

Embracing Jesus

Jan. 23, 2022

Series: *Start With Why*

A couple weeks ago during Sunday service, Pastor Andrew and I had a conversation about how Cornerstone—along with just about everyone these days— is in a *liminal* season. What does liminal mean? It means, quite simply, *in-between*.

An airport is a tangible example of a liminal space. It's not where you're coming from, and it's not where you're trying to get to. An airport is a space that lies in-between.

These days, thought-leaders tell us that pretty much every organization—including churches like Cornerstone— is in a liminal season, for obvious reasons. We're no longer where we used to be before the pandemic, but we're not where we're going to be once we've emerged from it.

I recently read a book on leadership in a liminal season. It has a title that many in church leadership can surely relate to these days, myself included: *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*. The book makes it very clear that many standard leadership practices do not serve us well during in-between seasons.

Casting a clear vision, for example, isn't advisable when we can't see the future with reasonable clarity. Strategic planning, says the book, is not the best practice to spend a ton of time on during a liminal season, because it's based on assumptions about how the future will unfold, and if these past two years have taught us anything, it's that we're in a period of time when it's exceptionally tricky to make assumptions about the future.

In navigating the gap between how things *used to be* and how things *will be*, life and ministry in a liminal season require us to trust that God will build the bridge between here and there *as we're walking on it*.

One vital practice that helps us to cultivate such trust, according to the book, is *tending to our purpose*. An in-between season like this is a crucial time to revisit our purpose— our WHY—our God-given reason for existence as a local church.

Why are we here? Why do we exist a church?

You see, it would be incredibly tempting to start the year off by focusing on *what* we want to do and *how* we want to do it. And to be clear, a place still remains for the *whats* and the *hows*, even in these in-between times. Indeed, we have already discerned several *whats* and a few *hows* for the year ahead. There's plenty of fruitful ministry that will be taking place.

But we deeply believe, especially in this first part of 2022, that God is leading us to *Start With Why*. Because we can only rightly discern all the *whats* and the *hows*, both now in this liminal season, as well as into the post-pandemic future, when we start with WHY.

And so, for those reasons, today we begin a series called *Start With Why*. And what's personally encouraging to me is that the book I was telling you about? I discovered it *after* we had already discerned to start the year by focusing on Cornerstone's WHY. To me, coming across that book was God's way of affirming to us, "Yes, you've heard my leading. You're on the right track." Thank you for that, Lord Jesus.

Speaking of books, perhaps a few of you have noticed that we've borrowed the title of Simon Sinek's best-seller for this series. Writing from a business perspective, Sinek argues in *Start With Why* that every organization on the planet knows WHAT they do, and some know HOW they do it. But the most impactful and enduring organizations are crystal clear on WHY they exist. It's the WHY that keeps them going and growing— even and especially in liminal seasons.

If any organization needs to be clear about its WHY, it's the church, because Jesus has given his church a WHY that supersedes all others. In this series, we're going to look at three aspects of the specific WHY God has given to Cornerstone, and in the process, we'll be digging into scripture.

Today, I'll share about Cornerstone's Vision, and next week I'll be back again to explore our Mission with you. Then, Pastor Andrew will close out the series by taking a timely look at something we call our Bedrock Statement.

If you're new to the church, this series offers you a fantastic opportunity for you to discover what Cornerstone is all about, and to get involved here as the Lord leads you. If you've been with Cornerstone for some time already, this series will reinforce your sense of this church's God-given purpose, and why God has placed *you* here to be a part of it all.

With that in mind, I'd like to take the rest of this message to unpack the first of Cornerstone's Vision Statement: **Embracing the Jesus Who Embraces the World.**

Years ago, as the result of an extended process of prayer, fasting, focused discussion, and congregational discernment, this is the Vision Statement that God imparted to us. It's a biblically rich and motivating *word picture* that captures the essence of the kind of local church God is calling us to be and become.

If there's one *image* that captures what Cornerstone is all about, it's that of *embrace*. God has given us this soul-stirring word picture—this *vision* of embrace—to represent the kind of community he wants us to be and become. Because when we embrace Jesus for who he really is, we will also extend his loving embrace to the world around us.

Embrace is an evocative way of saying that God has called us to be and become a community of *love*. It's a metaphor that captures the essence of Jesus' great dual commandment to love God and to love others. In Matthew 22, Jesus says:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.¹

Love God; love others. That's the whole ball game, says Jesus.

How do we love God? We love God by embracing Jesus, God's Son. In John 8:42, Jesus put it this way:

“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me.”²

We love God by embracing Jesus, by joyfully receiving him as God's greatest gift.

Love God; love *others*. As the Bible says in 1 John:

The command we have from Christ is blunt. Loving God includes loving people. You've got to have both.³

¹ Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV)

² John 8:42 (NIV)

³ 1 John 4:21 (MSG)

How do we love others? Well, the more fully we embrace Jesus, the more he will make our arms as an extension of his own. We love others by embracing those that Jesus embraces, and on the cross, Jesus embraced the world—for God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son (John 3:16).

In other words, Jesus' loving embrace encompasses *everyone*— people from all walks of life, no matter their age, race, colour, nationality, social status or abilities; no matter their religious background; no matter their past.

Jesus' embrace extended to untouchables, including lepers. Jesus' embrace extended to religious and moral outcasts, including greedy tax collectors. Jesus' embrace extended to the least, the last and the lost causes of his day.

One of my favourite stories of embrace here at Cornerstone is that of Rob, a longtime member of this church who passed away several years ago. Some of you will remember him. Rob was a life-long bachelor, socially eccentric and quite rough around the edges. Sometimes he could rub people the wrong way. Sometimes he would say inappropriate things without realizing it. For much of his seventy-plus years, Rob had known the pain of exclusion, but at Cornerstone, he experienced embrace. I'll never forget the words he said when he and I were having lunch together years ago:

“You know, Steve, at Cornerstone, I find that people actually like me!”

By embracing the Jesus who embraces the world, we were able to embrace Rob, who in turn embraced Jesus as his Saviour, and was baptized. Though Rob is no longer with us, we are comforted to know that he is at rest in Jesus' embrace even as we speak.

The founding members of Cornerstone embraced the Jesus who embraces the world. Of the 35 people who were part of that group, 33 were Canadian-born Chinese. They could have taken the easy path, saying, “Birds of a feather flock together,” and established a church of people who belonged their own tribe, as it were—people who were just like them.

But they knew that through the cross of Jesus, God brings diverse peoples together in loving unity. As the Bible says in Ephesians:

Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace...⁴

Spurred on by this biblical conviction, this group took the harder path, and set out to establish an intentionally intercultural church. Soon after they started the church, they

⁴ Ephesians 2:16 (MSG)

welcomed me, a non-Chinese pastor, fresh out of seminary. Since then, they have welcomed the old, the young, the poor, the well-to-do, the neurotypical and the neurodivergent, the brown, black, and white. They've embraced Jesus for who he really is, and in doing so, they have embraced the world. Now, there are over 40 different countries of origin represented in this congregation.

As together we've embraced the Jesus who embraces the world, Jesus has made our arms an extension of his own, and here in Markham, Canada's most diverse city, he continues to shape us into a diverse community of faith, marked by loving unity.

The following well-known prayer—from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*—wonderfully expresses the spirit of Cornerstone's Vision Statement:

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching out our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you, for the honour of your name. Amen.

That's why we're here. If you're a newcomer to this church, and this vision of embrace resonates with you, is it possible that God is calling you to join us—to become a part of what God's doing here? We offer many opportunities to help you get connected, but one of the best is to connect with a small group.

You see, a big part of becoming a community of embrace involves opening our lives to each other, and learning to live in loving, mutually supportive unity as a church family, and that often happens best in small groups.

Just before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed for all who would ever believe in him—including us—saying:

"I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me."⁵

Notice how our loving unity as a church family impacts our witness to the world. The vision of embracing the Jesus who embraces the world includes our embrace of *each other* as a body of believers, as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Getting involved in a small group is a great way to live into that, and the best way to join a small group at Cornerstone is through our Group Launch event which happens to be coming up this Wednesday evening on Zoom (www.cornerstonechurch.ca/smallgroups). Through Group Launch, you'll be connected with a 6-week starter small group, and your

⁵ John 17:21 (NLT)

group will have the option to continue meeting beyond the 6 sessions if it so desires—and most groups do.

At this point, I'd like to turn a corner. I've been unpacking Cornerstone's Vision Statement, which is a word picture that captures the essence of what God is calling this church to be and to become—a community of Christ-like *love*.

Much of what I've said so far has been about loving others—embracing those that Jesus embraces—folks in the greater community from all kinds of backgrounds and walks of life. I've talked as well about embracing each other as members of the same church family. As we heard earlier:

The command we have from Christ is blunt. Loving God includes loving people. You've got to have both. ⁶

Right now, it would be so easy for me to wind this message down by simply telling you to go forth and embrace others as Jesus would embrace them. If I were to close this message that way, you might even go forward into your week excited, motivated to get busy making this vision more of a reality in your own life.

But I'm here today to tell you that you cannot do it. I cannot do it. We cannot do it—not by our own strength and effort. You and I are too sinful, too flawed, too broken, too weak, too easily distracted, too self-preoccupied. We are too curved in on ourselves to live out this vision of embrace—this vision of self-sacrificial love for all peoples. We just can't live like that...

But there's one who did. His name is Jesus—and *he* can do it in and through us. As we walk with Jesus, and as his Spirit fills us, we will find that Jesus loves others through us. You see, you're not called to love others with your own love. You're called to let *Jesus* love others through you with *his* love.

In order for that to happen, you need to first receive God's love for you in Jesus.

The Bible says in 1 John that:

We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us... We love because God first loved us. ⁷

You can only love God and others by first receiving God's love for you in Jesus. Or to put it another way:

⁶ See again 1 John 4:21 (MSG)

⁷ 1 John 3:16; 4:19

You can only embrace others with God's love if you have first accepted his loving embrace of you.

Embrace implies that we're not just here to know ABOUT Jesus. We're here to KNOW JESUS, himself. Embrace implies personal, real-time encounter with the risen King, an intimate relationship with the living Christ." Author Brennan Manning puts it this way, "It does us little good to memorize chapter and verse if we have no... experiential knowledge of God in our lives."

To know God is to experience his loving embrace of you in Jesus. Which is why the Apostle Paul prayed this prayer for the Ephesian Christians:

May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.⁸

There are some of you—I don't know who you are, but God does—who know ABOUT Jesus. Perhaps you've been going to church for many years, and have heard hundreds of sermons. Maybe you know a lot about the Bible. And you have mistaken your knowledge ABOUT Jesus with actually KNOWING JESUS, personally, experientially. I wonder how many of you would say that more or less describes you.

You may know very well that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. But, as Pastor Tim Keller puts it:

Have you ever seen, in your mind's eye, Jesus dying on the cross for YOU? Because to see Jesus dying on the cross for others, forgiving the people who killed him, can just be a crushing example of love that you will never be able to live up to or duplicate in your own life. But if instead, you see Jesus dying on the cross for YOU, forgiving you, putting away YOUR sin, that changes everything. He saw your heart to the bottom, but he loved you to the skies.

And the joy and freedom that comes from knowing that the Son of God did that for YOU will enable you, more and more, to love OTHERS with HIS love.

You see, our love for God and others can only flow in *response* to God's *initiating* love for us in Jesus. We love because he first loved us. As God's astounding, unspeakable, relentless, and tender love fills us, we no longer have to worry about grasping and grabbing love for ourselves—demanding it from others—because in Jesus, we have all we need and more.

⁸ Ephesians 3:19

This frees us to love others with Jesus' love, which fills us to overflowing. Therefore, my first priority, and yours, is not to love like Jesus loves—to embrace like he embraces—as essential as that is. My first priority, and yours, is to live in the loving embrace of Jesus, day by day—moment by moment, even. As we learn to do that, Jesus will then make our arms an extension of his own—and his love in us will spill over to bless those around us.

I'd like to conclude this message with a prayer exercise designed to help you experience God's loving embrace in Jesus. In a moment, you will see a video that features a world-famous painting—Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The painting is inspired Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke chapter 15.

The painting captures that moment in the parable when a wayward, rebellious son finally returns to his father after running out on him. But the father, against everyone's expectations, and against all social convention, embraces his returning son with a love that is greater—far greater—than all the son's sins.

The parable reveals the incredible love that God the Father has for each of us in Jesus.

In the video, you'll hear my voice reading that passage, and as you listen, I encourage you to keep your eyes on the image and your heart wide open, with the prayer that God would reveal to you in these moments, and in a personal way, his love for you in Jesus.

You may even want to put yourself in this picture, in your mind's eye. See yourself as the returning son, for example. See God's forgiving love and tenderness for you in the image of the father. Rest in his loving embrace. Let God reveal his love to you through this exercise in whatever way that he will. Lord Jesus, reveal God's love for each one watching now, I pray...

Play [video](#) (see 5:10 - 7:30)