

Weekly Study of Sunday's Message.

Sunday Dec 20, 2020. "Names: Names Are a Gift. Love."

I Intro.

Welcome to the weekly devotional that gives you some specific things to work through from the message this Sunday. Whether you were able to participate in this service or not, this devotional is free-standing and you can still use it to help you dig deeper into your own spiritual walk. Take as long as you need to dive into this material and feel free to share it.

We're still gathering in person. A small but growing group who follow all the safety guidelines joins us at the church. We're so encouraged with your love and presence when you gather with us. If you're still joining us online, we love and so appreciate your presence also. We still are your church family, and if there is ANYTHING you need, prayer, ideas or suggestions you have, please pass them our way. We feel just as isolated as you, and we want to maintain that connection with each of you.

II Recap.

We're at the final Sunday of Advent, and right up against Christmas. Hopefully we've given you some insight and specific ways to help you find these Advent themes in your everyday life. To both help you get ready for Christmas, and spiritually prepare for the coming of Jesus. So you can grow **hope**, a confident expectation the coming of Jesus can bring the world we so desire. Find **peace**. Not just absence of conflict, but repairing what was torn apart. The division, disunity, brokenness, we've experienced, especially this past year, can be pushed aside by a peace that unites, and heals. And experience **joy**, the natural outpouring of receiving love, and sharing the story of what Jesus means to you with others. Those services and companion study guides are available for your benefit.

III Sunday.

Sunday was the last Sunday before Christmas and we hit the final theme of Advent...love. THE most important of the four themes, and most likely the least understood in the fullness of what scriptural love actually means. I'm not sure we'll ever really grasp the depth and meatiness, (yes...it's difficult to find another word), of this kind of love. So, let's wrestle with a bit, and then dig into the passage.

How do you think our culture views love?

How do you believe the scriptures understand and teach about love?

What makes actually practicing the scriptural understanding of love so difficult?

The scripture used for our conversation about love came from the super familiar passage **John 3:16-17**. But the story began when a Pharisee named Nicodemus sought Jesus out one night, and poured his heart out to him. So, read **John 3:1-17** first, and then we'll dig into it a little deeper.

What jumped out to you about this story?

What do you believe Nicodemus was struggling with that made him come to Jesus?

What are some ways you understand this love Jesus talked about?

Ok, let's dig into the story first. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who had 'made it' according to the world's standards. He had achieved worldly success, and by all measurements should have felt this sense of accomplishment and that he had arrived. But there seemed to be an emptiness in him, even religion couldn't satisfy. And in the words of the founder of Habitat for Humanity; *"I have fulfilled the American dream, but the American dream did not fulfill me"*, it appeared Nicodemus still felt this emptiness.

Do you believe it's true that often pursuing the worldly definition of success can leave us feeling empty? Why is that?

So, Nicodemus sneaks out in the night to talk to Jesus. He doesn't know exactly how to express this sense of emptiness in his life, so he just begins the conversation with his understanding of what kind of person Jesus is, and hopes it leads somewhere substantial. A couple more questions.

Have you ever been at a place in your life where you couldn't find the words to describe what you're feeling?

Why does that happen?

These feelings often come from our earthly desires, and they create deep within us a feeling of lack. Because I don't have something in my life that gives it meaning, purpose, fulfills me, and all the things I try to stuff in that hole don't satisfy, (including religion), I have to keep looking.

Now let's talk about lack. What is that feeling, and where does it come from?

After a back and forth of what being born again means and other theological things, (I believe Jesus was testing Nicodemus' belief system), Jesus then gives us the most famous scripture of all time. John 3:16. The problem is we read and recite verse 16, but we always fail to include verse 17 which gives verse 16 the context it absolutely has to have. Read those two passages again.

How does verse 17 give context about verse 16?

What does this say to you about this understanding of scriptural love?

This is going to sound heretical, but hear me out. Of all of the descriptors of God, almighty, holy, righteous, just, merciful, sovereign, and more, only one description, GOD IS LOVE, is naturally inherent to God. All of those other descriptors came about AFTER creation, and describe God's nature in relationship to people. God did not have to be those things when there wasn't us. He became those things because we weren't. Even before there were people - God was love. This is the nature and foundation of the Trinity. That's how important this understanding of love is. So, it's a constant effort on our part to fully embrace this understanding of love, it is the nature of God, and the center of the Christmas story, and we practice it with EVERYONE in our lives.

IV Challenge.

So, a quick final thought and challenge. We finish out Advent trying to fully understand and embrace what the scripture describes and calls love.

As we draw closer to Christmas, what can you work into your life to step up your practice of love?