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The Great Hope, Part 1

John 17:1-5

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."

Jesus expresses in this prayer the great hope that we are talking about here as a hope that God has for people, and a hope that we want for all people, for us ourselves, and really should want for all people in the world.

As we begin our discipleship sort of strategy this fall, at our new schedule for building up disciples and being more intentional about this, I want to back up just a little bit to where the discipleship team started as we met earlier this last summer and even before that, and started talking about what should be a part of discipleship here at Nazareth.

And two things rose to the top very early on.

The first one is what drives discipleship and should drive discipleship in all parts of the church. And that is found in Mark chapter 12, and in Matthew and in Luke as well. But we're looking at Mark 12:28 through 31, where Jesus was debating with some religious leaders of his day. They were sparring back and forth.

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, of all the things that God has instructed people to do here on the earth, which is the most important? What's the greatest thing God has for people to do while here on the earth? What did he create them, first and foremost, for?"

Jesus answers this question directly. Of over 300 questions that were asked of Jesus in the text of Scripture, less than ten of them he answers directly. This is one of them.

"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

Very specifically, Jesus answered, "The most important one is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength."

And then he added to the question's answer: "The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself."

I want you to notice that the most important thing God has for us here on the planet is not necessarily, in its nature, religious. It's not religious in its behavior. At its core, it's relational. It's personal. It has to do with how we relate with our Creator and with each other, not so much our behavior in the world.

It comes from our heart. The core of what God created you and I to do is relate well with him, and then so relate well with each other. When we're loving God and experiencing his love, and his love is welling up inside of us, we naturally want to do what he asks us to do, what he calls us to do.

If you're overcome by the love of God, you love him back. We love him because he first loved us. And then, as he fills us with his love, we want to do what he said and pour out that love in our midst to those around us.

And this is how our discipleship strategy is built, that it's built and designed to be motivated by the love of God working in us, so we want to obey his instructions.

And, of course, this moves us to the Great Commission, the second sort of foundational scriptural basis of our discipleship strategy.

At the end of his time here on the earth, Jesus, having demonstrated his love to us and made these disciples, called them to himself. He said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples."

Disciple people.

The Great Commission, the Great Commandment, flows into the Great Commission, that we would, in love, do this for people. Help them become disciples, followers of Jesus, from all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them all that Jesus taught us to obey.

As I was thinking about love in our community, I was drawn to this passage in Romans. There are so many descriptions of love in the Bible, and many of them bolster each other up.

Romans chapter 12 talks about this love being authentic, being sincere. I am very mindful that 1 Corinthians chapter 13 says if a person comes and they preach in a great way, but they don't have love in their hearts for the people they're talking to, it's like a clanging cymbal.

And so one of my prayers often is, "Lord, give me a love for the people that I'm interacting with. When you open up doors for me to speak and to share, love must be sincere. It must be real in a person's heart."

"Hate what is evil," Paul writes. "Cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves."

And then in verse 15 is this little verse I talked with the children about: "Weep with those who weep."

A part of discipleship is being involved with people's lives.

Jesus was a man of sorrows. As our Good Shepherd, the one who is discipling us by his Spirit through his Word, he was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

I don't know if you've noticed it or not, but this world is filled with pain and hurt and heartache. And if we're going to disciple someone, we can't ignore the problems that they're experiencing in life.

There is economic pain. There's relational pain. There is mental pain. There is physical pain. The world is filled with pain. And all of this pain comes from the fact that we're in a world that has been separated from God.

And if we don't start with people's pain, oftentimes they won't sense our care and our love for them. So discipleship involves itself with people's hurt. We hurt with those who hurt.

I don't know if you get a lot of information in your life about pain and suffering, but if you work in a church, the one place people often call when they're experiencing hurt and heartache is a church, and they just want people to know.

And sometimes I think about all the people right here in our church family who are hurting from the loss of loved ones, dealing with sickness and disease, relational drama. And it can be overwhelming in that it draws us to God so that we might care for each other as a part of our discipleship.

When we sincerely love each other in discipling each other, we hurt when others hurt.

But that same verse says we also celebrate when others celebrate. There's so many things to celebrate in life. Some people trivialize celebration. Birthdays, weddings, new jobs, new babies, God's provision in some miraculous way—great things for us to encourage each other with in celebrating and acknowledging.

The Bible often speaks of acknowledging and praising God for the good things he's done in community and doing it together.

Discipleship, at its root, is relational in love, and it involves itself with each other's lives. And then, as that relationship and trust grows, you watch Jesus disciple. He was with them. He walked with them. He wept with them. He celebrated with them. He interacted with them.

And all of this relational work was a training that Jesus was providing to his disciples.

In addition to these two things and others, Paul writes in Romans 12 that when we sincerely love someone and we are discipling them out of God's love for us, we hope great things for them no matter where they're at in life. We anticipate and hope great things for them.

He wrote it this way, talking about authentic love in the midst of community: "Be joyful in hope, patient in the hard times, in affliction, and just keep praying, knocking on the door of heaven."

This is a part of discipling in love: hurting with people when they're hurting, celebrating when they're celebrating, and constantly looking forward with a positive, anticipatory faith and hope for them in their lives.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13, "Love always hopes." It hopes.

When we're talking about discipling each other in love, we're talking about, in a sense, really getting honest with each other about life and allowing others to be honest with us without judging them or coming down on them in some spiritual, look-down-your-nose-at-another-person way.

We're talking about caring for them and then hoping the best for them.

The great hope that we're highlighting in this whole discipleship series really comes out of this prayer from Jesus. The great hope that he prayed in John 17, verse 3, is that people would know God and Jesus Christ, whom God sent.

Why is this the great hope? Of all the things that you and I can hope for someone, why is the most important thing that we hope for, pray for, and try to guide them to a knowing of Christ, a growing in Christ, and then a making Christ known?

We are saying that is the great hope we should have. Why?

The Bible gives us many reasons. I want to highlight three.

The Bible makes it very clear that Jesus is God's only antidote to our biggest human problem. We've sung about it this morning here. We've actually confessed our own challenges with it. We've talked about God's grace in Jesus.

Our greatest problem in this world is not political. It's not economic. It's not physical. It's not educational.

Our greatest problem, from which all other problems stem, is a spiritual problem that exists in the heart of every human on the planet. It is the problem of sin.

It is the consequence of sin that brings all of the hurt, the heartache, the pain, the suffering, and death in our world. And Jesus is God's antidote to the problem of sin.

Peter wrote it this way: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness."

Hope and healing for individuals and for our world begins with a surgery that has to occur right here in the human heart. And the only one who can do that surgery is Jesus.

It's a spiritual surgery where the very nature that we're born with has to be removed from us, and we have to be implanted with a new nature that wants to please God and honor God and live for God.

The greatest thing we can offer to anyone in the world is the knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Savior, as the forgiveness of their sins, as the one who wants to take that old nature out of them and breathe into them a new nature so that they might have a new life in Christ.

Of all the things I wanted for my children—opportunity in this world, yes; healthy relationships, yes—but the deepest thing I want for them, yet today, is the knowledge of Jesus, the forgiveness of their sins.

Why?

Because it goes deeper than that. Because then Jesus can lift their shame.

The consequence of sin is not just all the hurt and the suffering and the pain in the world, but how many people have I met who, when they find out I'm a pastor, can't look me in the eye because their heart is filled with shame? And in some way a pastor represents God, and they can't turn towards God and just face him openly with great vulnerability because their heart is filled with shame because of sin.

Now, economics cannot solve this problem. Politics cannot solve this problem. Education can't solve this. This is a spiritual work that has to happen in people's souls.

Of all the things we should want for people is their sins to be forgiven, and then their shame from their sinfulness to be removed from them.

Then you've really given people something that comes from God through Christ. It's the only way it comes.

He is the antidote to our biggest problem, and he is the lifter of our shame.

Do you know we were designed to live without shame?

There's something tucked away in the Genesis story. It's just kind of awkwardly stuck in there. After God created Adam and Eve, he brought them together. They became the first married couple. And then it just sits there, this phrase inspired by the Spirit of God to give us a picture of what real free life looks like.

They were naked before God, totally seen by him, totally vulnerable before God. And then it says this: As they stood face to face with their Creator, they felt no shame.

And then the moment they disobeyed God and sin entered their hearts, they went hiding from God. They heard God in the garden, and they ran to the bushes and covered themselves.

And God came to them and said, "What has happened?"

They said, "Well, we knew we were naked, so we hid."

Who can call people out of the darkness and into the light and free them from their shame?

Only Jesus, by absorbing their sin and not counting their sins against them. And then he becomes the lifter of our heads.

Paul writes that those who come to know him never need to worry about shame in the future. They'll never be put to shame. He will remove the shame of their past, which then births us into life—not biological life, but the spiritual life that is spoken of so often in the Scriptures.

We want people to know Christ, and that's our greatest hope for people because, ultimately, he's the only one who can give them life and life eternal.

John writes it this way: "In him was life."

Certainly he created all biological life. We're all here because God created us, knit us together in our mother's womb, and here we are biologically.

But Jesus said, "You have to be born again to enter the kingdom of heaven forever."

It's talking about being born into a spiritual life, a whole new way of relating with God and with others from a whole new nature that's put within us.

This is the spiritual nature that comes alive when our sins are forgiven, our sinful nature is put upon the cross, and God breathes into us. And all of a sudden the spiritual life comes alive and we're truly alive—the life that is truly life.

And it wells up in this life from glory to glory to glory on into eternity, and it will never die.

Friends, if you don't have this spiritual life, you're separated from God, and you will live that way for all eternity.

And every person on the planet who hasn't had their sins forgiven through Jesus, and then their shame lifted by him, does not know life.

And the greatest thing we can want for people, friends, the greatest thing we could want for them in the brevity of this life, is to know Christ. Know Christ so their greatest problem—separation from God—can be completely dealt with.

So their sense of trying to measure up and wondering where they stand and trying to keep the account good, they can do away with all that, and they can say, "I am his and he is mine forever."

When we give that to people, friends, we really give them something.

And what is the church?

The church is the place where God has entrusted the gospel. This is what we carry. This is what we're accountable for: the carrying of the message of Jesus in love to the world, first in our Jerusalems, our local networks, then beyond to the world.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for the start of a new fall. We thank you for stirring in our hearts, by your Spirit, the work that you've called us to.

You have sustained this mission around this faith community for many, many decades, and you're continuing to move it forward by the work and power of your Spirit.

Forgive us when we stray away from following what you've said to us, when we grow lazy or halfhearted or lukewarm in our spiritual fervor.

And Father, we pray that you would continue to stir this in us, quicken it in us, in each one of our environments throughout every given week. Correct us when we're moving in the wrong and lead us in the right, Father.

And I ask, as we head into this fall, you would draw others to yourself just as they are, that we might be able to plant the seeds of your love in their hearts, that they might come to know Christ, have their shame lifted, and come alive in you, and join us in this great work you've called us to.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.