

## **Sermon – Embracing Jesus**

### **Sunday May 11, 2024**

#### **Introduction**

Travis was the new kid in school. He was shy, quiet and always kept to himself. He avoided eye contact, spoke only when spoken to and spent most of his time alone - not because he didn't want friends, but because he was afraid of being rejected. Deep down all he wanted was to belong.

One day, during a school assembly, the principal spoke about kindness. He challenged the students to hug a student they didn't know. The kids thought this was weird, although there's one pastor I know who asked the congregation to talk to someone they didn't know – right in the middle of his message.

Anyone, back to our story. Luke, one of the most popular kids in school decided to take the risk. He stepped out from the crowd and walked straight toward Travis. It was definitely awkward — but without saying a word, Luke opened his arms and gently pulled Travis into a hug.

For a moment, Travis stood there frozen, unsure of what to do. But then, something in him softened. Slowly, he hugged back — and in that moment, something began to shift.

From that day on, Travis was different. He smiled, he laughed, he began to make friends. When a teacher later asked him what had happened, he simply said, "That hug. No one's ever accepted me like that before."

There is power in an embrace.

Maybe you feel you're Travis. You want to be known, but you're not sure if anyone cares to know you. Maybe you know a Travis.

In ancient times, opening your arms for an embrace was a way to show you weren't carrying any weapons. It was a sign of peace and vulnerability. Even today, it's still a sign that means you know you might be hurt but you're willing to take that risk.

Studies show that when you embrace someone, your brain releases a hormone called oxytocin. Oxytocin plays an important role in bonding, trust and emotional connection. In other words, when you embrace someone, you're saying to the other person:

- I see you.
- I accept you.
- You matter.

That's the power of embrace. But at Cornerstone, embrace is more than just connecting with others, it's also a reminder of who we are.

#### **Sermon Series**

Today we're kicking off a new sermon series called **Why We're Here**. Over the next three weeks, we'll be unpacking Cornerstone's key statements of purpose – our Vision, Mission and Bedrock Statements. Because these are more than just statements we post on our webpage or print on our banners. These are statements that answer the question, Who are we? And why has God placed us here?

We believe that God is calling us into a new season. A season that will stretch our faith, challenge our comfort level and deepen our dependence on God. But before we step into this season, we need to remind ourselves of *who* we are and *who* we're called to be.

There's also another important *who* question– Who do we belong to? The answer of course is Jesus. In fact, when you look at our statements of purpose, you'll see a single word that runs through them all – and that word is Jesus.

- **Vision Statement:** Embracing the **Jesus** who embraces the world.
- **Mission Statement:** Making space for **Jesus** to shape people together in God's love.
- **Bedrock Statement:** Fix your eyes on **Jesus**.

Notice anything in common? Jesus is in our DNA, as it were. The name of Jesus is the thread that runs through all our statements of purpose, holding them together. Indeed if there is one word that sums up what Cornerstone is all about, it's *Jesus*.

What I want to do today is unpack our Vision Statement - because when we're clear on who we're called to be, we can move forward with confidence knowing what we're called to do.

Now the statement - Embracing the Jesus Who Embraces the World might sound like a nice, feel-good phrase, but this isn't something we just came up with our own. It's actually deeply rooted in Scripture.

One time, a man approached Jesus and asked Him —'What's the most important thing God wants from us?' Jesus' answer was both simple and profound:

**“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40)**

In other words—love God, and love others. The word *embrace* is a vivid picture of this. Because to embrace is to open yourself to God and to others. Embrace is a powerful way of saying, God is shaping us to become a community of love, a community that loves God and loves others.

## **Love God**

So how do we love God? We love God by embracing Jesus—*not just admire him, not just learn about him*. Because it's possible to admire Jesus but never truly embrace him.

Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. He is God's heart in human form. He was sent not just to teach us, but to save us, walk with us, and show us how to live.

In John 8:42, Jesus said, **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. (John 8:42)**

In other words, we can't separate loving God from embracing Jesus. To love God is to embrace the One He sent. To love God is to welcome Jesus into every part of our lives— into our thoughts, our priorities, our relationships.

Embracing Jesus isn't just about inviting him into our worship services, our small groups or our personal prayer times.

- Embracing Jesus means inviting him into our work, our friendships, our decision-making.
- Embracing Jesus means inviting him into our doubts, our fears, our failures.
- Embracing Jesus means asking him to show us how to forgive, how to be good stewards, how to respond when we're facing challenges.

Embracing Jesus isn't a one-time decision; it's a daily posture. It's saying, Jesus, I trust You. I want to walk with You. I want to become more like You. That's how we love God—not just with words, but with hearts that have embraced Jesus as our all in all.

Maybe you've been around church for awhile but you've never fully embraced Jesus. Maybe it's out of fear, out of doubt or out of the belief that you need to get your life cleaned up first.

If that's you, Jesus doesn't wait for you to be perfect. He invites you to embrace him now, just as you are.

How do you love God? By embracing Jesus.

### **Love others**

How do you love others? By embracing the people Jesus embraces. But who does Jesus embrace?

Does Jesus embrace only the socially acceptable, the religiously impressive and the outwardly successful? What do we see in the gospels?

**Jesus embraces the outcast.** Think of the leper in Mark 1. In a society that called him untouchable, what does Jesus do? He reaches out his hand and touches him. And in that touch, Jesus brings healing not just to his body but to his soul. Because in that touch, Jesus says to him, You matter, you are loved.

There is healing in an embrace.

**Jesus embraces the morally broken.** In John 8, a woman was caught in adultery and dragged before Jesus in shame. Her life hangs in the balance – what will Jesus do? He doesn't accuse her, he doesn't throw stones at her. Instead he says, Neither do I condemn you – go and sin no more.

In that moment, Jesus offers both grace and truth. He doesn't ignore her sin, but He doesn't define her by it either. Instead, he gives her dignity, hope, and a fresh start.

There is forgiveness in an embrace.

**Jesus embraces the outsider.** In John 4, he meets a Samaritan woman at the well. This woman has all the wrong qualities – the wrong gender, the wrong ethnicity and the wrong lifestyle. So what does Jesus do? He doesn't walk away from her, instead he sits with her, talks with her and offers her living water.

There is grace in an embrace.

**Jesus embraces the overlooked.** In Mark 10, children are being pushed aside by the disciples, but Jesus says to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. (Mark 10:14) Jesus doesn't dismiss them—He welcomes them and blesses them.

There is welcome in an embrace.

Who are you in these stories?

Maybe you're the leper – wondering if you're too unclean to be touched? Maybe you're the woman caught in your sins and ashamed of your past. Maybe you're the Samaritan woman who always feels like the outsider.

Who are you in these stories? Imagine now, Jesus with love in his eyes, embracing even you.

Because story after story, we see the same thing – Jesus doesn't just embrace the people who have it all together, Jesus embraces the very people the world pushes away.

His embrace is shockingly inclusive and boundary breaking. How do we know that?

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)**

Who does Jesus embrace? He embraces lepers, tax collectors, fishermen, Pharisees, women at wells, criminals on crosses. Jesus embraces you and he embraces me. There's not a single person outside the reach of his embrace. Do you know what this means? It means there shouldn't be a single person outside the reach of our embrace as well.

What's Cornerstone's vision statement? Embracing the Jesus who embraces the world. We embrace the people Jesus embraces.

**We're called to embrace people from different cultures and ethnicities.** Of the 35 founding members of Cornerstone, 33 were Canadian-born Chinese. They could have planted a church that catered to people just like them—but instead they chose a different way. They believed that through the cross of Jesus, God breaks down dividing walls and brings people of every background into one family.

So they set out to build an intentionally intercultural church—one that would reflect the diversity of God's kingdom. And today, we are a church family that represents over 50 countries of origin and worships together in one of the most intercultural cities in Canada.

And while we're thankful for what God has done, God isn't done with us yet. We want to listen more deeply to each others' stories, we want to build stronger bonds of fellowship, we want to grow into a community where every culture and background is not just acknowledged, but celebrated.

**We're called to embrace people who don't think they belong in church.** People who feel too broken, too different, too far gone. We've heard so many stories of individuals who assumed that their past, their struggles, or their doubts disqualified them from being part of a faith community. But instead, at Cornerstone they've discovered a place where they're not judged, but welcomed. Someone once said, The church isn't a museum for saints, it's a hospital for sinners.

And while we're thankful for what God has done, God isn't done with us yet. We want to be a community known for our radical hospitality, where people feel at home, where their stories are heard, and where they experience the love of Jesus here.

**We're called to embrace people who are hurting and grieving.** In the past, we've run a healing discipleship ministry called *Freedom Session* that helps people overcome addictions and wounds and grow in their identity in Christ. We have a *GriefShare* ministry that walks with people through their pain and offers hope in the midst of grief.

And while we're thankful for what God has done, God isn't done with us yet. We want to grow in our compassion and create more safe spaces for people to bring their pain and experience the transforming love of Jesus.

We're called to embrace people from all walks of life—whether they're elderly, new to the country, living with disabilities, navigating learning challenges, struggling with finances, or facing any number of struggles we haven't named.

Because here's what we know.

- Every person, regardless of their circumstances, is deeply loved by God.
- Every person is made in his image.
- Every person deserves a place of belonging in his family.

And we want to be that family for them.

There is power in an embrace.

Cornerstone is entering a season of discerning how God may be calling us to look beyond our comfort zones and embrace those he is placing on our hearts. We are a church that embraces Jesus who embraces the world.

How might he be calling us to widen that embrace? Who might he be calling us to reach next? Will you join us in seeking God's will together?

Cornerstone is having a **Prayer and Re-envisioning event** on May 24<sup>th</sup>. This is a time where we'll come together as a community of faith and prayerfully consider how God may be leading us forward. If you haven't done so already, consider signing up and attending.

As we look ahead, we need to ask ourselves, Who are we? We're a people of embrace. What are we called to do? Embrace the Jesus who embraces the world. Why do we do that? Because there is power in an embrace.

But here's the problem. As exciting as all this sounds and as much as we want to be part of this, embrace is messy. The truth is we can't do it on our own. We're too sinful, too flawed, too broken.

Think about it. It's easy to embrace those who are like us and easy to love. But how much harder is it to embrace those who are different from us and hard to love? This kind of embrace requires a love we simply don't have. So where do we find the power to love like this?

In the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg hangs one of **Rembrandt's greatest paintings, *The Return of the Prodigal Son***. When Henri Nouwen – a theologian and writer, stood before this painting, he was captivated.

Here in this painting, he saw the son on his knees – broken, filthy and ashamed. He has nothing to offer, no excuses he can make. But his father is bent over him – and he isn't angry, he doesn't reject him. Instead, his arms are open, his hands gently resting on the son's shoulders.

Nouwen would call this painting "the most personal and intimate expression of the Father's love I have ever witnessed." Because in that embrace, Nouwen saw himself.

- He saw himself as the lost son – rebellious and impulsive, squandering his inheritance in a life of indulgence and reckless living.
- He also saw himself as the older brother – dutiful, self-righteous, and resentful.
- But eventually Nouwen saw something he didn't expect to see.

The embrace offered by the father, was offered to both the younger brother as well as the older brother. And that's when it hit him. They were *both* invited into the father's embrace. And when we allow ourselves to be embraced by the father, we then become people who can offer that same embrace to others.

"The spiritual life, then, is not a life in which we move away from the world, but one in which we move toward the world with the love of the Father... The true call of the spiritual life is not to become like the younger son or the older son but to become like the Father."

Where are you in this painting?

- Are you the younger son – lost and broken, seeking forgiveness, longing to come home?
- Are you the older brother – distant and cold, dutiful but bitter?
- What if, today, Jesus is calling you to come home—not to religion, not to rules—but to the embrace of the Father?
- What if Jesus is inviting you into the father's love not just so you can experience his embrace, but so you can become like the father – opening your arms wide to embrace others?

Where do you find the power to love like this? You find it in the father's love.

**We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)**

We find the power to love when we allow ourselves to be loved by the father. Only then can we become people who can offer that same love to others. So wherever you are, come home and let the Father embrace you. Then go and embrace others in the same way.

Because there is power in an embrace.

Let's pray.