

Victory of the Lamb
November 3, 2019
Series: Welcome to Victory
Theme: Welcoming

I'm not a great driver. I'm easily distracted. When I'm driving, I'll start thinking about an upcoming sermon or something I'm reading, and I will forget where I'm supposed to be going. I'll forget to turn, where I'm supposed to. I'll take a wrong turn when I'm supposed to be going straight. Then the GPS will chime in, "rerouting, rerouting." That's why it's good that my wife, Emily, is usually with me. She seems to always know where we are going and the best route to get there. If it wasn't for her, I might still be driving back from our last vacation.

Knowing where you are going and how to get there is not just important when driving. It is important in every area of our lives. We all need to stop sometimes and ask ourselves fundamental questions: Who am I? Why am I here? And where am I going?

Everybody must answer these fundamental questions. Every individual, every family, every organization, every company, and every church because we can all drift. We can all get distracted. So, over the past few months our leaders and staff have been discussing these questions. We have tried to clarify our mission and our core values as a church. And we wanted to discuss our mission and core values with you in this sermon series called: **Welcome to Victory**. If you are new here, we wanted you to know what we are all about. If you have been coming here for a while, we want you to clearly know what it means to be a part of Victory.

Here is the good news about being a Christian: we don't have to come up with the answers to these questions on our own. The Bible answers these questions for us. The Bible tells us who we are, why we are here, and where we are going.

But where do we look to find those answers? Well, for individuals, if you were looking to find your identity and purpose as a human being, then you should start when God created human beings. You should start by looking at the first few pages of Scripture.

But if you are a church, you should look at parts of the Bible that describe where the Christian church started: the book of Acts. The book of Acts tells the story of how the Christian church was born after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. How the early Christian communities started to gather and grow. And so last week Pastor Bill took us to the first page of Acts, where Jesus is speaking to his disciples for the last time. He is telling them their mission. He is explaining why they exist, giving them their purpose.

Jesus told them, "**You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**" (Acts 1:8) This is the mission that Jesus gave to the church. He is calling his church to be witnesses to his life, death, and resurrection, to be witnesses of his love.

So, churches don't really need to come up with a unique mission statement, a unique purpose. Jesus has already given it to us. So, when our leaders and our staff discussed clarifying our mission statement, all we were doing was rewording what Jesus has already said. We were just putting Jesus' mission statement in our own words.

And so last week Pastor Bill shared that mission statement. **Reaching today's people with Christ's victory.** It's not different from our old mission statement. It can't be. We are just reiterating what Jesus already told us. Jesus told us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. The message of Jesus is not just for us. Jesus wants us to reach people. And we don't just want to reach people who are already Christians. We want to reach today's people. People who are born today, in today's world. And we don't just want them to come to a building. We don't just want them to be members of a church. We want them to know God's love for them in Jesus. We want all people to know Christ has won the victory over their sin and death.

Our mission statement clarifies who we are and what we are trying to do. But it doesn't really explain how we are going to do it. It doesn't explain our culture and our values. You see every Christian church is trying to fulfill Christ's mission. But each church does it in its own way. Each Christian church has its own culture and values.

So, what about Victory? What makes us unique? Well, our leaders and staff did some brainstorming, and started to identify unique values at Victory. And one of the words that everyone agreed on was **Welcoming.** One of the core values is that we really put a priority on being a welcoming church. I noticed that when I got here back in April. And several of you have told me that you come here because we are a welcoming church.

And there are quite a few visible examples that we are a welcoming church. Pastor Bill will usually be out in the parking lot to greet you. Then when you come into the church there are people who greet you. Then there is a full spread of food and great coffee when you enter. When you come into the main worship space you participate in music that is engaging and uplifting. And Pastor Bill and I try our best to speak in a way that is understandable to everyone. So, I can see why our leaders said that one of our core values is that we are a welcoming church.

But I have also noticed something else. There is a *dead zone* in our church. We have talked about it as leaders and we have heard comments about it from our guests. Once you get into the building and get passed the gamut of greeters there is a dead zone. It can be so overwhelming that you can get lost as to where you are supposed to go next. And then when you come into the worship space, there can be so many new faces that we don't know who to talk to. Some people are familiar, and we feel like we should already know them. Some people we don't know at all. So, many of us struggle to have meaningful relationships with others in our church family.

This *dead zone* is not just a problem in church. It is a problem in society. Everything that I'm reading and all the research that I've seen, has said that we are the loneliest people in the history of the world. There are lots of reasons for this. One is cultural. We have crammed our schedules. We keep on working and working and striving and striving. I have lived in different parts of the world and different parts of the country. And out of all the places I have lived, Franklin is the busiest culture I have ever seen. We are all striving for achievement and excellence, which is a good thing. But it is also at the expense of human connection.

Another reason is technological. This is obvious. We are so distracted with superficial connection, that we don't make the time to have real human connection.

But the fundamental reason is spiritual. Because the first humans turned their back on God and lived selfishly, humanity has been tainted. We are, by nature, selfish and turned in on ourselves. Relationships are hard and messy. They take time and work and they can be exhausting, even scary. So, we are tempted to just continue to isolate ourselves.

What are we supposed to do? Let's continue to look at the early Christian Church. Let's see what they believed and how they lived. So, we turn to the second page of the book of Acts. Jesus has already ascended to heaven. One of Jesus' main leaders, Peter, just preached an incredible sermon to a large crowd, and 3000 people became Christians. This group of Christians started gathering to form the first Christian church. And this is what it looked like:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts (Acts 2:42,46)

When the early Christian church started, they didn't first get a building. They didn't figure out the worship style. They didn't first find a dynamic preacher. The first thing they did was devote themselves to the Bible and devote themselves to each other. They were devoted to fellowship. Which means they spent a lot of time in common. They met together at the Temple. The big worship service. But they also took time to meet with each other in their homes. They broke bread and ate with one another.

So, here is what I want you to know. The first Christian church was welcoming. That was one of their core values. But they were more than just a welcoming church. They were devoted to one another.

So, here is our first fill in the blank:

1. The early Christians were devoted to one another.

And look what happened? **...with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46-47)** Look at this! These people were filled with joy. They had the happiness that seems so elusive today. And their joy was contagious. The first Christian church grew. They went from a group of about 100 people to 3,000. And soon after that we hear that the first church grew to 5,000 people.

Why was the first church so devoted to each other? Because they were started by the original followers of Jesus. They were first devoted to Jesus and to his Scriptures. And Jesus was known as someone who *welcomed sinners and ate with them*. Jesus spent his life devoted to people who couldn't pay him back, who couldn't help him. He was devoted to the poor and to the social outcast. They believed the Jesus was devoted to them. That they were dearly loved children of God.

And what you need to know is that Jesus was devoted to you. He was devoted to your forgiveness and salvation. You see, his time and energy were not just devoted to helping people temporarily. He was devoted to rescuing you from guilt and shame and death. His devotion to you led him to extend his arms on a cross to embrace you and your sin. To die and to be resurrected in order to welcome you into God's family.

So, what does this lead us to do? Here is our second fill in the blank: **2. Be devoted to one another**. We are a friendly church. We are a welcoming church. That is good and important. But I believe God is calling us all to something deeper.

I think we are all like this iceberg. (show image of iceberg) There are some things about us that you can see on the surface. But there is a ton going on in our lives below the surface. On the surface we might look put together. Some might be able to see a slice of our problems. But for the most part our problems seem small and manageable. But then there are all these things going on below the surface. We might be really struggling in our marriage and relationships. We might really be struggling with fear and anxiety. We might really be struggling financially. That's what's really going on. Now what sunk the Titanic? It wasn't the part of the iceberg above the water. It was everything below the surface. And this is the stuff that can sink us too.

So how do we do this? How can we look more and more like the first Christian church? How can we be devoted to one another in love? Well, I think as a church we want to continue to improve our systems. We want to find any *dead zones* where people feel lost and help them connect. We want to improve our small group ministry. We want to offer more small groups and make them more accessible to more people. But we need to change more than just our systems. We all need the Holy Spirit to change our hearts. We need to realize that everyone who comes into this place is an iceberg. Everyone is struggling with something below the surface.

Now, none of us will be able to connect with all 400+ people that come to worship. Psychologist will tell us that we really can't connect with 50 or even 10 at a deeper level. Even Jesus, who is God in the flesh, had only 12 disciples. And he seemed to only connect on a very deep level with only three of them. So if Jesus only had 3 really close friends, who are we to think we can connect with hundreds of people.

Maybe this visual could help. I've heard it said that we are like Lego pieces. We were designed to connect to others, but we only have enough emotional space to really connect with a few. There is no way that you will be able to connect with everyone in this room. That's impossible. We can't connect on a deep level with lots of people, but most of us can connect with five. And all of us can connect with one.

So when I say, *be devoted to one another*, what I mean is: **Fill up your Lego**. Find a way to connect with a handful of believers on a deeper level. So, what is your first step in filling up your Lego piece? How can you start or improve being devoted to one another? It might start by just spending a little more time before or after worship, speaking with the people around you. It might mean that today you sign up for a small group or you sign up in the new year. It might mean you start making plans with the people you serve with at church. There are lots of ways for us to be more and more like the first Christian church. And as we do, we will start to experience more of their joy. And I believe we will continue to see more and more people being reached for Christ.

Pastor Bill told me, "We need to take the next step from being a friendly church to a church of friends." That's really what made the early Christian church so powerful. In the fourth century, the Roman Emperor Julian wanted to wipe out Christianity. He persecuted the church and formed all sorts of alternative religious programs to the Romans gods. But he knew he just couldn't get rid of the Christians. In his words, the Christians didn't just take care of themselves. They took care of our people as well. They loved one another. The love and devotion that the early Christian church had for one another and for their community was one of the most powerful tools that God used to change the world. And it is the same today. According to one Biblical author: The only thing that counts...The only thing! Is faith in Jesus that express its love for one another.

So where are we going as a church? When we say **Welcome to Victory**, what are we inviting you to? We are a church that is reaching today's people with Christ's victory. And we believe we can further that mission as we continue being a welcoming and inviting church. But in today's world we need more than just friendliness. We need friends. We need a handful of people of which we can be devoted to. I know that might sound too hard and too exhausting. The good news is that we follow a God who was first devoted to us. And he will give us the power to be devoted to one another. Amen.