**Turn the Page Week 10 – From Least to Loved**

**Message Big Idea**: “Turn the Page” by embracing your identity as the one Jesus loves.

**Scripture:** Luke 2:8-20, John 13:23

**NOTE**: Everyone should receive a blank “ID Card.” Improved Options: Buttons for everyone that say “the one Jesus loves.”

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**Introduction: Status Symbols**

When you were a teenager, do you remember what you wanted for Christmas? I’m talking about the status symbols that would mark you as part of the “it” crowd that you longed to find under the tree. I know in this room we represent a lot of different ages…some of you are teenagers now…but I grew up in the 1980s, and everyone knew what it took to be hip and cool back then. *(TP-personalize to yourself)*

For example, did anyone here ever have a pair of *(picture)* **Jordache jeans**? Oh yes, that little horse on the front pocket meant you were styling! I really wanted those!



And everyone wanted their own brightly colored *(picture)* **Swatch Watch**. Yep, the more colors, the better. Do they still make those? I asked Santa for that but never did get one.



And, students, if you think having the iPhone Xs is cool today, it was nothing compared to having a *(picture)* **cordless phone** in your house back in the day. Of course you still had to be in the house to talk on it…and not too far from the charging station, but still… it was a big deal to be cordless when everyone else was tethered to the wall by that spiral cord. Those of you under 30 have no idea what I’m even talking about.

Take just a minute, turn to someone nearby, and share what the “status symbols” Christmas presents were (or are) when you were a teen. *(Give a minute)*

Every culture at every time has its own status symbols. It seems for some reason we have this innate need to define…

* The “haves” and the “have nots.”
* *(add)* The “ins” and the “outs.”
* *(add)* The “most” and the “least.”

And, of course, we all want to be the “most.” I remember wanting a pair of those Jordache jeans so bad when I was a teenager. There was a big problem, however, and it wasn’t just financial. At 15 I was already almost six feet tall and back in those days Jordache jeans didn’t come in tall sizes. So I could have had Jordache jeans, but they would have been about five inches too short which would have created a whole new status problem for me!

Most of us have experienced what it feels like to be regulated to the “have nots,” the “outs,” or the “least.”

* Maybe we feel like the “have nots” because we look around at what everyone else has and feel we’re lacking.
* Maybe we feel like the “outs” because there is a circle of people we long to be part of but can’t seem to break into.
* Maybe we feel like the “least” because as we look at the rungs of society, almost everyone seems to be above us.

And the reality is those who feel like they are the “most” are usually pretty scared about becoming the “least.” That’s often what drives them to try and hang on to their status.

All of this ordering of the “most” and the “least” isn’t anything new to our modern society. In fact, it was happening all the way back in 1st century Judah.

**The Shepherds**

There is one group in particular I want to focus in on who, in that time, were viewed as the “least” in almost every way imaginable. They were considered the lowest class, unskilled, and untrustworthy. They were given a job that most people believed children could do. So if you occupied this role as an adult, you were considered a total fail. So much of a fail that your testimony wouldn’t even be considered valid in a court of law.

Who are these unfortunate outcasts? Or should I say the “least?” Shepherds! Maybe that’s not the first group of people who would come to mind today, but shepherds were viewed as the lowest rung of society in 1st century Judah. So far outside the “it” crowd, they had no hope of breaking in.

What would a typical day look like for a shepherd? Luke, the doctor tells it like this…

**“…there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.” – Luke 2:8**

Shepherds had to live where they worked, amongst the dirt and the filth of the field where the sheep lived. Have you ever counted sheep at night while trying to stay awake? That’s what they would have to do, except literally… fending off the occasional wild animal for entertainment and hoping their rabies shots were current.

Everything appeared like it was just another hopeless night shift ahead for these guys. But little did they know, everything about their lives was about to change.

Luke continues:

**“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’**

**Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’” –Luke 2:9-14**

All of a sudden, God’s plan to redeem the world is set in motion as he breaks into the world in the person of Jesus. Angels announce his arrival singing, “Glory of God!” and the shepherds are freaked out! Who could blame them? Yet the angels tell them not to be afraid, hope has arrived…their Savior has been born!

As amazing as this announcement is, perhaps it’s just as amazing to whom the announcement was given. The shepherds! It’s as if, right from the start…

* The “have nots” are honored.
* The “outs” are brought in.
* The “least” discover they are loved.

God elevates the forgotten as the news of Jesus’ birth is delivered to shepherds, not kings.

The shepherds were so overwhelmed by what just happened. They had to go see for themselves.

**“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.” –Luke 2:15-16**

I’m sure the shepherds came into this 1st century Christmas feeling like their lives were anything but awesome. All they saw ahead of them was another mundane night as a “least” tending sheep in a field. Yet, here was God turning everything about their lives right side up. He deliberately chose them to give this powerful message of hope.

**The Love of Jesus**

The birth story tells us something incredible about Jesus. That his birth was announced to shepherds paints a beautiful picture of whom this Savior would be.

When Jesus entered our world, people were drawn to him. They were drawn by the wonder of his miracles, they were drawn by the power of his words, and, perhaps above all else, they were drawn by the goodness of his love.

Jesus’ life is full of stories of how he loved the “least.” He seemed to make a habit of breaking down societal barriers and classifications. John, one of Jesus’ closest friends, records many of these stories in the Gospel he wrote about Jesus life:

*(John 4:7-9)* In John chapter 4, Jesus, a Jewish man, encounters a Samaritan woman at a well and engages her in a conversation. That he would even speak to her shocked the woman as in that society Jews did not associate with Samaritans and men didn’t publicly acknowledge women. This woman had already been cast aside by five former husbands. She likely lived in shame. Yet, Jesus affirms her value by speaking to her. Jesus loves this woman who others rejected.

*(John 5:5-7)* Turning the page to John chapter 5, Jesus encounters a man who had suffered from a disease for 38 years that had left him unable to walk. When Jesus meets him, no one else had been willing to help him. Yet, Jesus has compassion on him and heals him right on the spot! The man is immediately able to stand up and walk! Jesus loves this man who others ignored.

*(John 9:1-2)* Turning a few more pages to John chapter 9, Jesus encounters a man who had been born blind. Even Jesus’ own disciples believe his blindness was a result of sin. He was blamed for his own condition, a way others justified his circumstances. Yet, Jesus saw it differently. He restored the man’s sight and gave him a new beginning. He loved this man who others blamed.

John’s Gospel is full of incredible stories that demonstrate Jesus’ goodness. John, himself, had a unique perspective on the impact Jesus’ had on every person he encountered. After all, John was right there witnessing these interactions, seeing lives changed before his eyes.

And even more, it was Jesus’ love that redefined how John saw himself.

Years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, when John is sitting down to write these reflections, he had a lot on his resume to be proud about. After all, he was one of Jesus’ first followers, a leader in the early church, an apostle, a teacher, and an author. The guy was legit! He had lots of reasons to consider himself a “most” not a “least.” With a resume like that, who could blame him?

Yet, observe how John refers to himself in his Gospel. Time and time again he refers to himself as:

**“…the disciple whom Jesus loved…” –John 13:23**

Notice he doesn’t introduce himself as “John, the Apostle” or “John, the leader” or “John, the author.” The identity John holds most dear, the way he refers to himself is as “**the disciple whom Jesus loved.**”

Now, does this mean that Jesus didn’t love the other disciples? Does this mean John was somehow the favorite? No. We can see from the stories recorded earlier in John’s Gospel that Jesus’ love extends to everyone.

I think what this is revealing is that when you know Jesus as well as John did...when you’re as close to him as John was...the primary way you see yourself is as “**the one whom Jesus loves**.” THAT becomes your core identity. That is the truest thing about you.

As good as John’s accomplishments were, as much as he had achieved, that’s not what he considered the “most” about him. What John saw as his deepest truth, what defined his self-perception was that the Savior of the world loved him unconditionally. Jesus love defined him.

**Our Identity**

So let me ask you… **How do you see yourself?** Where do you get your sense of identity? What forms the basis of your deepest truth?

Some of us work long hours, often putting people or priorities on the back burner so that we can excel in our jobs. For us, it’s more than just doing a good job; we are obsessed with achievement. We see ourselves as *(add)* **“the one who must succeed.”**

Others of us bend over backward to make everyone happy…even people we don’t really know. We are terrified of disappointing anyone so we go the extra mile to do our best for everyone. We see ourselves as *(replace)* **“the one who must please.”**

Some of us spend our days chasing after the image we want to see in the mirror. Whether we feel success in our efforts or shame, our thoughts are consumed with everything that goes into our physical appearance. We see ourselves as *(replace)* **“the one who must look good.”**

Others of us can’t rest until a certain person is in our life and happy to be there. Our emotions ride the highs and the lows of that person’s affections. The highs are really high, and the lows are really low. We see ourselves as *(replace)* **“the one who must be wanted.”**

Some of us pour ourselves out in countless good deeds. We volunteer for everything and can be counted on for anything. We receive kudos from the pastor and the PTA that keep us going even when we’re running on empty. We see ourselves as *(replace)* **“the one who must serve.”**

Or maybe, some of us can identify with the shepherds in the story. We are used to being overlooked. We are used to being passed by. We see ourselves as *(replace)* **“the one who doesn’t matter.”**

There are so many places we search for our identity and look for our sense of worth.

* At work.
* And in relationships.
* As parents.
* And in accomplishments.
* At church
* And in our bank statements.

*(How do you see yourself?)* All of us look for that something or that someone who will make us feel OK about ourselves. I struggle with this. My identity can get wrapped up in being “the one who must be important.” I think my greatest fear in life is that I don’t really matter. If a friend can’t make time for me or if I don’t stand out in some way at work, I can feel the ground beneath my self worth start to shake. There have been seasons when my identity has been so wrapped up in this need to be important that my emotions have ridden a rollercoaster of ups and downs based on whatever happens in a given day.

Maybe some of you know what it is like to be on that identity roller coaster. Maybe most of us do.

Here is the critical truth every one of us needs to grasp today: No matter how you see yourself, no matter where you tend to place your identity, no matter whether you think you are a “most” or a “least”… The truest thing about you is that you are*(add)***“the one Jesus loves.”** That is the core of your identity, the basis of your worth. You are the one Jesus loves. I am the one Jesus loves. That is our true self. Every other identity is an illusion.

Just think with me for a minute what this means. It means we can breathe. It means we can rest. Instead of being…

* The one who must succeed, or…
* The one who must look good, or…
* The one who must please…

We can stop all our striving and rest in being the one who is already loved far more than we could have ever dreamed. You are the one Jesus loves.

And I think growing as a Christ-follower is a lot about coming to live out of that core identity more and more. You see, I don’t think it is something we ever fully grasp. We need to be constantly reminded. Maybe that is why John calls himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved” over and over again in his Gospel. Perhaps he, too, was trying to live into that identity. We need to constantly remember that this is who we really are…you are the one whom Jesus loves.

**Response and Communion**

Today, we want to take some time to remember, to realign our hearts and minds to our core identity.

Let’s start by being honest about the places we are tempted to find our identity apart from God. When you came in today, you were given this blank ID badge. In the moments ahead, I want to encourage you, just between you and God, to get real about the ways you look to people or places or performance to find your self worth.

Maybe you look for your identity at work or in your spouse or in a talent or in a title. Maybe you search for who you are in the mirror or in your bank account or in the accomplishments of your children. Whatever the Spirit of God, speaking to you in this moment, brings to mind, write that down on this ID badge. Do that right now, and then let me tell you what we’re going to do next.

Around the room, we have stations set up where you can come and receive Communion. In his first letter written to Christ-followers, this same John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, reminds us:

**“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” -1 John 4:9-10**

When we receive Communion, we remember the Love that sacrificed himself for us. And he did it so that, as John says, *(highlight)* **“we might live through him.”** Life, real life, full and free life is found in Jesus, in grounding our identity in being “the one whom Jesus loves.”

So today I want you to invite you to come to the table, and as you come, bring your ID badge with whatever words you have written on it to describe where you look for your identity. As a way to remember who you really are, lay that identity down on the table, and in turn receive the elements, the bread and the cup, that remind you of your true identity. You are the one Jesus loves.

*(Genius option)* As I said, we need to be reminded of our true identity over and over again. So we have a little gift for you to take with you today. In a basket on the end of the table you will find these buttons that simply say, “the one Jesus loves.” Take one of these. Wear it if you want to or pin it to some place you will see often. This is the truest thing about you…your real identity. You are the one Jesus loves.

Join me at the table this morning as we remember we are loved.

**Communion Moment**

**Conclusion**

*(Luke 2:15)* I want to conclude today by going back to where we started…the shepherds, the “least,” whose testimony wasn’t even considered valid in a court of law. They were given the honor of witnessing the birth of our Savior, of being the first to know that Love himself had come into the world.

And what did they do in response? *(Luke 2:17-18)* They turned around and told everyone they could find about the child who was born. They carried the good news that Love had come into the world, and all who heard it were amazed.

And you and I? We now get that honor too. We get to share the good news of Jesus with everyone.

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, the day we celebrate that the child was born. There’s still time to spread the word, to invite our friends, family members, neighbors, and co-workers to join us here for Christmas Eve services. So let’s invite all to come so that they, too, have the opportunity to discover that they are “the ones whom Jesus loves.”