God like very few others -- the mothers among us.

Because whether we dads admit it or not -- it is often the moms who are the advocates for the Baptism ... and for the Sunday School ... and for the catechism ... and for the continuing relationship to God and his church ... and for the millions of lazy husbands who would rather stay in bed on Sunday mornings.

Yes, mom, you do deserve at least one special day of recognition from the pulpit -- because in no way has message taken away from God's glory. God is glorified when his followers become faithful Advocates! And thanks be to God for the millions of Advocates that we honor today on this Mother's Day.

Your story, mom, is best illustrated by the four pastors who were discussing the merits of the various translations of the Bible. One liked the King James Version best because of its beautiful, poetic English. Another liked the Revised Standard Version because it came closer to the original meanings of the Hebrew and Greek. The third liked the Good News Bible because of its up-t-date vocabulary. The fourth pastor was silent. When asked to express his opinion, he replied, "I like my mother's translation best. She translated it into life, and it was the most convincing translation I ever saw."

I agree with the fourth pastor, mom.

With Love,
Peter.

EASTER IV

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

April 24, 1983

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

(The Jews said to Jesus) "If you are the Christ, then tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

John 10:25-28

Susan is a three year-old who loves to play with dolls-- all kinds of dolls. Her name could be Angela, or Terra, or Maria, or Sandra, ... and her age could range from 3 to 10... and maybe even older. Like all these little girls -- Susan likes dolls. A few weeks before her last birthday, she began to talk incessantly about one particular doll-- "Strawberry Shortcake!" There was nothing in the whole wide world that Susan wanted more than a "Strawberry Shortcake" doll.

Meanwhile - Susan's loving (but spoiling) grandparents had been going from shop to shop looking for that **something** very special for their most favorite granddaughter. They had heard that Susan wanted "Strawberry Shortcake" -- but they thought they could do better than that. Finally - they found it -- a beautifully furnished, antique dollhouse. Here they thought was the perfect gift for their doll-loving granddaughter -- and furthermore, it would be a treasured heirloom as well.

The birthday party came; Susan opened her gift ... paused and gave a polite but less-than enthusiastic "thank you." Her disappointment was obvious -- and obviously hurtful to her adoring grandparents. Susan had worked herself up so much for that "Strawberry Shortcake" that she simply couldn't appreciate anything else -- even though it was more beautiful, more lasting, more priceless! Someday she might appreciate more fully that dollhouse -- but right now she would gladly trade it for the mass-produced, inexpensive "Strawberry Shortcake."

Which one of us parents here today have not experienced

a similar incident -- maybe even some grandparents here have been through one of those disappointine encounters. The incident sheds real light on a similar aspect in relationship to Jesus Christ; most of his contemporaries simply would not accept him for what he was -- a priceless gift, the ultimate source of slavation.

Jesus represented so much -- actually too much. He was the way to the Father, the sure and certain way. His followers were offered eternal life -- an eternal relationship with God for believing in Jesus. He was not only a gift to one nation -- but to all nations. NOT only did his death atone for human sinfulness -- but his resurrection assured every believer of a hope and destination beyond death.

But for a great percentage of Jesus' contemporaries -- and for many of our contemporaries yet today -- this priceless gift of Jesus Christ was unexpected. Just like the dollhouse for Susan -- instead of thanksgiving, Jesus got a reception of disappointment and rejection. His contemporaries did not want an eternal savior -- they ~~had had their hearts~~ set upon a mere political messiah -- someone who would just deliver them from their present circumstances.

Susan did not value her new dollhouse because she was expecting something far less and far differnet. The Jews (and many Gentiles as well) did not value Jesus Christ because they were expecting someone far different -- someone who would merely provide favor and prosperperity for that moment of history -- not someone who would offer eternal security.

- The remarkable largeness of God's generosity thru Jesus Christ should have created enthusiasm -- but instead, it brought rejection. People simply did not want what they did not expect -- they did not expect the unexpected from God. Their vision of God was ~~restrictive~~ and judgmental instead of being expansive and graceful.

There is a bit of Susan in all of us when it comes to God. Too often we don't want or expect the unexpected from Him -- too often we're willing to settle for a little temporary

comfort from God -- for some momentary release from pain -- for some instant manna in our pocketbooks RATHER THAN FOR THE REAL PRICELESS GIFT THAT GOD OFFERS -- an eternal relationship through Jesus Christ!! God offers an everlasting heirloom ... when too often we seem to want only momentary gratification.

But our text makes clear that this need not be the Way, Truth & Life for us when we have had a full glimpse of the Good Shepherd. When we really belong to Christ -- when we have really listened to his voice -- when we have been attentive to his generosity -- then we rejoice over the UNEXPECTED GRACE OF GOD, even in the face of adversity! Yes -- when we have really tuned into his generous grace -- then we receive his gift gratefully even when others around us are rejecting it.

Yes - for the faithful followers -- for those who have remained within his flock -- we have learned to EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED. That was so classically illustrated through a recent encounter with Madalyn Murray O'Hair in one of our Ohio colleges. The Student Christian Association had invited Mrs. O'Hair to speak. More than 350 students and faculty packed the auditorium to hear Mrs. O'Hair express her negating views to God and religion.

As expected - she lambasted everything sacred. She made laughing stock of pastors, church leaders and religious volunteers. she harrassed students and professors who claimed Christian conviction; and she harranged the foolish thinkers who believed what they read in the Bible. She referred to God as "Big Daddy," to Jesus Christ as "Super J.C" and to the Holy Spirit as the "Spook."

As the evening's presentation was about to break up -- the quiet voice of a female co-ed came from the back of the auditorium. She spoke quietly and lovingly -- seeking to maintain a tone of compassion. "Mrs. O'Hair," she began, and then continued, "I am so happy you came to speak to us here at our college tonight. We have listened with attention and patience to your tirade on our beliefs. We thank you for showing us so graphically what an atheist really is -- many of us have never encountered an atheist of your calibre."

I want you to know that I will be ever grateful for your visit this evening -- because like no one has ever done before, you have really strengthened my Christian beliefs. I -- and I hope we all here really feel sorry for you -- and I'll pray each night and day for your conversion to the Christian faith.

Again, I thank you for coming; and again I must tell you how grateful I am for your strengthening tonight my faith in our church and our religion, and especially in Jesus Christ. You can be assured from this night forward I will always have more faith in "Big Daddy", and in Super J.C., and likewise in the "Spook." Thank you and God bless you!

Mrs. O'Hair had no response for this girl -- but there was a riot of noise from the house. The applause from the students and faculty was deafening. The meeting broke up that night with the voice of the Good Shepherd being victorious -- even though everyone had gathered there to hear the voice of rebellion and rejection.

So often we do not expect the unexpected from God. But God always delivers with great generosity where there are those who have genuinely heard his voice and followed. Jesus said: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

God continues to give us so much more than we expect from Him. He takes rejection and disappointment and turns them into the unexpected -- affirmation and enthusiastic proclamation! That's the Good News that we believe as his faithful flock -- that God can do the unexpected through us when we really treasure his gift! He can take a normally quiet co-ed and make her gift of speech the most expansive, most treasured and most priceless expression THAT COULD EVER BE SHARED!

He offers us the same priceless gift and treasure in Jesus Christ! He offers us the priceless ability to be Good Sheep faithfully following the lead of the Good Shepherd. He leads us to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed the hungry so that the whole world might come to know his priceless love. Thanks be to God for the assurance of that unexpected gift!!

AMEN

EASTER VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 24, 1987
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"NEVER ALL ALONE!"

"I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you."

John 14:18

"Sometimes I feel like a motherless child ..." Which one of us can't envision a buxom black slave woman singing that song into the heat of a southern night sky. It was this Negro spiritual that spoke to the feelings of being taken from home, from family, from culture, and certainly from "polite society." It was a song of bitter isolation, hurtful estrangement, agonizing alienation, and lingering loneliness. But it is no longer merely the song of a black plantation slave -- today it has become the themesong of much of America.

Suzanne Gordon in her book, Lonely in America writes, "Life in America has exploded, and loneliness is one main ingredient in the fallout. What was once a philosophical problem, spoken of mainly by poets and prophets, has now become an almost permanent condition for millions of Americans -- not only for the old and divorced but also for the men and women filling singles bars and encounter groups, the adolescents running away from home, the corporate transients who move every two or three years, and the people calling suicide crisis lines in search of someone to talk to. Knowing no limits of class, race, or age, loneliness is today the great leveler - a new American tradition."

She goes on to say that 40 million Americans change their residence once a year ... and that on the average, most of us will move 14 times in our lifetime. She claims that this fantastic mobility has caused us great reluctance in even "getting to know the neighbors." She says, "when people lived in the same place for years, residents got to know one another. When a new neighbor moved in, you brought them a cake or candy. Today the attitude is, 'why make the effort to welcome a new neighbor when they'll be gone in a year.'"

She tells the story of a California suburban woman whose husband had a stroke, but she was afraid to phone the neighbor for fear "that it would be viewed as an imposition." Compare that with a rural Montana single ranch woman, who in the winter calls her closest neighbors every time she goes out to feed the cattle. She says, "If I don't call, my neighbors will be furious. They'll come out looking for me thinking I've had an accident. They know something is really wrong if they don't hear from me on the phone." (Maybe we should all move back to Montana with Pastor Bob.)

Louise Bernikow's book, Alone In America, uplifts the same theme. She says that loneliness has become such an

epidemic, that merchandizers are exploiting it to sell their products: "New York Telephone says, 'Don't be lonely, pick up the phone.'" And of course, AT&T's ad campaign urged us "to reach out and touch someone." In beer ads, she notes that people are always drinking with large groups ... it's called merchandizing beer through friendship. Bernikow concludes, "Sellers of goods are increasingly aware of how vulnerable we are and how loneliness is a button to be pushed to make people buy."

Why in such a sophisticated and civilized era is this condition of loneliness so rampant? Bernikow says "American life has become too privatized. People are too wrapped up in selfish, individual pursuits of material goods. We haven't encouraged people to value people. The TV, the computer, the instant bank-teller allow us to do without others what we used to have to do with them." She says even VCR's have caused many to become "isolated in their apartments" rather than be forced to interact at the movies. She concludes, "all these advances may not be the cause for isolation, but they have made it more possible for people to live isolated."

What I find most fascinating about these authors is their solution. Bernikow says "what's needed to fill the gap is not necessarily a boyfriend or girlfriend but creating a community ... people need a membership in something bigger than themselves."

And Jesus said, "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. ... the Father will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth."

Was Jesus referring to the Rally by the River when he offered these words?? There are thousands of Toledoans each Friday that seem to think that this is what God has created for community. Please don't get me wrong -- there can be some meaningful fellowship even through the Rallies at Portside. But the next day, when the hangover wears off and the inner ear finally stops thumping from the beat, reality again strikes home: I AM STILL ALONE ... ALL ALONE!!

Jesus was referring to a "community that could be trusted and remained constant ... namely, his own body in the world, the church. In fact, strictly speaking, his words "I will not leave you desolate" ... can really be interpreted "I will not leave you as orphans." The Greek term is "orphanos;" I will not leave you without a father.

We would like to believe that there is no longer a problem with "orphans" in the world. In fact, many people (even myself) have at times questioned that Lutheran Homes still officially goes by "Lutheran Orphans and Old Folks Home Society." That title seems a little antequated. But maybe it's a good reminder to us all: TO BE MINDFUL OF THE ORPHANS AND OLD FOLKS WHO ARE STILL ALONE AND ALIENATED IN OUR SOCIETY.

We may not call them "orphans" ... we have other euphemisms like "unemployed" or "hard to place" or "early retirement" or "Negro or Colored" or "sexual misfit" ... or many other names which isolate, alienate, and segregate people so that they feel like orphans (fatherless). In fact, that's one of two reasons why there still are orphans in our community -- the realities of power, and greed, and prejudice, and immorality, and racism CREATE ORPHANS.

There is a fifty-year-old steelworker in Pennsylvania who has been laid off because the plant is closing. Too old to get another job, they say. Not worth the expense of retraining, they say. That steelworker today is standing in the unemployment line -- very much desiring to work, but finding no one who's interested. Can you imagine how he feels when he hears, "I will not leave you desolate."

This is not only a condition of Pittsburgh. It has also impacted upon hundreds in Toledo ... and with Chrysler's recent purchase of Jeep, there may be many more orphans in Toledo in the near future. Right here in this sanctuary today, there are some feeling like orphans ... feeling all alone, rejected, and alienated. It is time for those in the corporate towers of our society to look beyond profits and start creating job markets for the orphans they have created.

Or we could look at one of a multitude of young women stuck in Columbus waiting for an "ordained call" from the church. These women are told the time is not yet right, but if they wait long enough there will finally be an opening. There are, after all, lots of other things to do in the church - "You don't have to be an ordained pastor." So what do these women feel when they hear their Lord say, "I will not leave you desolate." Yes, there are still orphans even in the ranks of the church.

And on a hospital bed in an "isolation ward" is a young man with AIDS. It's hard to even find any hospital staff who will agree to empty the wastebasket unless they are dressed for a moonwalk. Now that his business associates and church members learned that he was "that way," he doesn't have to worry about any visitors. How empty Jesus' words must feel when this young man hears, "I will not leave you an orphan."

The recent incident in Toledo of a "burned cross in the grass" of the Williams family speaks most boldly of an orphan problem that still permeates our society. Black families are still viewed as second class citizens ... as people who should be isolated, alienated, and segregated from the mainstream of our society. Certainly Jesus' words "I will not leave you desolate" must sound pretty hollow 125 years after the abolition of slavery.

Yes, there are still many orphans in our society because of the corporate sin that infests all of us. There is great need for repentance and reform inside and outside the church.

But the second cause for orphans in our world is much more cureable than the condition of sin just mentioned. One of the greatest causes for loneliness is simply "an unwillingness to crawl out of the shell of self-pity." Because of fears and phobias, many people simply will not seek relationships or relief from self-inflicted incarceration. Both inside and outside the church, so many would rather "stew in their juices" than seek to be loved and renewed through Christ's forgiving power and presence.

I am often amazed that I will hear second, third or fourth-hand that someone is distressed or lonely or feeling alienated from the church -- but they will never call me directly to let me know. It is amazing how people will sometimes only share their distress when they finally decide to "change churches." When Jesus says, "I will not leave you desolate" -- he doesn't mean that that there's always a solution to every problem, but he's always present to listen through a pastor or another member of the church. That's the kind of community that Jesus has created -- a community that always seeks to listen and care through the example of his love. And the one thing he categorically wants everyone to know IS THAT YOU NEVER HAVE TO BE AFRAID TO CALL UPON HIM IN THAT COMMUNITY. YOU ARE NEVER ALL ALONE AS A CHRISTIAN. CHRIST IS ALWAYS ONLY AS FAR AWAY AS THE TELEPHONE.

There's a well known prayer that expresses eloquently the power that Jesus Christ can exercise daily in our lives: "Help me to remember, Lord, that nothing's gonna happen today that you and I can't handle together." Christ is always present ... we are NEVER ALL ALONE in the body of Christ.

There is absolutely no excuse for anyone in our community to cry about "being all alone." On Tuesday of this week, I will be mailing these 376 letters to churches in Toledo. 376 churches -- how is it possible for some people to say that Jesus Christ is not present in this world? How can there be 376 churches in Toledo if Jesus has not risen from the dead? How can anyone possibly say, "I don't know where to find Jesus Christ!"

There is no excuse for anyone to remain isolated or alienated from the body of Jesus Christ in this world. When Holman Hunt painted his famous picture of Christ outside a door knocking, he showed his picture to a friend before it was publicly exhibited. The friend looked at the kingly Christ seeking entrance to the believer's home through the thick wooden door. Suddenly he said, "Hunt, you've made a serious error. You've painted a door without a handle!" Hunt replied, "That's not a mistake. The door has the handle on the inside. All that we have to do is open the door."

Jesus could have never stated a more absolute truth: "I will never leave you desolate." Many times we are only alone because we choose to separate ourselves from his loving and forgiving presence and people. He has made it crystal clear: all we have to do is "open the door," and he will always be present to love and forgive us.

Thanks be to God for the body of Christ, the church. This is the place that God has created as community for all humanity. It is a place where no one should ever feel alone or abandoned or rejected. It is the place where Christ's love is truly present in word, in deed, and in sacrament.

I sincerely believe that's why eleven families are joining Hope today -- because they want to be part of something bigger than themselves ... a community that cares for them and the whole world. It's now our responsibility to make sure that together we always make that happen. Because that's what the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ is all about -- assuring one another that we are NEVER ALL ALONE!!

AMEN.

EASTER VI (CONFIRMATION)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 20, 1990
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"LOVE NEVER LOST!"

"Jesus said to them, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth ... I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. John 14:15-16, 18

A week ago, at the end of my jogging, six elementary children were running down Brantford Road laughing and joking about something as they ran. About twenty seconds later I realized the source of their great joy. The seventh of their party was a little chubby boy, probably about six years old. He couldn't run as fast as the first six. He was huffing and puffing and trying to catch them. But he just couldn't do it. His face was bright red with anger, frustration, and hurt. By this time, he was crying and feeling totally abandoned by "his friends."

My heart really went out to that little six-year old. I remember as a little boy having my so-called friends think it was a big joke to desert me on the way to school. I remember the hurt. Maybe some of you had a similar experience. All I could think about was how that little boy was going to feel for the rest of the day. I wondered how many of his teachers would realize how he began his day -- abandoned, rejected, & humiliated. I wondered if his friends would taunt him on the way home that night. I imagined him getting home ... with mom and dad trying to offer him love and understanding ... but how that might not make up for the rejection and humiliation of his morning.

And Jesus said, "I will never leave you desolate!" That little six-year old on Brantford Road was realizing that the world sometimes totally defies and totally denies the love and compassion of Jesus Christ!

The older kids with him knew it was wrong ... dead wrong to taunt and persecute this little six-yr old. But they did it anyway! They laughed and joked as they did it. They thought it was great fun to watch this little guy suffer and cry and feel abandoned. And I kept on asking, WHY? Why do we do such things to our friends. WHY IS LOVE SOMETIMES LOST ... SOMETIMES ABANDONED AND REJECTED?

We'd like to believe that all of us in this sanctuary are very different from those kids on Brantford Road. We'd like to believe that once we are baptized like Michelle and Jennifer today ... that once God pronounces his eternal love for us ... that we would never ever think of taunting or hurting anyone else. We'd like to believe that once we've spent two years and three levels learning our catechism -- that we'd never ever again be persecutors or rejectors. We'd like to believe that since (these) confirmands know the Ten Commandments and Creed so well ... that they'd always

live by them. In fact - the confirmands today not only know the Ten Commandments -- they also know Jesus' interpretation of them. 5th Commandment: THOU SHALT NOT KILL. In a hostile world, it's sometimes difficult to be non-violent. But most of us have to really be pushed to extreme anger before we will even think of killing. But (these) confirmands know what Jesus said about this 5th Command: Jesus pushes moral performance to the point of perfection. He says -- even those who are hateful or angry with their brother, they are guilty of killing. Now that's what it means to love Jesus Christ and KEEP HIS commandments. And which one of us can claim that kind of righteousness?? The LOVE of Jesus Christ IS SOMETIMES LOST ... ISN'T IT??

Yes, we'd all like to believe that we are above those six kids on Brantford Road. But to be human IS TO BE sinful is to suffer from some form of desolation -- some bondage to sin. A recent issue of Time magazine reflected the desolation of our culture as far as vulgarity is concerned. The article featured Andrew Dice Clay who was an unknown a few years ago. Last Saturday night he was featured on "Saturday Night Live." The ratings of the show skyrocketed! Isn't it amazing - a foul-mouthed, Brooklyn biggot reaches stardom through public vulgarity!

How can Jesus be serious when he says, "I will not leave you desolate." We look around us ... and we see desolation all over the place: drugs, pornography, bigotry, vulgarity, materialism, hedonism, self-centeredness, self-destruction, addictions of all kinds. These are not easy times to be baptized ... or to affirm one's baptism. Obviously, Jesus Christ has not abandoned us ... he has not left us desolate; but much of the world has abandoned Jesus Christ and left his love desolate.

We all know the facts. Every person in this sanctuary knows what's right. These five confirmands can tell you what's right -- they know the answers to the catechism. They know the Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and even the Beatitudes. They know that Jesus Christ is the Messiah of the world. And not only do they know what's right, they want to do what's right! They're seated before us today because they want to be faithful children of God. But even though they know all this - the facts are that the road to heaven is paved with more than good intentions.

Peter O'Toole, the famous actor, was asked how he wanted to be remembered. He related a story about his favorite jacket. It was a cherished possession, worn and stained by years of wearing. Ashamed to wear it in public, he finally broke down and sent it to the cleaners. When the coat was returned - it was obvious they had sent it to several branches to try to get it clean. There was a short note attached to it: "We regret to return this article less than perfect, but we tried our best."

"We tried our best!" That's what I asked of each of these confirmands this past year. And I'm proud of each

one of them -- BECAUSE THEY ALL TRIED THEIR BEST! I wish I had five like them every year (of course, their giggling did get to me at times - and did bribe them snacks.) But Jesus Christ is not as compromising as Peter Martyn. Jesus asks for more than Peter. He did not say, "If you love me, you will TRY YOUR BEST to keep my commandments." He came right to the point of confirmation of your faith! "IF YOU LOVE ME, YOU WILL KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS!"

The perfection Jesus demands of each of us is an absolute impossibility! We are too soiled and stained by sin to live up to his standards. We are too much like those six kids on Brantford Road. So what are we supposed to do? How can we avoid the desolation and be certain that Christ's love will stay with us longer than confirmation day? Obviously, Jesus pushes us right to the edge, he says: "If you love me, you will KEEP my commandments. He pushes us to the edge for one and only one reason: TO MAKE US AWARE THAT WE CAN'T DO IT ALONE ... TO MAKE US AWARE THAT NO ONE COMES TO THE POINT OF CONFIRMATION ALONE ... WITHOUT HELP! No matter how perfect and righteous we think we are -- Jesus wants us to understand today and everyday: WE CANNOT EVER KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS WITHOUT HELP!

And that's why Jesus says: "And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth!" The Greek word, "parakletos" means - advocate, counselor, comforter, helper -- the one who advocates for God's truth and love in our lives. Jesus never leaves his faithful children desolate -- he gives them a Counselor, an advocate. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves -- he gives to us what he demands from us. And how does he do this? He offers us advocates, helpers, intercessors ... people who keep on confirming his love for us. That's why parents stand up with confirmands and lay their hands on the confirmands' heads -- BECAUSE LIKE PASTORS, THEY ARE GOD'S COUNSELORS, THEY ARE THE PART OF GOD'S SPIRIT OF TRUTH, THEY ARE GOD'S ADVOCATES OF LOVE. In one sense, these ADVOCATES are the Holy Spirit. They are the ones who help pour God's spirit into us. God enters into us and dwells within us THROUGH THE ADVOCATES ... THRU THE COUNSELORS OF HIS LOVE.

Earlier I referred to Andrew Dice Clay. Would any 13-year old youngster want Andrew Dice Clay to stand and lay on his hand at confirmation? Clay advocates for pornography and vulgarity; he is not an advocate for God's love and compassion. I am thankful that Andrew Dice Clay is not my father; I'm certain these confirmands are thankful as well!

In my final interview this week, I asked each confirmand to tell me one teaching they had learned from the gospel of Matthew. Every one of them gave me the same teaching: "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." And when I asked them, what does it mean? They all answered: CHRISTIANS DO NOT GIVE IN ORDER TO BE SEEN OR GET CREDIT -- THEY GIVE BECAUSE GOD'S LOVE IS WITHIN THEM." FAITH IS a response to what is within us, not an effort to receive accolades from those around us.

Henry Drummond wrote, "Imagine what would have happened if Jesus had not ascended to be with the Father. Imagine if Jesus had stayed on earth and tried to be his own advocate of his love. Suppose he were still in the Holy Land, in Jerusalem. Every ship that started for the East would be crowded with Christian pilgrims. Every plane crossing the Atlantic or Pacific would be packed with pious saints seeking the healing touch of Christ. Every mail bag to Israel would be crammed with requests for those suffering difficulty or trials. Suppose you were on one of those ships or planes. The entry to Jerusalem would be jammed with jets and vessels of every flag. There would be an eternal gridlock of busses and trains to Jerusalem. If you were lucky enough to approach the Holy City, you would see a dark, seething mass stretching for leagues and leagues between you and the holy habitations. You had come to see Jesus; but you would never see him.

You had been crowded out by millions of other Christians, or would-be Christians. Jesus resolved that he would never allow himself to become such a world-wide attraction. It was necessary for him to go away so that the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, the advocate of his love could come and make God known right here in this place, and in a million other places just like this. The Spirit of Truth is not somewhere across the Atlantic in Jerusalem; it's right here -- in you and me, in every Christian who is open to his power and offers that same power to others.

Jesus says, "I will not leave you desolate." I will give you the Counselor, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth. So it is that he has given us parents, the church, SCS teachers, pastors, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins. WE ARE SURROUNDED BY HIS COUNSELORS, HIS ADVOCATES OF LOVE.

Today, in this holy place, among the holy people of Hope, five confirmands make the most important promise that a Christian can make: YOU PROMISE TO KEEP YOUR HEART OPEN TO THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST. You promise before God, before your parents, before me, before the communion of saints - that Jesus Christ's LOVE WILL NEVER BE LOST. You promise that you will remain open to allowing Christ's love to be present and powerful within you and from you!

That's a powerful promise! Because as I have already mentioned -- there are thousands of people out there like Andrew Dice Clay who want you to deny and reject that promise! Yes - even with hundreds of good people right around us who are trying to be God's advocates -- we can still be very much alone. None of us here ever knew Mrs. Cornelious Vanderbilt. But she was one of the richest widows to ever live. She lived in a 58-room mansion on 5th Avenue. In all this splendour, one day she told a friend: "I am so alone. I spent the whole day all by myself." The truth was she spent that whole day with 18 servants around her, but she had closed out the love of Christ from those servants.

It isn't our environment, no matter how splendid or beautiful, that solves our problems of desolation or loneliness. That little boy on Brantford Road didn't have to feel abandoned and desolate when his friends rejected him. The power of Christ was still in him. But he was still too young to be encouraged by that Spirit within him ... he was still too young to just cross the street and pass by those six friends as if they hardly were there. That's the power of the love of Christ; we will not be defeated by the powers of persecution and desolation around us.

As Peter Kroslak will tell us next week -- desolation has little to do with what's around you. Even in the midst of Communist persecution, Peter never felt abandoned by the love of God. Desolation is not determined from the outside, but from the inside. Even in the midst of this crowded church, with all the stained glass and singing and praying and outward signs of holiness -- we can still be very alone, very desolate, very apart from God UNLESS WE HAVE ALLOWED HIS LOVE TO ENTER INTO US AND FILL US WITH HIS PRESENCE.

The disciples had been with Jesus for three years. They had lived beside him, walked with him, even touched and embraced him, but that was not enough. They needed more than knowledge and companionship with Christ -- they needed communion in Christ. They needed his spirit to dwell within them! The same is true for you and me.

Today, your parents and I will lay our hands on your heads. That's a great ancient symbolism of the power of God coming to dwell within you. But that power will only be an outward touch unless you allow it to become deeply embedded within you so that it will never be lost. It's more than knowing the commandments. It's more than two years of catechism. It's more than being baptized once in a lifetime. It's a posture ... a commitment of openness to letting God's Advocates of love rule in your lives. It's not what you show on the outside -- it's what you believe deep from the inside. THAT LOVE OF CHRIST WILL NEVER BE LOST.

A father came home totally exhausted from work. He went directly to his bedroom and stretched out into a deep sleep. His two sons, six and seven, came in from play and asked, "Is daddy home?" Mom reassured them that he was home, but that he was sleeping and not to be disturbed. When mom left the room, the two little boys headed for the hall and walked slowly past the bedroom. Sure enough, there he was dead to the world. Not satisfied, they made another trip past the bedroom - this time stopping and then tiptoeing into their room. Then they went over by the bed. "Don't get too close!" warned the older brother. But the younger brother paid little attention. Finally, he went over to the side of the bed and put his face right over his father's face. He turned his head and tried to look under his father's eyelids. Finally, he reached up, and with two fingers ever so gently lifted the lid of his father's eye and peered in as if he were looking into a deep hole.

Then turning to his older brother, he whispered loudly, "He's still in there!"

I hope in one year ... I hope in 5 years ... I hope in 10 years ... yes, I hope in 50 years when I am no longer on this earth ... that when your children look at you, Jessica, at you, Michelle, at you, Lindsay, at you Jennifer, at you, Alexa --- when they look deep into your eyes ... I hope they will say: GOD'S STILL IN THERE. CHRIST'S LOVE HAS NEVER BEEN LOST!

AMEN.

(8:45 A.M.)

I hope when your children look deep into your eyes ... I hope when you look deep into my eyes ... I hope when we look deep into one another's eyes ... I hope we can say: GOD'S STILL IN THERE! CHRIST'S LOVE HAS NEVER BEEN LOST!

AMEN.

Easter VI
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 21, 1995
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"TO BE or NOT TO BE ... 'HOLY!'"

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. Rev. 21:22-23

What does it mean to be "holy?" Is it even a question that anyone asks or cares about anymore today? I'm not really sure, esp. as secularism has grown in our culture. But one thing is for certain! The Bible describes the essence of "holiness" 630 times from Genesis to Revelation in 562 verses. I think that means that God values "holiness." And I also think that means that God expects his faithful to value "holiness." Is it any wonder his Son taught us to pray, "Hallowed Be Thy Name!"

But what does it mean to be "holy?" The other day I was considering all my lifetime associations with "holy," religious & otherwise. What does it mean to be a "**Holy Cow?**" Does holiness have something to do with cows other than in India? Or what about "**Holy Cats?!?**" Are "cats" more holy than "dogs?" When I was growing up, I often said, "**Holy Mackerel!**" I must have learned that from my Roman Catholic friends, esp. with Friday Night fish fries. How about "**Holy Moses?**" Is Moses more "holy" than other O.T. figureheads like David, Abraham or Jeremiah? I never heard anyone say, "*Holy Malachi,*" or "*Holy Isaiah,*" or "*Holy Zechariah!*" So why has Moses been set apart and sanctified to be "holy?" Or why do some people say, "**Holy Smoke?!**" Does this "smoke" come from the notion that God is like a purifying fire ... or does it come from papal smoke after the election of a new pope? **And then there's the Holy Name of all Names -- "Holy Toledo!"** How did Toledo ever get the distinction of being called a "holy city?" One person once said the only time Toledo is ever "holy" is after a serious winter thaw! And of course we all know that Pastor Larry's vision of a Holy Toledo only includes those people who reside on the east side of the Maumee River. But seriously, what do we really mean when we say: "To Be or Not To Be Holy?"

Well, an appropriate beginning for our discussion today is to be reminded about what is so revolutionary in the book of Revelation. From the beginning of the Judeo-Christian faith - holiness was always associated with the presence of God. Wherever God abided or whomever God was with -- that place or those people were "holy." So, what would have obviously been the "holiest" of "holy" places?! The Jewish temple! In Judaism, the temple along with the law, sacrifice, circumcision and the sabbath were the basic realities of "holiness." That bias is still very present to this day. When people first enter this beautiful sanctuary, they often say, "now this is a real church ... this really feels like a holy place, like the way church should feel." "Holiness," according to their definition, has to do with the emotional or esoteric feeling of a place.

Likewise, there are some clergy who simply cannot serve a church that does not have weekly Eucharist -- because without "Holy" Communion, they feel there is "no holiness" in worship. But Revelation challenges these notions of architectural or liturgical "holiness:" *"I saw no temple in this holy city, for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. For God's glory is wherever his light is seen."*

Revelation challenges the idolatry of "holiness" into specific places or specific forms or specific acts of piety or liturgy or forms of prayer. When I was growing up, the "holy" people were the ones who went to convents or seminaries or monasteries. When I announced to a graduate friend at the Univ. of Wisconsin that I was going to enter seminary, he was appalled. He said, **"Peter, you'll never make a good pastor, you love life and fun too much!"** It was obvious from his cultural bias that "holy" meant a dismal and gloomy life - a life without fun and play and pleasure! How could we ever think of the "Holy God of Israel and the Holy Father of Jesus" as One who did not enjoy "fun and play and pleasure." A host of Jesus' N.T. stories are set at wedding receptions and festivities of eating & drinking. Moreover, here was a God who "suffered the little children to come unto Him" because He is a Holy One who loves children to "have fun and play and pleasure!"

Well, thankfully, John of Patmos who wrote Revelation may have been very obtuse re: many political realities in this last testament ... but he was right on the mark of religious realities when it came to defining "holy." **To be "holy" means to live in God's light and his light alone ... to be a source of brightness rather than doom and darkness in the world ... to be an advocate for harmonious love rather than a lover of alienation and brokenheartedness ... to be one who "opens the door" to all who desire to come in rather than the one who shuts anyone out who is different or unique.** To be "holy" means to always reach out to serve rather than pull-in to be served; to be "holy" means to live by God's law but always within the spirit of grace and forgiving compassion. To be "holy" means that you and I can mediate God's Spirit in forms and structures and denominations and liturgies, **but those physical things must always be transparent and must point beyond themselves to the Greater Light manifested in the person of Jesus Christ.** To be "holy" means that we would rather give than receive, rather forgive than forbid, rather care than be cared for, rather praise God than glorify ourselves, rather offer ourselves than possess someone else. **But above all, to be "holy" is to be very much aware of the mystery of the Holy One -- to be aware that there's so much more to know of and grow into as a follower of the light.**

And that's why you and I come here week after week after week ... to pray and listen and speak and meditate and seek that Light. Not to be enamored by a so-called "holy" place or any "holy" pastors or even a "holy" form of worship ... but to become a "holy" people of the Holy Light reflected in the Holy Life of Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

*EASTER VI
First English Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 5, 2002
Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim*

“NEVER ABANDONED!”

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ... I will not leave you desolate or orphaned; I am coming to you. John 14:15-16, 18

“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child ...” Which one of us can’t envision a buxom black woman singing that song into the heat of a southern night sky?? It was that Negro spiritual that spoke to the feelings of being taken from home, from family, from culture, and certainly from “polite society.” It was a song of bitter isolation, hurtful estrangement, agonizing alienation, and lingering loneliness. But it is no longer merely a song of a black plantation slave – today it has become a theme-song for much of America.

Suzanne Gordon in her book, *Lonely in America*, writes “Life in America has exploded, and loneliness and abandonment are the main fallout. What was once a philosophical problem, spoken of mainly by poets and prophets, has now become an almost permanent condition for millions of Americans: not only for the old and divorced but also for men and women filling singles bars & growth groups, for adolescents running away from home, for corporate transients who move every few years, and for people calling suicide crisis lines in search of someone to talk to. Knowing no limits of class, race or age – loneliness and isolation have become today’s great levelers – a new American tradition.”

Gordon goes on to say that more than 40 million Americans change residences every year. That on the average, most of us will move 14 times in our lifetimes. She claims that this fantastic mobility has caused us great reluctance “to get to know our neighbors.” Is it any wonder that churches have trouble getting to know their neighbors?? All life has become – isolated & estranged. Gordon says “when people lived in the same place for years, they got to know one another. When a new neighbor moved in, you brought them a house-warming gift. But today the attitude is, ‘why make any effort to welcome a new neighbor when that neighbor will be gone next year?’”

I doubt that any of this is new information, but it does illustrate that technology and sophistication alone cannot make life more meaningful and fulfilling. Louise Bernikow, who wrote *Alone in America*, says that “American life has become too privatized, too individualistic. People are encouraged to value things and not other people. The TV, the computer, the instant teller allow us to do without others what we used to have to do together.” She says even VCR’s have caused many of us to become “isolated in our residences” rather

than forced to interact at the movies. She concludes: “all these advances may not be the cause for isolation, but they have made it more possible for people to feel abandoned or alone.”

Is that the way God wanted his followers to experience the majesty of life and creation? More to the point, since our gospel says that Jesus would soon depart from his followers – did God want those devout disciples to feel like abandoned orphans? Quite to the contrary – God’s mission plan has never been to leave any followers in a state of isolation or abandonment! That’s why today’s gospel message has many different expressions -- but in all of them, Jesus makes the same point: “I will never leave you ... I will be with you ‘til the end of the age ... nothing will ever separate you from my love ... I will ask the Father to give you another Advocate to be with you forever!”

Just think of the multitude of Helpers – the Advocates that God has given to First English over her many decades. Not only has she had scads of faithful pastors, but she has had hundreds of faithful members whose spirit was the same as the Lord: **NEVER ABANDON THE MISSION!** And today that dedicated spirit continues to live on. I was again touched by that spirit last Monday evening by the twenty members at the yoking meeting. How thankful each of you can be that God’s spirit of Truth continues to be the reason that the faithful gather in this place.

And that’s what God wants you to keep uppermost in all your thinking and planning during this interim: **THAT NOBODY IN THIS PLACE WILL EVER FEEL ISOLATED OR LIKE AN ABANDONED ORPHAN.** And I am very thankful that God has given First English the advocacy of Pastor Marc Miller to journey with you along the way. Pastor Miller captures the meaning of God’s spirit of truth for this ministry – he does not let anyone forget that God’s mission “to serve” is what we are about! And because of his leadership, guidance and contacts – your yoking discussions have begun to bear fruit with St. Petri & St. Mark’s. But Pastor Miller does not allow us to deceive ourselves ... he continues to serve as God’s advocate for the spirit of truth: he reminds us that our mission is to reach out to the isolated & abandoned in this community. And as we talked last Monday night – that has been and continues to be the greatest challenge to get a handle on!

But that’s why Jesus offers the second dimension of today’s gospel: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Every one of us knows the great commandment – that apart from loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength ... we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. That’s what makes First English greater than any other organization in this community – it seeks first and foremost to keep God’s commandments ... and God’s commandments are that his spirit will not allow anyone to be abandoned!!

So this is the great challenge for First English and every other Christian body: TO NEVER ABANDON ANYONE WHO NEEDS GOD’S LOVE. I’m ashamed to admit it – but in truth I have not always been the faithful Advocate that God has called me to be to this commandment. He has said to me ... and to each of you: NEVER ABANDON ANYONE. There have been times I have rationalized and have taken the easy way ... avoiding this commandment. I have a suspicion that I am not alone in this sinfulness. Thankfully, God is even forgiving when we fall short of keeping his commandments.

It should be obvious that this world is filled with too many people suffering from loneliness, isolation and abandonment. Jesus says, “If you love me, you will love these ... because that’s my commandment.” The Father has sent the Advocate with the hope that each of us will be an expression of that spirit of truth. That spirit was once painted by Holman Hunt in his famous picture of “Christ Outside the Door Knocking.” Before Hunt’s picture was exhibited, he showed it to a friend. The friend looked at the Christ seeking entrance to the believer’s home through the thick, wooden door. Suddenly he said, “Hunt you’ve made a serious error. You’ve painted a door without a handle!!” Hunt replied, “There’s no mistake. The door has the handle on the inside. As the faithful, it is our calling to open the door when Christ is knocking.”

Jesus Christ has made it crystal clear that he will never abandon us. He is forever standing outside the door knocking. But sometimes we are unwilling “to open the door” – to really adopt his loving and forgiving presence.

And that’s the reason that Christ created and instituted the church – to be his community of advocacy ... that body of believers that always opens the door to be the presence of God in this world. God intended this place, the church, to be the one place in the world where NO ONE will ever be abandoned or rejected: “I will not leave you desolate or orphaned.” In this place God trusts that Christ’s love will be shared in word, in deed, and in sacrament.

God calls First English to be one vital link of the everlasting Advocate – the spirit of Truth. In fact ... for the future ... First English could adopt a simple mission focus in perfect harmony with what Jesus commands: WE WILL NEVER ADBANDON ANYONE WHO NEEDS GOD’S LOVE!!

AMEN

*EASTER VI
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 4, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor*

“What The World Needs Now!”

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. I John 5:1 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. John 15:12-14

(Karlene sings) Like Karlene, everybody's singing about it today! Even a recent bumper sticker says in a different way: **Perform An Unnatural Act Today - Love Somebody Else!** The obvious implication of the bumper sticker is that by nature we are self-lovers! **Ordinary human love is really a self-serving & self-focused love; natural love first & foremost seeks to gratify and satisfy ME.** It's what the Greeks called, "eros" (we get the word "erotic"). Such love is not patient & kind ... but rather jealous, resentful, boastful and often seeks to do wrong to others.

It reminds me of the story of Dr Albert Beven from my seminary days. Dr. Beven told us that when he was in college, one of his friends verbally and publicly assaulted him. His anger led to revenge. As he walked the campus, he saw a sticky burr covered with sharp, porcupine-like thorns. He decided to pick and carry that burr with him until he ran into his friend, at which time he would stuff it down his friend's back and create some pain and bleeding.

So he began his pilgrimage over campus with the burr in his pocket. However, every time he stepped, the burr pricked his leg. And everytime he sat down, the burr stabbed him. Finally at the end of the day he ran into his friend. As he took the burr from his pocket - the thorns were all gone. They had been deposited in his leg and bottom. Dr. Bevens learned that "seeking revenge" usually leads to "getting burred yourself." We all know such people - seemingly "on a mission to stick burrs in other people's bottoms." Out of jealousy and anger, such natural, human love too often seeks revenge instead of peace & harmony ... and very often results in self-inflicted wounds.

Christ's Love (Agape Love) is very different -- this love seeks peace & wholeness. But it is still very costly, because **“loving means dying to the self and living for others!”** That's why Jesus's words **“on love”** in John's 15th chapter are some of the most powerful words in the Bible: **“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”** Jesus took the burrs in his own body, and then said, **“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!”** Christ's love listens to the anger of damnation and then responds to it by saying: **“Peace be with you!”** Christ's love cringes over all the self-proclaimed arrogance and destructiveness in our world and then says: **“Bear the fruit of my spirit!”**
CHRIST'S LOVE OFFERS PEACE & WHOLENESS, NOT BECAUSE WE DESERVE IT ... BUT BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS

NOW!! Like never before, the **WORLD** needs the **Costly Love** of **Jesus Christ!**

Four years ago, Bishop Rave told a story at the Synod Assembly graphically illustrating the meaning of such costly love & friendship! It has been said that a true friend is **ONE** who knows you & me the way we really are ... and still likes us anyway! That's the love & friendship of Jesus Christ -- he intimately knows us the way we are -- yet he still not only likes us, but loves us!!

A graduate student was working on his doctorate comparing the life of white middle class Americans with the Indians of the Oglala Sioux reservation in the midwest. During his time there he became deeply involved in the life of this tribe. The Oglala's were a very reserved people. But as he came to know them better, they began to open up to him. They even shared some of their resentment about being segregated from the mainstream. They spoke proudly of their forefathers ... but also told him of their disdain for the white man who had basically overpowered them and co-opted them ... supposedly "civilizing them." This "civilized" white population had introduced them to whiskey -- "which to this very day has crippled their young & old alike."

The graduate student, deeply moved by their convictions, tried to learn their dialect. He threw himself into the daily routine of the reservation. He esp. noted early in his stay that an elderly Oglala woman was always present when he was around ... but she always kept her distance. Yet, like no one else on the reservation -- she watched him and seemed fascinated by his research.

Throughout his whole year there - this woman remained fascinated ... yet never said a word to him. But every time he was "in the eye of the reservation," he was aware of her presence . Yet ... when he would try to approach her -- she would quickly retire to her hut!

Finally he approached other members of the tribe and asked why she seemed to interested in him and yet would never talk to him. He was told that this wise old woman, while being able to understand the white man's tongue, did not speak the language and was therefore embarrassed. So for the rest of the year he did not engage her in conversation - but always warmly gave her a look of approval when in her presence.

Finally his year was up and it was time to leave. Saying "goodbye" was filled with the usual heartache of good friends. But his greatest struggle was with the woman on that final day. For there she was again -- standing on the sidelines as usual. He decided to approach her with one last attempt to express his gratitude for her "supportive kindness to him." To his amazement, she did not retire this time. As he approached her, she took him and hugged him tightly. Then she gently pushed him away and with her cracked, dry & calloused hands over his cheeks, she looked into his eyes and said in broken English: "I LIKE ME BEST WHEN I'M WITH YOU!" And then with tears running down her weather worn face, she repeated: "I like me best when I'm with you!"

What greater honor, what greater respect, what greater appreciation, what greater love & peace could this woman have shown this white man than to say: "I like me best when I'm with you!" My dear friends in Christ -- that's what we say as "friends of Christ." What greater honor, what greater respect, what greater appreciation, what greater love & peace could we possibly offer to any other person than to say, "I like me best when I'm with you!!"

Do you know anyone with whom you could truly share this statement?? That person is truly a "friend in Christ!" For that person would certainly lay his or her life down for you ... and you would probably do the same for him or her. A recent survey indicated that 60% of the men in America do not have such a friend. The survey indicated that most men made friends in grade school -- but ceased making friends as young adults. The survey indicated that men may have "golfing buddies" or "fishing buddies" or even "drinking buddies" -- but these become "functional relationships" rather than genuinely emotional attachments. In other words -- these are relationships for which "they would not lay down their lives!"

The survey concluded that women were slightly better: most women can name five or six people whom they would consider deep friends. But when all is said and done, Americans share more with their barbers, beauticians and bartenders than they do with any close friends. At Glenwood, we will test out this theory next Sunday - the degree to which we INVITE A FRIEND to church will say something about our value of Christ's love.

Today - our gospel tells us that we all have a friend with whom we can share anything and everything. His name is Jesus. As a young man -- my parents introduced me to this friend. And to this very day, "I like me best when I am with Him." When I sing those old favorites like "What a Friend We Have In Jesus," I am saying: "God, I like me best when I am with you!" When I laugh or cry or hug at somebody's bedside or right here in the sanctuary, I am saying: "God, I like me best when I am in the presence of your loving folk!" When I am teaching or trying to share Christ's vision with a committee or through a sermon, I find myself saying, "God, I like me best when I'm in your presence ... uplifting Your Way, Your Truth, & Your Life."

What a great day it would be if we all could say with the same enthusiasm: "God, I like me best when I'm with you!" That's what the world needs now -- everybody saying, "God, I like me best when I'm with You!" Because when we all say that -- then we will know that "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends!"

AMEN.