

To God Alone Be The Glory

131 years ago a group of believers with a German Lutheran background decided to call their church Sankt Johannes Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, which transliterates to St John (Ev. Luth. Ch.). If we were starting a new church here today, would we choose the same name? Maybe not. Naming churches after saints in heaven is a practice that has fallen out of favor. Many new churches call themselves by catchy names like New Life or Crossroads. One of my favorite names for a church is The New Church—doesn't matter how many years the church is in existence, it's always The New Church. Some churches these days identify themselves with their location. So maybe we would be Lake City Lutheran or Shepherd of the Lake Lutheran or Eagleview Lutheran. I wonder what name we would choose if we were a brand new church.

Of course, we're not a brand new church. And I haven't heard anyone proposing a name change for us. Our sense of identity is tied up in the name St. John's. It's a fine name. Naming a church after the apostle John is like saying, "Thank you, Lord, for all the blessings you poured out on your people through the apostle John." John's Gospel reports all kinds of

things about Jesus that we would not know if all we had there the other three Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Because of John's Gospel, we know that Jesus changed water into wine and raised Lazarus from the dead. It's John that reports how Jesus cleared out the Temple also at the beginning of his ministry, that Jesus met with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. John quotes Jesus as saying, "*The truth will set you free,*" and "*Before Abraham was, I am.*" Because of John's Gospel, we have the bread of life discourse. From John we hear: "*God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son...*" Because of John's Gospel, we think of Jesus as our Good Shepherd. It's John who reports that Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and John gives us four chapters of Jesus' teaching from Maundy Thursday evening. John tells us more about what happened between Easter and Ascension than the other three Gospel writers combined. John's Gospel was so popular among the early Christians that more copies were made of John's Gospel than of Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts combined.

While the membership of this church still has a majority of German names, 14 other ethnicities are represented in our membership: Norwegian, Swedish, Finn, Mexican, British, Irish, Scottish,

Polish, Czech, Slovak, Ojibwe, Hindi, Jewish, and French. Yet despite our different backgrounds, we, the people of St. John's, are one family. We even share the same blood—not the stuff running through our veins, but the blood of Christ which washed away all sins. You are my “brotha from a different motha.” You're my “sista from a different mista.”

Think about that. When you look around at the people in church, you can say to yourself, “God takes care of these people every day. He loved each of them from eternity. He sent Jesus to save each face I see. He arranged for us all to hear the Gospel and be brought to faith in Jesus. Instead of having to endure hell together forever as a dysfunctional family with the wicked father of evil, we are going to join the multitudes of every nation, tribe, people, and language around the throne of our good and gracious heavenly Father. Hello, family. You're all my relatives.” You can say that here. It's what we mean when we say, “This church is my family.”

‘The church as family’ is hardly a new idea. Jesus and the apostles planted this thought in our heads. Our sermon text is a good example. Ephesians 3:14-19: ¹⁴*For this reason I kneel before the Father,* ¹⁵*from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth*

has its name, ¹⁶*and ask Him to give you a gift in proportion to the riches of His glory. I ask that His Spirit will inwardly strengthen you with power,* ¹⁷*in order that Christ will live in your hearts by faith, and you will be firmly rooted and built up in love.* ¹⁸*I ask for this gift so that you and all the believers can grasp how broad and long and high and deep His love is.* ¹⁹*Then you will know how much Christ loves us—more than we can know—so that you will be filled with God's full measure. (NET)*

What a great thing to pray for your church family. As Paul prayed for the Ephesians, I ask you to join me in praying for the St John-sians again and again. And please see St. John as part of a much greater family, *the whole family in heaven and earth*. That's all believers everywhere, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. We have a very large family, thanks to the triune God. And there's still room for more.

Our family, the family of God, *has its name* from the Father. Since you've all been adopted into God's family, you may tack his name onto yours so that his name becomes your real last name. Go ahead. Try it in your head. [Nathan Cordes God] Sounds a little funny, right? It's not that you become God. But you do have his name. God

wants your place in his family to affect your sense of identity. Why? From identity comes behavior because people act like who they think they are.

When you pray for your family, what should you pray? Paul prayed for God to give you a big gift, since God is so rich. Are you thinking money? Ach, money is just a tool, something God allows us to use during this life so we can accomplish important things like providing food, clothing, and shelter to our household and to others who need help. Important things like paying our taxes. Really important things like sending missionaries to other places to preach on our behalf, and operating this church so we can hear the Word of God and share it with others locally in every way possible, including through our school, for as long as the Lord will move us to operate it. Money is just a tool for us to accomplish what is important to God. Anyone who looks at money as more than a tool turns money into a god.

Paul wanted a much bigger gift for the family of God. And what gift could be bigger than the Holy Spirit? So we love to ask God for each other, “May the Holy Spirit strengthen you inwardly with power, not so that you yourself will be so strong, but so that Christ lives in your heart by faith. Dear family, I want

you so firmly rooted and built up in love that, like a tree in the wind, no matter what pressures blow on you, nothing can uproot you from the truths of the Bible.” Bible truths like this: You are so completely forgiven because of Jesus that your sin will not be held against you on the Last Day. Oh, you can expect earthly discipline from the Lord if you have done something you knew you shouldn’t. That’s what a loving parent does to children. And you are the children of the loving Father in heaven. A good parent helps a child not want to repeat sinful behaviors and attitudes. And a great tool for accomplishing this change in attitude is loving discipline. A good parent loves a child enough to make the consequences of a sinful choice too un-enjoyable to repeat the sinful choice. That’s how we get *firmly rooted and built up in love*. I pray this for you. We pray this for each other.

The goal of this prayer is that we will all gain deeper insight into God’s love for us, so we will have some idea of how far God’s love will go in any direction to hold on to us. I want you to be filled up with the full measure of God. Imagine that you are this glass. Imagine that God keeps pouring his love (like this water) into you to the point of overflowing. God wants you to have a full measure of himself in you so you can know how much Christ

loves you... except for the fact that it's impossible for us to understand it fully. But we can get a pretty good sense of how much God loves us. His love is broad and long and high and deep.

Why would we pray such a prayer for each other? Because we understand that the closer each of us gets to God, the closer we become as a family. And that's always one of our goals: **GROWING AS GOD'S FAMILY**. We've come a long way, especially in the last year or two. It's not just about the hugs I see happening. Hugs are great between people who like them and are able to keep them pure. For others a handshake or a nod or a smile or some pleasant conversation are sufficient for exchanging love.

But there's always room for improvement, especially since Jesus predicted that the love of most would grow cold (Matthew 24). Jesus was not saying that he is in favor of our love growing cold. Just the opposite. He said, "*Love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*" (John 13:34b-35). But he wants us to know that the tendency is going to be for people to hurt each other more and more as the Last Day draws near.

Well, how many times do you have to be hurt by people before you start pulling back as a hedge against further hurts? Or how many times do you have to hurt others before you start pulling back as a hedge against revealing your sinful side to your church family? We tell ourselves: "I don't want anyone to know who I am when the Holy Spirit is not in control of me." We reason that it's better to hold ourselves back from our church family than to feel ashamed for our shortcomings. Or maybe you know that it's difficult for you to forgive—that's your weakness, like others struggle with worry or lust or gluttony. So you don't want to give others a chance to need your forgiveness because you fear it will be slow in coming.

But our forgiving and gracious Lord knows that it's actually better when we spend time together, get close to each other, find out each other's secret sins, keep the knowledge to ourselves but privately check with each other to see how the struggle is going, remind each other how forgiven we are because of Jesus, and ask the Spirit's help for success in overcoming temptation. Now that's a loving family! May the Lord move our church family in this direction. We want to be **GROWING AS GOD'S FAMILY**.