

Earl Mangels Funeral Sermon – Revelation 21:1-7 & John 14:1-7

Earl Mangels was well known in this congregation. He was well known because of his time on the Board of Elders. Earl was one of the first people I got to know when I arrived at Immanuel ten years ago, specifically because he was on the Board of Elders when I arrived. And a new pastor leans on his elders constantly.

He was well known because of his years attending the Thursday morning breakfast Bible study. He was, in fact, one of the founding members of that group, back when Andy Melendez first started it. And he loved attending every week. In fact, I would often hear from him or Patty how much he missed it when I had to cancel or he was sick or when he just couldn't find the strength in these last couple years.

But most of all, Earl was well known because of that stool sitting right there. That stool which sat in the narthex just outside those doors. Upon which Earl could always be found on Sunday morning. He was like Norm on an episode of Cheers or Sheldon on an episode of Big Bang Theory. Earl had his spot. And you always knew you would find him there.

But Earl had that spot for a very good reason. And it wasn't just to talk about how they did dairy farming back in his day (although he did do a fair amount of that). No, Earl wanted to greet every person who came into our building. He wanted to keep track of who was here and who wasn't. He honestly wanted to know how you were doing and what was happening in your life. He wanted to be a friendly face and helpful guide to visitors.

That last one was especially important. Churches need people who are willing and able to show the way to those unfamiliar to the congregation. Whether that's physically pointing out where the bathrooms or the Fellowship Hall are. Or pointing out who to talk to about taking communion or enrolling their child in the school. When you're in an unfamiliar place, you need someone like Earl to show you the way.

Jesus talks about that in our Gospel lesson today. This Gospel lesson was chosen for a very special reason: verse six was Earl's confirmation verse. It's a very, very familiar verse. One of the most popular verses in the entire Bible, I would guess: *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

In fact, it's one of those passages we repeat so often, I wonder if we really think about what Jesus is saying and why He's saying it. Because he's just told his disciples something important: He is leaving them. Going back to his Father to prepare a place for us. To prepare a room for us in his Father's house.

Patty, you and Earl knew something about having your kids come back and live with you, didn't you? I don't want to embarrass any of them. But, sufficed to say, I have heard about one child or another staying with Patty and Earl on several occasions over the years.

But they did so because they knew they were always welcome back in their mother and father's home. Patty and Earl loved their kids. Whether they were their biological children or not. They always wanted to provide a place for them whenever they needed it.

Our heavenly Father does the same for us. In death, we leave this earthly home behind. But it's not because we're going somewhere strange. Somewhere unknown. We're just going to live in our Father's house. In the room that Jesus himself has prepared for us. Because our heavenly Father loves us and we are always welcome in his home.

But, in our lesson, Thomas is confused. It may be our Father's house. But it's in heaven and we're on earth. It's in a place that we've never been. How can we possibly find our own way into heaven? How can we know the way to a place we've never been?

You see, we're all born separated from God our Father. Wandering about like wayward sheep and prodigal sons. So hopelessly lost, we don't even know where home is anymore. We turn to all the comfort and pleasures that this world has to give us. And all we find is a place that still isn't our Father's house.

Thomas was absolutely right in saying that he didn't know the way. Apart from Jesus, we don't know the way. We don't know who the Father is or where we can find him.

But Jesus tells Thomas not to worry. Because Jesus himself is the way. Follow him and you'll end where you belong. Cling to him, to his cross, to his resurrection, and he'll carry you to exactly where you need to go. Let the truth of his Word be your guide, and you'll know exactly where you're going. Be reborn in his baptismal waters and you'll have a life that cannot die.

On January 31, 1954, Earl Wayne Mangels was made a child of God in those baptismal waters. To him, God declared, "*I will be his God and he will be my son.*" And from that day forward, the Holy Spirit never ceased to bring the Word of God into Earl's ears and into Earl's heart. Reminding him that if Earl had Jesus, he knew the way and the truth and the life.

And when Earl finally faced his own looming death, just a few weeks ago, he did so not as someone terrified because he didn't know the way. No, he faced the end of his earthly life with the confidence of someone who knew the way to the Father, because he knew Jesus. Someone who knew the truth of his own sin and his own forgiveness, because he knew Jesus. Someone who knew the life bought for him on the cross and revealed on Easter morning, because he knew Jesus.

Today, we weep because a faithful, loving, hard-working man has been taken out of our lives. And that's perfectly OK. I'm going to miss Earl too. But we need to remember that our separation from Earl is a temporary separation. Earl has gone to the room in His Father's house that Jesus prepared for him. But we each have our own room being prepared in that same house. And so we will see Earl again.

Until then, we remember with gratitude the life God gave to Earl and still gives to each of us. The life here and the life to come. And we rejoice for the witness that Earl gave to his Lord each and every Sunday as he sat on that stool. Greeting and guiding and caring for the people who came into this church. That they might also know the way, the truth, and the life found in Jesus Christ, just as he did. Amen.