

WITNESS: YOUR FATHER'S PRIORITY

Five Guiding Values

John 3:14-17

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Isn't it great to be in Christmas season? I really enjoy the festivities of this season; and with the early Thanksgiving, we actually have more time to celebrate it this year. The next three Sundays at Bethany will be so special. In fact, you won't want to miss a Sunday in December. Even the Sunday after Christmas is wonderfully planned. If you come here, the next four weeks and don't find yourself personally strengthened and tugged by joy, then you will have to be dead or very close to it.

This Sunday, however, I want us to look back a little. This fall we discussed our mission. We have a call: *Go and bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ.* That is

our business. We are not in the business of producing exciting worship services, although I am excited as we worship. We are not in the business of attracting Christians, although God calls us to love, serve, team with and develop believers as disciples. We are not in the business of growing big, although God desires every person in our community to experience salvation in Jesus Christ and fellowship in His church. All these things might happen and really should happen; they are not unimportant; yet they are not our primary business. Our business is going and bringing people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ. In doing so, we are not merely bringing people to worship. Faith and freedom is not an automatic result of attending worship. Faith and freedom flows from a relationship with Jesus Christ. We establish a relationship with Jesus by repenting from our way of life and turning to Jesus as "the way." There are five values, however, that guide us in developing that relationship.

Last Tuesday night, fifteen of our members gathered and prayed together as we do monthly. Prayer is really a supernatural link to God. We saw God answer prayer. We saw supernatural love. Some of us wept. All of us laughed. Talk to any of the fifteen, and they will tell you about their experience of a divine love that is fresh and

gripping. Prayer is your supernatural link to God.

Consequently, a goal of this body is to help people pray.

A second value is fellowship. I want every one of you to experience friendships that renew and awaken you to God's generosity and mercy. Fellowship is your redemptive connection. God develops people, corrects people, and strengthens people through fellowship.

A third value is worship. Worship corrects our vision. There is a redemptive plan that is unfolding for you and me, and it is so wonderful that heaven celebrates. Heaven is aware of our sadness and pain; yet it celebrates an unfolding victory for us that is greater than our pain. Worship corrects our vision and helps us get a grip. We not only get a grip. We get a taste. We get a taste of the joy God has for the world. "Joy to the world." In worship, we can taste that.

A fourth value to guide us is ministry. We were made in the image of God. Every one of us has a deeper desire to contribute than to consume. God made us that way. Our creator wired us to minister. Each of us has a life calling. When we work in it, we see God's greatness. I want to encourage you, even prod you, to discern and embrace your life calling.

Four critical values that help people experience faith and freedom are prayer, fellowship, worship and ministry. Yet there is one more thing. There is one more value. If this value escapes you, you'll never fully grasp God's amazing love.

Christmas offers us a glimpse of it. Christmas confronts us with a historical truth. It reminds us that in the calendar of history God in his love sent his one and only Son to live among us, to suffer with us and to die for us. God's own Son came as a vulnerable baby, raised in occupied territory and dependent upon the care of imperfect parents. (If you are a teenager and your parents occasionally get on your nerves, Jesus had that experience. In fact, there is a story in the gospel of John where Jesus as a young adult sounds upset with his mother.) God's son shared our experiences. Even more, God's own Son came to save people rather than condemn them.

The Christmas story reveals that God prefers to save people rather than condemn people. God prefers to save you rather than condemn you. God prefers to save your neighbor, God prefers to save your family member, God prefers to save the prodigals rather than condemn them.

When Jesus was young, he studied the Hebrew Scriptures. Especially he studied the five books of Law. In the book of

Numbers, he read about the journey Israel took from Egypt to Palestine, the Promised Land. He read how at one point, many Israelites became disgusted and weary. The journey was taking too long. They lost faith. They started a revolt. As they camped, hundreds of poisonous snakes (maybe even thousands) invaded the site. Men, women, youth and children were getting bitten. Few, if any, were surviving. Tears were shed as panic spread. People came in sorrow and regret, asking Moses to pray for them. In response to Moses' prayer, God told him to fashion a snake and place it on a pole. All who were bitten that looked at that snake would live.

God's Spirit revealed to Jesus that people were suffering similarly in his day. God's people were dying from the bites of spiritual serpents. The venom of these vipers was not merely sickening, but lethal. This poison was exacting a spiritual, emotional and physical toll. People were crying out for help. God's Spirit showed Jesus that his Father was responding. Just as that bronze snake had been lifted up. Jesus would be lifted up, and all who looked to Jesus would live.

Jesus not only understood his call. He understood his Father's heart. God's heart is with his dying children. God's heart is with his poisoned people. God's heart caused

him to send and sacrifice his Son. Although people, made in the image of God, are responsible and accountable for their choices, they are sick with a poison. Yet God is not interested in them dying. God is not interested in them being condemned. God's heart is for their life.

When you and I look to Jesus and find forgiveness, when you and I look to him and taste love, when you and I look to Jesus and embrace a new life, we become witnesses of God's heart and work. As witnesses, we know God's heart. We know that God's heart is for people who are just as undeserving as we are. We know that God's mercy extends to people as guilty as we were. When you and I reach out to others affected by that deadly poison, when we pray for them and serve them, we are letting God's heart affect our heart. We are letting God's Spirit direct our spirit. As God's fills our hearts with patience, mercy, tenderness and compassion for unbelieving people, we taste God's love for us even more. Paradoxically, people grow most as they reach out, and in serving those estranged from Christ, we embrace our Father's heart and priority.