

Good morning, friends! We are in a new sermon series this week, called LIVE LOVE GIVE... This time of year, we always circle back to LIVE LOVE GIVE because it's central to who we are as a church. It's "Harbor 101"... It's part of our heartbeat.

Harbor was dreamt of by our friend Brent Storms, nearly 20 years ago. He and his wife moved to the greater Lowell area with a dream to start a new church; a church that spoke hope into seemingly hopeless situations; a church focused not on growth, but on "Helping people find their way back to God."

He built a team, got support from other churches and church leaders, and launched in 1999, in a small corporate event room in the Double Tree hotel in Lowell. Their vision was to be a "Harbor of Hope"; a Harbor that weary ships could come into, rest, be built back up, and sent back out. [FIRST Harbor LOGO] And though we've changed logos, because... Yeah. The vision hasn't changed for 17 years. "*Helping people find their way back to God.*"

That phrase comes from the Apostle Paul's words, in a his second letter to the Corinthian church. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

18 And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. 19 For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. 20 So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" 21 For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

And ten years after our launch, our pastoral team was trying to answer the question of "WHY?" "*Why find your way back to God? Why begin to live in faith? Why follow this Jesus guy?*" And that's when LIVE LOVE GIVE was born.

JOHN 3:16 "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

In John 3:16, perhaps the most memorized phrase in the history of humanity, we see God, the Father, showing LOVE, GENEROSITY and LIFE. So why do we help people find their way back to God? So that they can live fully, love deeply and give freely. And while we're at it... Why live fully, love deeply, give freely? Because it helps more people find their way back to God. Which creates more life, love and generosity... And no one would argue that the world needs more life, love and generosity.

When we live fully, love others deeply, and give of ourselves freely, we become attractive; we begin to have this aroma that draws people in. Our lives are attractional. We become living boxes of Krispy Kreme donuts. People begin to congregate around us; asking why (and HOW!) we're living the beautiful lives we're living. The more people that come back into relationship with God, the more joy, love and generosity there will be in the world. And each and every one of you here today play a role in this.

Our heart with this series is to illuminate some of the language we use regularly around here. To strengthen our community as a tribe with a shared language, and mission and vision for the future. Hopefully at the end of this 3 week series, you'll feel that you can answer the "WHY" questions, about us as a church, but also about you as a follower of Christ.

Earlier this week, as I was preparing for today, I took a quick look at my bookshelf and made note of the books there... Dozens of titles like: "*Design your day: Be more productive, set better goals and live life on purpose.*" "*Boundaries for Leaders: Results, Relationships and being RIDICULOUSLY in charge.*" These are some pretty ridiculous promises that these short, 200 page books are making. Not unlike diets we hear about from Dr. Oz. "*Lose 42 lbs without ever leaving the couch!*" Ok... If you want to lose 42 lbs without leaving the couch, you better be ready to cut your leg off.

Promises, promises, promises... All around us. Marketing campaigns geared towards our deepest, most vulnerable desires. To be known, to be accepted, to be loved. "*But only if you lose those 42 lbs!*"

Well, it doesn't take long, as an adult, to realize that 90% of the time, the promises don't pan out.

- If we buy the special shampoo, it doesn't mean we'll stop our genetics from balding.
- If we buy the special toothpaste, it doesn't mean our soft teeth won't get cavities.

But the marketing companies don't want you to know that. That's bad for business.

The promises fall flat. And largely, marketing companies don't care... Because you already bought the book.

At the core of all of this is a simple, but incredibly powerful, motive... We want life (and life to the full), but under our terms. We want "*Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...*" GALATIANS 5:22-23 but we want them under our control. It's our choice how those happen. We're self-made men. We're wonder-women. We can have our cake and eat it too.

We're hunting for the right treasure, but we're hunting in the wrong place. It's like looking for your soul-mate in a strip club. Could it happen? Yeah... I guess so... But the chances aren't likely. Chances are a lot more DAMAGE would happen there than forward progress in life.

Love, joy, and peace are incredible things to have mark your life, but we're looking for them in formulaic, 9-step programs. And when we do these things in our own power, placing the weight of all our hopes and dreams on a diet program, or a self-help book, or a relationship, or a work contract...

- We're expecting a limb of the tree to affect the roots. Being overweight, needing counseling, feeling lonely at night... If we fix any one of those things, we won't

experience life and life to the full. It's a step, but it's not the core. It's like fixing a window in a house with a cracked foundation. Yes, helpful, but not what actually needs to happen.

To have any real impact, we must go deeper... Become more vulnerable with ourselves, and with God, and allow deeper work to be done.

Trying to produce the Fruit of the Spirit under our own power is a... fruitless endeavor. (It's like going to a Michelin-star restaurant but then asking the chef if you can take the ingredients and cook the dinner yourself). The Fruit of the Spirit can only be produced by the Spirit. That's why it's NOT called the Fruit of John, or Dave, or Kelly.

Now, we've proven that we can produce fruit as humans. And we can even genetically modify fruit! That's impressive stuff. In college, I learned about specific Sunkist oranges that were genetically modified to either be seedless, or to make sure the seeds that ARE there, are completely impotent. The seeds from these genetically modified, "Man-Made" fruit are incapable of reproducing... So they're not actually fruit at all! The definition of a fruit is a "seed-bearing structure of a plant" i.e. Mangoes, acorns, tomatoes (yes, tomatoes are a fruit)... What a perfect illustration of what it looks like when we try to PRODUCE fruit on our own. Yes, there's fruit, but it doesn't last, and it lacks nutrients, and it won't reproduce.

What if... (and I know these are typically dangerous questions when I'm speaking)

- What if the one thing getting in our way of experiencing "life and life to the full" is our STRIVING towards "living a full life."
- What if, by planning and chasing and striving, we're actually inhibiting God from doing His best work in us?

Now, as a pastor, this is very "counter-productive" advice to give. It would be very easy, AND very helpful to the ministry here, to just encourage everyone to TRY HARDER! "*Try harder at being generous; just get out your check books, add some zeroes to the end of that... Great!*" Or "*Try harder at being nicer to one another. No more little squabbles. Just grin and bear it.*" Motivation is easy. Self-reliance is easy. And it produces immediate results. If I could, somehow, manipulate you all, guilt you, shame you, into giving financially here... It would produce immediate results. We'd hit budget and probably exceed it. But...

Long term, the "try harder" solution rarely works. Now, I'm not suggesting that there's no place for willpower and discipline in our spiritual growth... The choices we make and the will we exert are extremely important. What I *am* saying, however, is that we are being naive and unbiblical if we think that our efforts will produce lasting, fundamental change in our lives. Willpower plays a role; but it can't change our character. Willpower can't make an unloving person more loving or a depressed person into a joyful person.

A person can try hard to ACT loving and joyful when they're actually unloving and depressed, but a person can't actually BECOME loving and joyful simply by trying harder. That's just pretending. And pretending don't last. Whether it's a week or 10 years, it inevitably grows weary and breaks down.

So... With our seedless watermelons and our desire for the Fruit of Spirit, we need to recognize that we can try to ACT this way, but we can't will ourselves to BE this way. The fruit of the Spirit is not even actually about BEHAVIOR, it's about our heart, our soul, our innermost disposition. It's not about about how we ACT; it's about how we ARE.

So how do we "grow" the fruit of the Spirit? The honest answer is that we can't. Rather, it's the Spirit that grows in the fruit in us. So the real question is. "*How do we allow the Holy Spirit to grow His fruit in us?*" That's a much more interesting (and complex) question.

Living life to the fullest, and experiencing "*Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...*" in our lives, only begins when we cease our striving, learn how to rest in Christ, and allow the Spirit to transform us by His grace. As we rest in the love, joy, peace and patience of Christ toward us, and as the Holy Spirit makes all of this real to us, we become more Christlike; more loving, joyful, peaceful and patient.

What the "try harder" solution does is it confuses the EFFECT with the CAUSE. It's the cart before the horse. It assumes that whatever we DO determines who we ARE; rather than vice versa. This goes back to something I spoke about with Mary & Martha: the "*What do you do for a living?*" question defining who we are as people. Where this falls short is that it makes behavior the means to acquiring a new identity, rather than making a new identity the means of acquiring new behavior.

In contrast to the "try harder" solution, the New Testament typically speak of godly behavior as *following from* the believer's identity in Christ. If we ever have character or behavior problems, the problem isn't first and foremost with our behavior... The fundamental problem is that we don't see and experience ourselves as we actually are. Rather than being defined by our Creator and Savior, we continue to be defined by the "*patterns of the world*" as Paul speaks of it in Romans 12:2. We all have these hundreds of broken-records playing in our heads from our childhood, our culture, our past and our own personalities... Telling us we're broken, we're unworthy, we're hopeless, we're victims, we're afraid...

If we are going to LIVE FULLY, we need to know who we are in Christ. The New Testament has amazing things to say about who we are as believers because of the amazing things that Christ has done for us.

When the Lord "saves us", He doesn't just rescue us from eternal death; He gives us a completely new identity. The Christian is, very literally, "a person who has become someone they were not before." In Romans 8:1, 1 Cor. 1:30, 2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 3:28, Eph. 1:3 it says that God literally places us, as believers, "*in Christ Jesus.*" If we understand what this means today, we'll see that there is nothing greater that God could EVER do than what He has already done for us by placing us in Christ.

Here's what this means for us, based simply on us receiving this truth (and there are Scripture references for all of these, but I can't read through them because it's literally like 40 passages):

- Everything from our past—all that is sinful and contrary to God—has been crucified. It is dead. Period.
- We are completely forgiven; perfected for all time, and therefore completely reconciled to God.
- We are completely made new and given Christ's eternal resurrected life.
- We are given the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God Almighty, to live within us. We have been made into a temple of God.
- We are partakers of an eternal inheritance that Jesus has purchased for us.
- When we are hidden in Christ and united with Christ, we are made participants in the eternal love that flows within the Triune God.
- We are completely redefined. No longer "in Adam", and rooted in sin... But "in Christ" and rooted in righteousness.
- We are chosen by God, and made "holy and blameless before Him in love." He loves us and lavishes on us in the same exact way that He loves His son, Jesus. This means that our relationship with God is not defined by anything we DO but by the eternal, unshakeable, loving relationship He has with His own Son.

This is who we are TRULY are when we place our trust in Christ. Nothing from your past, no labels from your childhood, no expectations from your parents, no pressures from our culture can change that. This is truth.

By placing us in Christ's death, we are made dead to sin.
By placing us in Christ's life, we are made fully alive.

This is our true identity. And all genuine spiritual growth comes from the Holy Spirit making this identity, our true identity, real to us. Only then can we overcome the self-identity we've inherited from the patterns of the world.

So... Our job isn't to change the way God sees us (as we typically think religion is about)... Our job is to change the way WE see us. This is what I mentioned last week. Even though everything that I just read about us is true—our experienced self-identity, the way we habitually see and experience ourselves—remains largely unchanged. Even though God has done all of these amazing things for us, the way we see and experience ourselves is still heavily marked by our pasts; cultures; patterns of the world.

The beauty of God is that He doesn't DESTROY everything of who we were before He saves us... All of our memories; our habits; our past associations... He instead seeks to TRANSFORM all of our memories, habits and past associations on the basis of who we are now in Christ.

It's important to recognize that our ongoing problem with sin, despite our new identity in Christ, is not really with our BEHAVIOR. This is a symptom, but not the problem itself. The problem is with our EXPERIENCED self-identities... How we view ourselves, how we define ourselves, how we experience ourselves... That's Proverbs 23: *"As he thinks in his heart, so is he."*

Our biggest problem is that we have internalized messages from our upbringing, culture, past experiences, and our own inner rebellions that are NOT TRUE, but that continue to influence us, even after we've received our new identity in Christ. Our true identity conflicts with our experienced self-identities, inherited from the world.

So, clear back in Genesis 1, when God said, "Let there be light", there was light... Automatically. Because in the beginning, there was nothing to oppose God's voice. Yet, when God says to us, "I declare you to be holy, spotless, infinitely valuable and beautiful," there is a false identity in place that RESISTS this divine word. And that false identity has to be confronted. We can't keep living in this discrepancy.

Thankfully... Thankfully... God promises us that this battle will come to an end. And because God's Word is true and creates the reality it communicates, it's guaranteed that believers will ultimately be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29). The light will overcome the darkness. The truth will swallow up the lie (John 1:5). Until that time, however, we are in process.

God calls us His children, because that's who we actually are (1 John 3:1). We just don't fully believe it yet. And that's ok... God is patient with us.

Someday, our true self-identity in Christ will be perfectly manifested. But that doesn't mean in the meantime we just sit and wait. We're called to begin enjoying our true nature—over and against our old selves—today. To begin living and acting and speaking and thinking as God's children, completely known, flaws and all, and completely loved, exactly as we are today.

How do we do that? We do that by inviting Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, to begin exhibiting His characteristics through us. And as we experience the loving kindness, the patience, the genuine joy that Jesus has on a daily basis... We begin to love ourselves. Or more specifically, we fall in love with the Jesus within us.

And it becomes a beautiful, healthy cycle of us stopping trying so hard, allowing the Spirit to grow fruit within us, and then us acting out of those true identities. (As opposed to our current ways of living, with the cycles being: Us believing lies about ourselves, so we act in sinful ways, so we begin to believe that we're broken and unlovable, which breeds more self-reliance and sin and separation.)

So... Now that I'm done with my introduction of this sermon... Let's read today's text ☺

I want to close with a few verses from this text in Acts 2, where Peter (our best buddy from last week's sermon) shares the truth of Christ with a crowd of people, explaining everything

that happened in Jesus' death and resurrection... And it wakes up thousands of people, in that moment, to the truth.

Acts 2:37-41

37 Peter's words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?"

38 Peter replied, "Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, [REPENT: change your old way of thinking] and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 This promise is to you, to your children, and to those far away—all who have been called by the Lord our God." 40 Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, "Save yourselves from this crooked [and unjust] generation!"

41 Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.

Today, Harbor... We have an opportunity to do exactly the same thing. Probably won't be 3,000 people, but who knows.

This translation, New Living Translation, translates a word in verse 38 that might confuse our understanding of baptism... It says ..."*be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ FOR the forgiveness of your sins.*" Which makes it sound as though you're not forgiven unless you're baptized. When you really dig into the original language, you find that this phrase really is all about entering into something that is already there, already true: your forgiveness, by virtue of God's grace and Christ's sacrifice. Baptism doesn't create that reality, it illuminates the reality that is already there... Which changes the motive behind the baptism entirely.

Baptism is a beautiful, ancient, sacred moment where believers, whether brand new to faith today or lifelong believers that just haven't been baptized as an adult, go under the waters to recognize this truth and to identify with Jesus' death and resurrection.

When I was new to this whole "Jesus" thing, I viewed baptism like it was the finish line of faith... Like, "*Ok! I have everything figured out. I finally believe EVERYTHING in the Bible. I'm ready.*" But that's SO inaccurate... The reality is that baptism is the BEGINNING of the relationship. It's not the finish line. It's allowing our intentions for our future to put a stake in the ground and say, "*I want to follow Jesus for the rest of my life.*" Is it being 100% sure? Maybe. But not necessarily.

We see people left and right in the New Testament that hear about Jesus, and see His power and peace demonstrated in other people's lives, and immediately they get baptized. They haven't gone through a bootcamp, they haven't been brainwashed... They allow themselves to place hope in this new belief, and then they get in the waters through faith.

Baptism is an invitation. And for those of you that have accepted that invitation, you know how rewarding that moment of baptism is. For those of you that are there today in faith, but

haven't accepted the invitation, you just need to wrestle with that a little bit. You need to ask yourself, *"What's hanging me up with this? Why am I holding back from this?"*

If it's fear, join the crowd.

If it's uncertainty, join the crowd.

If it's feeling unworthy, join the crowd.

If it's frustration with how you've seen Christians act in the past, join the crowd. We need you to help redefine how people view Christians.

But if you see Jesus, and you love what you see; and if you look into your future and wish you could live with more *"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control..."* I invite you to join us today in the baptism waters. Questions, doubts and all.

The two questions we ask people before they're baptized are: *"Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead to bring you new life?"* & *"Today, is it your desire to follow Jesus for the rest of your life?"*

If you can answer yes to those questions, you're ready. If you want to talk with me afterwards, please come find me. You can speak with Sharon Stacy. You can find anyone on staff, on the platform here...

Today might be your day. And if it is, we'll celebrate that with everything in us, just a few hours from now...

Let's pray...