

**Message: Connected to Christ in Love**

**What gives meaning to your life?**

This is the age old question of “Why?” Why do I exist? You don’t have to have a degree in philosophy to think about it. Everyone wonders about the meaning of life at least once in their life. Some of us may reflect on our life’s purpose more frequently, but we all consider it. The question impacts us as a person, as a family member, as a worker, as a member of a group and someone who is part of a community of faith.

**Where do we find meaning?** We aren’t given a user manual on how to live. There’s no reference we can turn to that will tell us the decision we should make or action we should take in all situations. That means it’s up to us to decide. That’s the power of free will. We’re made in God’s image, so we have a conscience and the power to make informed decisions. No one else can make our decisions for us.

**Given that power, we have a lot of options.** So we find ourselves making choices – all the time! Some of our choices are healthy. Some of our choices are not. As we grow up, we learn that it’s hard to do the right thing all the time. Dreams are good to have. Achieving those dreams is harder. Failures begin to add up. They can limit us, narrowing our vision. We begin to see barriers everywhere we look.

**Failure and the challenges of life cause uncertainty and doubt.** Our confidence and self-esteem erode over time. We may turn to unhealthy behaviors to take away the pain or lack of control we’re feeling. The word “deaden” is very appropriate. When we turn to alcohol, drugs, pornography, promiscuous sex, gossip or other hurtful behaviors, we’re not just surrendering to our desires for a moment. We’re desensitizing ourselves to the presence of God’s Spirit. Instead of embracing a way that gives life, we’re embracing a way that leads to death.

**Jesus teaches us how to have a real life in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel of John.** I have to admit that this is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. Jesus shows us a way to live that’s filled with meaning and purpose. It’s the kind of life that’s contagious – others will want to have the same experience. That’s because it touches us, as humans, way down, deep inside, where our heart and soul are, beyond speech.

**How do we find true life?** Simply, be in a relationship with Jesus. That’s what it means to be connected. Jesus invites us to be in a unique relationship with him. There are a couple of ways it’s special. First, I hope this isn’t a surprise, but we don’t actually meet him, sit down for a cup of coffee and then hang out. Jesus won’t text you. That’s because our relationship with Jesus begins and grows from a place most of us don’t think about or talk about, our spirit. Our relationship with Jesus is first spiritual and then mental, emotional, physical and behavioral.

**Second, our relationship with Jesus is special because it’s defined by love.** Our reading from 1 John 4 tells us, *“No one has seen God, ever. This is how we know we’re living steadily and deeply in him, and he in us: He’s given us life from his life, from his very own Spirit”* (vv12-13, The Message). Jesus came to give us new life; that’s how saving grace works. When we accept his love, we grow. The more deeply and fully we accept Jesus’ love, the steadier and stronger we become spiritually. Our spirit may grow by leaps and bounds during some seasons of life and more slowly in other seasons. What’s important is to connect and remain connected.

### **Why is it important to be connected to Jesus?**

Here’s an illustration to help. Normally, we see leaves on a tree. They’re healthy and green, even those that don’t receive direct sunlight. All of the leaves that receive sunlight pass on what they receive, so the whole tree benefits – all of the leaves grow. The leaves and branches are supple, able to bend and move in the wind without harm. If a leaf falls from the tree, things seem okay – for a little while. The leaf keeps its color and shape. It appears to be okay, but it doesn’t bend as well. If you look at that same leaf later, you find it’s brown, shriveled and brittle. Give it the slightest touch, and it crumbles and falls apart.

**We’re like a leaf on a tree or a branch on a grapevine.** When we’re connected to the source of life, we bud and grow, giving new life when we bear fruit. But if we disconnect from the source of life, we’ll wither, dry up and become brittle, ready to crumble at the slightest push.

### **This illustration is about our spiritual life, deep inside of us.**

The deepest part of us is beyond words. It’s where conscience, will and

passion intersect. That’s the part that seeks meaning, to be connected. That’s where Jesus invites us to connect with him. If our spirit is disconnected from God, we can get by. There are people who live their whole lives that way. But they often experience depression. There’s little meaning to their lives. They’re blown around by the winds of culture. With time, they can become rigid, inflexible and brittle. There may be little joy or positivity in their lives.

**People like that are missing a vital element: hope.** Hope in a love that never fails. Hope that comes from knowing, in your heart of hearts, that you’ll be reunited with those you love after you die. Hope in grace that can overcome the most heinous evil and injustice and bring good. Hope based on forgiveness and sacrificial love, not anger and revenge. That’s the power of God’s unfailing love. That’s what we offer when Jesus lives in our heart. Hope makes us fruitful.

**What kind of fruit do we bear?** Here are two references to help us. The first is Galatians 5:22-23a, “*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*” (CEB). Through our connection to Jesus, our spirit begins to imitate and reflect his nature. That’s one way the fruit of the Spirit is evident.

**There’s a more powerful and direct reference, though.** Jesus explains the parable of sower, “*the seed scattered on good soil are those who hear the word and embrace it. They bear fruit, in one case a yield of thirty to one, in another case sixty to one, and in another case one hundred to one*” (Mark 4:20). The fruit is the spiritual life we see in others when they embrace Jesus and his love. To be clear: new believers are the fruit. Jesus spoke of the need for laborers, “*Look, I tell you: open your eyes and notice that the fields are already ripe for the harvest*” (John 4:35b). Jesus calls us to work, extending the invitation to connect to Jesus, to let his Spirit live in them so they can live a new life. We’re called to sow seeds in others.

**How do we sow seeds; give spiritual life to others?** Let’s turn back to 1 John 4 for help. In v12 we read, “*...if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us - perfect love!*” When we love other people, God’s love is at work. Each little deposit of

love we make in another person’s life makes their life better. And, as we learn to love more deeply and fully, our capacity to love becomes even greater. One note: loving people in this way is inclusive. We don’t get to pick and choose who to love. We’re called to love everyone, regardless of our differences. That means caring and loving for others even when we may feel that - in our eyes - they don’t deserve it. In God’s eyes, all are God’s children, valued and loved.

**We’re called to tell others about God’s love.** The easiest way to do so is by telling others how Jesus’ love changed our lives. When we speak the truth in love, God’s Spirit will prompt us at the right time and give us the words to speak. Be patient, have courage and share your blessing. Pass it on.

**Jesus also talks about pruning and cleansing. What does that mean?** Let me offer an illustration. When you plant roses, you quickly learn that you have to prune them to get flowers. It makes the plant healthier. You also have to keep a close eye on the rose bush. You need to cleanse the plant occasionally to help it stay healthy, otherwise pests like aphids or disease can set in. Those problems will keep a rose from flowering. The plant can even die from neglect.

**Pruning is necessary to help us flower and bear fruit.** Without pruning, there may be no opportunity for new growth. Without pruning, we can become overgrown – tangled up in ourselves or in the anxieties of others. That chokes out new growth. Without pruning, we’re trying to use the limited resources we have to do too many things. We’re trying to be steady and strong, have new growth and bear fruit. That’s overwhelming, particularly when we’re faced with external stress.

**It also takes time for fruit to develop.** Pruning helps us focus on that. Learning how to prune ourselves – to say “no”, is important. That’s part of learning how to set priorities and to make choices. Sometimes we find that difficult to do. We want to have and do it all. This is one way to live, but it may not be very fruitful. For example, if you sit down to decide what your priority is in life and you walk with a list of five things, you haven’t really done what was needed. In fact, the word

priority comes from the Latin *a priori* – that which is first. Something is first in your life, whether you want to admit it or not.

**What’s first in your life: personal interests, ambitions, job, anxieties or concerns, your children, family or spouse?** For some of us, habits or learned behaviors may dominate. For others, it’s about control. Yet others, it’s other relationships. We make excuses. You know how that goes, “I’ll go along with whatever you want, as long as you don’t ask me to \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).” We’re selfish. We prefer to be served, rather than to serve. That attitude changes when we connect to Jesus. It has to. We’re being fed spiritually and the Holy Spirit changes us from the inside. As we mature spiritually, we become more and more like Christ, able to love others more freely and willingly. When we mature, we want to put others first.

**Jesus tells us what should be first in our life: He is.** Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. He is God and God is love. And God’s love never fails. Jesus gives us life and changes us for the better. Jesus fills us with light that chases dark things away, freeing us from the sins and forces that bind us. He changes us so we can see another way to live. That’s the way of hope and love. Jesus’ way transcends this world. There is nothing we face that can overcome the power, strength and depth of God’s love for us.

**How does this help us to live?** With a connection to Jesus, we’re like a branch that receives all that it needs to thrive and bear fruit. We aren’t separate and alone. We’re part of a living, growing entity. We’re part the body of Christ, made to love.

**Without a connection to Jesus,** we’re like a branch that has cut itself off. We’re trying to do it on our own, from our own resources. Yet we’re limited. We can’t see from God’s perspective. We can’t see things that are right in front of us. There’s a reason why the frog doesn’t jump out of the pot of boiling water. It wasn’t boiling when the frog got into the water. The frog’s fear leads it to believe that things are worse out of the water. So it will stay in the pot until it dies. We do the same thing. In our fear, we find ourselves trying to live our own way, yet expecting a different result. Fortunately, there’s another way. We can

accept Jesus and ask for forgiveness. That’s where fear, anxiety, doubt, disappointment and frustration find a place. I invite you to lay them down. Jesus knows your pain. Jesus is compassionate and merciful. His way is filled with love and forgiveness. Jesus will give you hope again.

**When we’re connected to Jesus in love and we remain connected to him, we have a clear purpose and meaning to life. I invite you to accept Jesus’ love and your life will be changed.**

Let us pray ...

*“Lord, you are the source of light and life. Forgive us when we turn away from you and go our own way. Come into us and change our lives. Help us to remain connected to you and to each other. Thank you for filling us with all the things we need to live healthy, meaningful lives. May we be confident in our blessing and have courage in the witness we pass on to others. Show us how to bear good fruit in Jesus’ name. Amen.”*

**John 15:1-8 (CEB)**

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

**1 John 4:7-21 (CEB)**

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.

Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit. We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world. If any of us confess that Jesus is God's Son, God remains in us and we remain in God. We have known and have believed the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them. This is how love has been perfected in us, so that we can have confidence on the Judgment Day, because we are exactly the same as God is in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.