

**Funeral of Jowann Lenore Fleming**  
John 15:5

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Jim, Teresa, Hans, family and friends of Jo, sisters and brothers in Christ, beloved of God, Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“I am the vine, you are the branches,” Jesus told his disciples the night before his crucifixion. “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” I’m taking this verse from John’s gospel as my sermon text today because it is referenced in the hymn that we will sing in a few minutes, a hymn that caught Jo’s attention when we were planning her funeral soon after she learned the shocking diagnosis of inoperable thyroid cancer back in August. It caught her attention because it weaves together the images of the vine and the tree, both used by Jesus to talk about our relationship with God, and it reminded Jo of something that her doctor had told her about her illness being like a tree. I didn’t understand that last connection until it was explained to me just yesterday. But I’ll come back to that in a minute.

We are here this morning to accomplish three main tasks; to celebrate and give thanks for Jowann Lenore Fleming, to mourn her death, and to commend her into God’s eternal care.

The first of those tasks is surely the one we are most readily drawn to. And that’s because there is so much to celebrate and give thanks for when it comes to Jo. She was, she is, a remarkable person and I am personally thankful that she has been a part of my life and ministry for almost nine years. Jo wore a lot of hats around here at Grace. She was our financial secretary for many years. She was a constant presence on the Grace Food Pantry team. She was part of our worship planning team. She was a member of the choir for many years, and then more recently joined the bell choir. She served in the rotation of assisting ministers for Sunday worship. She was a faithful participant in faith formation and educational opportunities, and in the past couple of years organized the faith-circle book group with Pastor Janet Lepp, and hosted nearly every meeting her home. That, friends, is a whole lot. And if Grace had been the only place she so generously volunteered her time and gracious presence, that would have been more than enough for any one person. But there was more – Empty Tomb and the Orphans Treasure Box Bookstore to name only two. But to celebrate all of those concrete things that we can quantify and give names to does not begin to convey the quality of her character, her wise and gentle demeanor, her deep thoughtfulness, her sense of humor and irony, and her kindness and care for others. Jo has been one of the loving faces of this congregations, quick to greet visitors, and intent on getting to know those new to our community of faith. That’s just a glimpse of who Jo has been from our limited perspective. The rest of you are testimony to the many other lives she has touched and been a blessing to. And for some of you that has been a lifelong reality. Celebrating Jo has already been happening and will continue after this service at the luncheon to which you are all invited, and it will spill out into our lives going forward as we remember and give thanks for what she has meant to us.

The other task that is being accomplished simultaneously amidst that first task, is the task mourning Jo’s death. It is an unavoidable task that goes hand in hand with loving and being loved by her, of caring for her and being cared for by her. We celebrate Jo with tears in our eyes, a lump in our throats, and an ache in our hearts, and we wish desperately that we didn’t have to say goodbye. We want more time with her and we can’t have it. Mourning is not pleasant, not something we want to do or look forward to. But it is ultimately good for us, in spite of the pain, and a sign of the depth of the love we share with her.

The final task, the one we turn our attention to now, is meant to help us with those first two tasks of celebrating and mourning, and to give them context and meaning. And that is the task of commending Jo into the care of God, her creator, redeemer, and advocate. I want to be clear that this is not something God needs us to do, and it is not something Jo needs us to do. God long ago claimed Jo as God's beloved child in Holy Baptism, and Jo throughout her life, including her final days, commended herself into God's care, just as she long ago commended her son Drew into God's care. She knew and trusted the promises of life won for her and him in Jesus' death and resurrection, and she and he are already in their Lord's eternal embrace. Our commendation of Jo, then, is actually for our sake, something that God does for us. It is God saying to us, even as we cling to Jo in our grief, "you can let go now. I've got her. She is in good hands."

"I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus told his disciples the night before his crucifixion. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." Jowann Lenore Fleming has been abiding in the vine of Jesus and bearing fruit from that connection for her entire life, fruit that all of us here have been tasting and delighting in. But here's the connection that Jo was making when we chose the next hymn. Her doctor had said that her illness was like a tree that she was in that was growing up and branching out. She was in this particular tree, and it was no use wishing she was in a different tree. The way forward could go in all sorts of directions, but all of it was this same tree, this deadly illness, and it was now her reality going forward.

The doctor was mostly right of about that. Until now, that is, after Jo's death. Because Jo knew that she was also in another tree, the tree of life that is Jesus Christ, the tree depicted in brickwork on the wall behind me. She knew herself to be rooted in Christ the vine, with his life flowing through her, life that has conquered the power of sin, and death, and evil, and she trusted that that would be her reality going forward, long after death had done its worst.

We are invited to hear that same promise for us as we turn to the hymn. Before we do, though, I want to read to you the fourth verse there, so that you are not hearing it for the first time as you sing. This is a hymn that sings us through the seasons of life, with winter being the season of death. Here's the fourth verse:

*As winter comes, as winters must, we breathe our last, return to dust;  
still held in Christ, our souls take wing and trust the promise of the spring.*

Good luck singing it now. The final verse then is a prayer that I invite you to join in as you are able and inclined to do. As we sing, now, as we celebrate, as we mourn, and as we commend Jo to God, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.