

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor John Swanson

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — John 14:23-29

Jesus answered him, ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

### SERMON

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I am preaching today because Pastor Pedro’s father died this past week. Pastor Pedro and Aura learned of his death on Thursday, quickly packed, got on a flight to Venezuela and joined the family for the Friday funeral. Recently Pastor Pedro preached at our midweek chapel service and talked about his father, Manuel Suarez. His father, like mine, was a pastor. And Pedro told us during chapel that as a pastor his dad never felt as if he had learned enough - he had a tremendously strong drive to learn more. This passion for more and more learning continued throughout Manuel’s life - taking Pedro’s family from one community to the next. That pursuit for knowledge not only led Pedro’s family to a variety of cities in Venezuela, it also took them to the United States.

The drive to learn more - to learn how God works in this world, to understand more fully our place in the work of God, to uncover the mystery of faith and to wrestle with the reality of doubt - that drive to keep learning was strong within Pedro’s father. His passion to know his Lord and Savior more completely sent him to many schools, but it did far more than that. It brought him into fellowship with God in a way he would not have had otherwise.

In our efforts to serve God through our actions and to experience God through our learning, we come to know God more and more deeply and eventually, to love God. We see that even though our lives may take many wrong turns, God consistently is there for us - offering us his grace, his love and his mercy. And as that truth becomes more clear,

love grows more fully. And we show that love through all that we say and do.

Pedro’s father was not living in ivory towers as he went from school to school. He continued to share his faith through his ministry - being the arms, mouth and feet of God in the communities in which he lived. Both efforts - his book learning and his hand’s on ministry - together strengthened his faith and brought him closer to God. Through his collective efforts to know more about God in his head and in his heart, Manuel’s faith grew and that passionate faith was passed on to many others, including our dear friend Pedro.

This past week I visited a Bethel member who was going through treatment for cancer. Her prognosis is good, yet fear and anxiety continue to be very familiar emotions for this woman. As we talked, she told me that this experience with cancer has helped her focus on what is important in life and to put aside the rest. She also told me that she has felt a pull to do something with all that she had and continues to experience and endure - she wants to create something positive from a potentially terrible situation. And she said that part of that searching was a searching for a deeper connection with God - a clearer understanding of who God is and what God’s plan is for her life. Cancer, she said, was obviously not something she ever wanted, but it is something that has caused her to search - and that searching is something positive that she can take from an otherwise bad situation. This woman and Pedro’s father have at least one thing in common - they share the desire to know God more completely. How this woman will pursue her search is anyone’s guess, but I have faith that she will do it.

Nearly 1 ½ years ago many of you remember that I was sick and hospitalized for 10 days and out of work for 6 weeks. My thoughts and feelings during the first week of my illness seemed to be very deep, dire and dark. But as I gained my strength and overcame my initial shock at what was happening to me, I took stock of the situation and realized that I was very fortunate. And like Pedro’s father and the woman I visited last week, I felt driven to connect with God more deeply.

Being as sick as I was has a way of doing that to a person, but I think that drive to connect with God - that searching for a more complete relationship - is actually very common and does not necessarily need an illness on our part to jump start the search. In fact, the question that was asked of Jesus just before our Gospel for today begins, is a question about deepening that connection.

The question, which was asked by one of the disciples while Jesus was speaking to them during the Last Supper is this, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world.” In other words, he was asking,

“After you are gone, Jesus, how will we know that we are connecting to you? That we are not just talking to the wind or the stars or the empty space?”

And Jesus answers, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them and we will come to them, and make our home with them.” If we love Jesus, we will follow his Word. Our faithfulness to the Word of God becomes a sign to ourselves and to God, that we are Christians. And as we keep God’s Word, we have the most wonderful promise - the presence of God within us will become more and more clear. When we follow the Word of God rather than our own notions and our own interests, room is made in our hearts for God and God will dwell with us. God is not far away in some heaven above, but God is with us - God is with us as we read Bible stories with our children, God is with us as we tell our faith stories, God is with us as we pray, and God is with us as we reach out our hand to someone in need. That is where we will find God.

I have been asked many questions during my time as pastor here at Bethel - one of the most common is this question about how do we connect more deeply with God. It is a reasonable question, given the fact that God does not call us up on the phone, send us an email or stop by our home and tell us what we should do. But what Jesus is telling us in these verses in John is that it does not need to be so complicated; in fact, it is relatively simple - Jesus is telling us to love God and do the work of God; and the work of God, in its simplest form, is to share God’s love with others.

When I was recovering from my illness last spring, I found myself thinking about how I could live a better life - how I could be a better person. Much of that had to do with this desire to connect more completely with God. But as I thought about what that really meant, I determined that one thing that would help me to get to that point was to be more loving with my family. I decided that I would try not to get mad or frustrated; that I would not yell or say angry things - I decided, essentially, that I would be calmer and more loving.

Things started off beautifully. Over time, of course, I began to forget what I had decided to do. And in the course of this past year, I have, at times, gotten angry and yelled and basically done what I said I would try not to do. While my wife and children may disagree with me as to how successful I have been in the past year, we would all agree that I have not been perfect (my wife and kids are far more willing to agree to that part than I am, but I guess it is the truth). I have failed.

But my family has not given up on me and I have not given up trying - I have experienced their love and support and I have turned to God on numerous occasions to seek his support and assistance. Due to the collective efforts of my two children, my wife, God and me, I am happy to report that there is still some hope for me - together we think that with a lot of outside help I have at least a decent chance of being a calmer person in the future.

There was a nature show on television a while back that followed a family of bears - it was a female black bear that gave birth to two cubs. One cub died right away. Three

weeks later the mother died and the remaining cub was left to fend for itself. An orphaned cub in that condition is like a walking buffet for predators. And of course the camera immediately showed a hungry-looking mountain lion. One day the orphan cub encountered a giant male black bear. The little cub cowered at the bear’s sheer mass. The larger bear peered around and seemed to realize that the mother bear wasn’t anywhere to be found. He gave the little cub a friendly nudge. The camera then showed the little bear happily trailing along after the larger one - a bond had been made. Papa bear proceeded to show the cub how to grub for insects and how to catch fish and how to scratch his back against a tree.

One day the two bears became separated. The cub began to cry and looked frantically for his new father, but couldn’t find him anywhere. The cub approached a stream where he’d learned to fish and something caught his attention. He looked up to see a mountain lion ready to pounce. There was no way that mountain lion would have gone for that cub with Papa bear around, but with him gone, things did not look so good.

The camera zoomed in on the cub. He automatically mimicked the posture of his adopted father when threatened. He stood on his hind legs and bared his teeth. Then, in exactly the same way his new father would have done, this cub let loose a mighty growl that should have reverberated throughout the forest. But, only a tiny bear cub squeak came out. Despite that tiny squeak, the mountain lion lowered his head and ran off in the opposite direction.

The camera panned back to the proud little cub still standing tall on his hind legs. And then all the viewers saw what that little cub could not: a few yards behind him, at full, ferocious height, his sharp, white teeth bared in a snarl, stood Daddy bear. He may not have made a sound, but he was there.

And even though the cub couldn’t see his father, his father stood guard, protecting his young. The little cub had power available greater than anything he could produce on his own. There was a greater power watching over him.

Our connection to God might not always feel strong. We might feel separated, alone, abandoned, forgotten. We might want more guidance, greater insight, a clearer picture. Instead, we have a promise: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them ....” Amen. © 2010