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“Love one another as I have loved you”

Ali Tote

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**Text: John 15: 9-12
Morning Worship, July 16, 2011
ELCIC National Convention, Saskatoon**

Sisters and brothers in Christ: I have two hats: first, I am a proud son or adopted son and pastor of this wonderful church of ours, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). Second, I was born in Cameroon where I grew up and lived until 1998 when I moved to Canada.

I will speak this morning as a proud son and pastor of this church but primarily from the perspective of my journey from Cameroon to Canada. In that respect, I have two pieces of news for our church, for you: The good news: You are a very welcoming church; you love and seek to love others and the world very much; you long earnestly to be a welcoming church, and you do everything in your power to be as welcoming as you possibly can.

The bad news: You do not love each other very much; you do not seem to show the same earnestness with regards to seeking to love one another in the ELCIC. Before I left Cameroon, my home church the Evangelical Church of Cameroon (EEC) had been wrestling with some hot issues including tribalism, polygamy, and the ordination of women. Wrestling with these issues meant that the church ended up much divided.

When I moved to Canada in 1998, I discovered a wonderful church: the ELCIC. Some of you may be questioning this assertion but it is true that you are a wonderful church. I was immediately embraced and welcomed. In most congregations I belonged to, I was often if not always the only black (spot or shall I say) person in the church. It was odd but it was good. Friends from Africa often asked me to join their church instead, so that we could really worship. I continually responded that I had found a wonderful church, sisters and brothers in Christ, where I belonged. Race, ethnicity, background, etc. none of that mattered. They were great people and a wonderful family to be a part of.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, That is the good news. You are an amazingly welcoming church. It is your gift to the worldwide church and to the world. I soon discovered that I was not the only one being welcomed. Blacks and people of other races, people of other ethnic groups were also welcomed. Once I was shocked to take part in a service of the blessing of the beast which I had never heard before. So, this amazing hospitality as I found out was extended even to animals such as dogs, cats, and all sorts of animals and birds.

An illustration of that tenacious desire to be loving, welcoming and hospitable was shown yesterday in the adoption of the draft statement on human sexuality which aims primarily at opening the doors of the church to the marginalized in the persons of our sisters and brothers who are gay and lesbian. It is a good thing in the sense that at least at a

very basic level, it demonstrates the openness and the desire to not exclude people. But given the difficult nature of the votes, the debates and of the subject matter, there are no winners, and there are no losers as Bishop Susan pointed out. This simply shows how you risk hurting each other (and indeed do hurt each other) for the sake of seeking to be a welcoming place for others. You are a warm and welcoming people, and the sister in Christ who said the other day that she is even compassionate to mosquitoes portrays quite accurately the benevolent hospitality of this church extended to others. That is the good news.

However, as my journey continued in this church, I soon discovered that this excellent hospitality and love seemed directly almost exclusively outwardly. You could be that amazingly loving to me and to others like me, but not as loving towards one another. I soon learned that the ELCIC I had initially thought to be a white church had more subtleties than that. Beneath the surface, and like my home church in Cameroon, it was divided along ethnic (tribal) lines. Norwegians did not seem to like the Swedes I soon found out. Germans and Norwegians did not like each other I also discovered. I first found this out when, after moving from one congregation to another, I shared with members of the new congregation my discovery of, joy and passion for lefse and lutefisk, only to be shocked that this was not good news to them. I also learned that the French in the church felt unwelcome because of English dominance. I found this out the first time when I spoke French in the presence of some members and was met with a stringent rebuke and a history lesson on the French and English speaking parts of Canada.

I soon learned about the East versus west dynamic in the church and how they are and have been at each other's throat. I soon found out that the conservatives-versus-liberals debate in the political world was raging also in the church in the form of pietists versus the rest. I also discovered the urban versus rural struggles in the church. I found out that even in the same province there were divisions in the church along the social biases lines seen out of the church in the society around us: Edmonton versus Calgary, Saskatoon versus Regina and on a different level, Toronto, the centre of the universe, versus the rest of the world. In the church!

Sisters and brothers in Christ, That is the bad news! The bad news that you do not love each other as much as you ought to and need to; that you do not seem to want to love each other with the same earnestness with which you open your arms to those outside the church. What are you thinking? What are you doing to one another?

The truth is, we cannot be truly welcoming if we fight amongst ourselves. We cannot reach out to the world in love if we destroy each other. Knowing that his disciples were going to encounter divisive challenges: theological, exegetical, hermeneutical, socio-economic, political and otherwise, in the gospel of John 15: 9-12 that we just read, Jesus urged them, Jesus begged them, Jesus commanded them, that they love one another just as he had loved them.

Knowing that we, the members of this beautiful and wonderful church called the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, that we were going to (and indeed do already) face divisions amongst ourselves, that we were going to be so outwardly focused we forget about caring for and loving each other, Jesus urges us to love one another; Jesus begs us to love one another; Jesus commands us to love one another as he has loved us. It is a commandment grounded in Christ's love for all of us since Jesus knows that we can be a stubborn bunch. It is a commandment, not a suggestion, a commandment grounded in

Jesus' amazing grace for us. As we move forward to be a covenant people in mission for others as our national Bishop Susan Johnson has encouraged us, let us remember first that we are in mission with one another, in mission with brothers and sisters of this church that Jesus loves passionately and urges us, begs us, and commands us to love.

May Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bless God's word in our hearts and in our minds. AMEN!