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The Fruits of Lasting Life

From the moment you step into our apartment on Lake Street in Oak Park you realize that this is a very particular home for two particular people. Most of the things on the wall are photos of family. There is a Velkommen sign painted by Ole's grandma Pearl and a painting that used to hang in my great-grandma's house. There is something about knowing that you are connected. That you are not alone. Knowing it and seeing it. Being surrounded by it.

It is partly my own personality, but I think there is something deeper going on. Ole has observed before that I am a "joiner" as he puts it. When you get me on your team or a part of your group, in your family, or on your side, I am all in. I crave connection.

We all want to belong. We desire connection. The truth is that talk of belonging and connection is often fraught with complexities. It's complicated. Mention of dwelling places and homes and abiding can bring up all sorts of emotions. Families cause pain and grow apart, relationships end, houses are not places of refuge. Connections die. We find ourselves alone. The ideal is an illusion. We know the temptation of those like us- curved in on ourselves is to move further inward and to be skeptical of others.

We are back in the upper room on the night of Jesus' arrest and betrayal. Now we hear these words on the other side of Easter. The one who spoke these words now addresses us as the one who was dead and is alive again.

As I was talking with Lucas, who was baptized at the Easter vigil, about what images he associates with baptism he said, "being God's friend." That is who we are. Jesus calls us friends. You and me. The one that knows you better than you know yourself speaks that promise to you today.

Just as we are connected to him like branches to a vine, so too are we connected like companions in a new family that stretches out beyond every human distinction. If we ever imagined that the God of all creation was somehow far away or at a distance from you, the resurrected Christ has put an end to that notion once and for all. You can be more or less aware that you are abiding in God's love at any given moment, but that does not change the reality. If the fifty days of Easter tell us anything it is: nothing can separate *you* or disconnect you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not death itself nor any rupture or transition or grave. So don't be afraid. You are held and sustained by a friend who loves you with a love that is stronger than every death. This

love washes over you and is placed in your hands. The risen Christ refuses to keep you at arms length. At every end this love goes further.

We are connected to Christ and to his body- like branches on the ever-growing tree of life with roots that continue to go deeper and spread out.

Just as those first branches were starting to push out past the many enclosed upper rooms of fear and trepidation we find ourselves with Peter. The people are astonished because of just how far this love will go. The gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out *even* on the gentiles. Outsiders- now connected. Our lineage directly related to them and the risky faithfulness of others who dared to make room for those unknown gentiles. Those branches make room for sinners like you and me. Who might we make space for in this community?

I first heard the phrase “chosen family” from other LGBT folks as I was finding my own way through the complexities of the coming out process. I’ve been lucky that my family has been so supportive. We all know that is not always the case. For many people finding support and care from their family of origin is no longer possible or safe and so they search out others who will love them unconditionally and make new space for them where it had only been taken away. Family, as Luther might say, is now broken open. Where dead ends and barriers had long been built, love breaks through. Once outsiders, now companions in a new family whose branches stretch out.

It was Pete Pero, the first Black American Lutheran to earn their Ph.D. in systematics who said “water is thicker than blood.” Baptism is more powerful than any human distinction. Yet, it is your body in its particularity that is called beloved. Your spot on this branch cannot be taken away. Whatever else happens in your life- you belong in this family. No matter what. We need you. Even if we are mutually astounded that the other is here. The branches continue to stretch out.

This is my commandment- that you love one another. How else would we relate to those new siblings and friends of ours?

Yesterday, leaders from Grace gathered with Pastor Sunitha Mortha to explore what this commandment looks like in practice, especially in relation to those who are different from us in countless ways. The words curiosity and mutuality began to emerge. We might recognize them as fruits of this intertwining love. Lasting life. There is no competing for space or status in this family. The branches just continue to reach further. The roots are strong.

When you come into this place, look around. Notice the signs: table, font, cross, words of life, and your own broken and risen bodies. What do they say? Christ is alive. Love abounds. He calls

you friend. You are never alone. Grace is not a commodity that needs to be protected, it can only be shared. It is so plentiful. There is room. Thank God. The branches just keep stretching out embracing all of who you are and all creation.

Alleluia, Christ is risen.