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## LIFE IN HIS NAME

### INTERNATIONAL SUNDAY

John 12:9-26

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

"Fear not, daughter of Zion;  
behold, your king is coming,  
sitting on a donkey's colt!"

His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

Today is a special day of celebration for us. We call it International Sunday and it has significance on several fronts. First of all, today, September 11, is the day that this building was dedicated to the Lord in 1998. Eighteen years ago today we dedicated this facility to the Lord. Here was the vision, and it coincides with what we are celebrating today. We had a

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vision to move into an area geographically where we believed that it would position us to receive people from all types of backgrounds. We had outgrown the facility we were using and we really had two objectives:

- 1) To reposition ourselves geographically where we could grow in diversity, and
- 2) We wanted to employ a financial model that didn't put us into a constant fundraising mode. We wanted a property that would help us pay for itself.

So, with God's leadership we found this shopping center and we bought it and began to retrofit it.

Now, I just want to give a testimony to God and how he works, and to unapologetically make this claim before you this morning: God loves unity, and a church that will give itself to uniting, though diverse, God will strongly support. Maybe I could say it this way: If you live in a diverse area and your church isn't diverse, something's not right. Because this is what God is doing. I know that sounds like God is only doing what we are doing. I just can't help it.

Here's what happened. We bought this building at the very end of 1997. It was a mess. When I say it was a mess, multiply that times 10. It was a disaster, largely empty. We knew we needed the tenants to help us pay for the rent. And we didn't know this when we bought the building, when we signed the contract, that the city needed a place to put its charter school. So they approached us as we were purchasing the building and said, "Listen, we need to rent your building from you, and if you will agree to this we will give you money to help you build out. We'll give you a couple of hundred thousand dollars (just pocket change) to help you build it out, and we will expedite all the permits because we need you to get in by August so that we can put our school in there. Then we will pay you \$200,000 a year in rent.

That to me seemed like a good deal. But I didn't know it was God's deal, because we got in and there was this eight month period from the time we purchased the property until that dedication -- end of December 1997 to dedication September 11, 1998. Because much of the shopping center was not full, we were operating at a deficit of \$10,000 a month. Four months into that (it took me four months to realize, "Wow, there's a pattern here!") the pastors were in my office praying. We were saying, "God, we are \$40,000 in debt and that's going to continue until the school gets in here and starts paying us rent."

Just to illustrate the magnificence of how God works -- we were not able to meet here. We were paying rent in the high school, paying rent here, and I realized that not only would the rent from the charter school make us solvent, but that had the city not expedited the permits to get us in quickly, and had that period (you know how building projects can go) taken years instead of months, it would have been the end of us. I saw God's provision in it. There in the immediate, short \$10,000 a month, we are praying, (you've heard me tell this story, you will hear me tell it many more times if you stick around), there's a knock on the door, and a brother in the Lord named Butch interrupted. He had the nerve to interrupt

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our prayer time, and I was irritated. “Wow, we were just trying to pray. Don’t these people know this is important?” I’m like, “Butch, what do you want?” And Butch was like, “Well, you know, I was driving and the Lord told me there’s a financial need and that I should come and see if I could help.” “Butch! Glad to see you! Come in! We’ve been waiting for you!”

Butch called his wife and wrote a check for \$40 or \$45,000 that day and asked the church to match that gift. The church matched that gift. God carried us through those eight months. God will strongly support a church that is not living for its own agenda. It was God’s miraculous provision. I literally could stand here for hours and tell you story after story how God has established us in this building, in this place.

Some of you remember just how ugly the building used to look. It was a disaster, really a disaster. We had a gentleman on our staff who was a project manager. He was managing some projects and I said, “Dave, we’ve got to redo the building.” He said, “Well, you need about a million dollars just barely to redo the façade. It was just all rotted wood in front. I said, “Well, I’ll see what we can do. We’ll raise what we can in the short term.” He said, “Just raise what you can and we’ll see what we can do.” We raised like \$150,000. I don’t remember the exact number, but it was 10-15% of what we needed. So, what did God do? God sent a hurricane and we had an \$800,000 insurance claim and we redid our building.

My point is this: God is all about unity. People talk about it, but they find it’s very difficult to do. This passage is a fascinating passage, because it tells you that a man gets raised from the dead, and there’s a group of people that are so threatened by Jesus they not only want to kill Jesus, they want to kill Lazarus. They want to stop his testimony.

You’ve got this one group plotting to undo Jesus and to kill him then there is a crowd that’s following Jesus from this great miracle a few miles outside of Jerusalem. They are coming with Jesus into Jerusalem on the feast, to celebrate the feast. They are coming in and then this mass of people is coming out, because they have heard about the miracle. John tells us that there is frenzied excitement, and this group is shouting praise to Jesus: “Hosanna!” They are quoting Psalm 118, specifically verse 25.

Now, Psalm 118 was part of a unique group of six psalms that would be sung to the Lord at special feast times. This particular psalm and this particular verse had come to be associated with the idea of a messiah coming to save the people of God. Literally, Psalm 118:25 reads like this: “Save us, we pray, O LORD!” That’s roughly what hosanna means. Hosanna means “Save us. Save us now. We are looking to you. We believe, God, that you will save us.” Specifically, they were believing that God had sent a messiah, and now they are saying that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the King of Israel.

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So you have two groups. One group wants to kill Jesus and another group wants to make him king. Here is the fascinating thing: Both groups are wrong. Both groups are right, unintentionally, but both groups at the heart of the matter are wrong.

How are they right? The group that wants to kill Jesus is saying this: “We’ve got to find a way to kill Jesus to stop him.” Well, they were right. Jesus was going to die. He was going to give his life freely. But they were wrong. It wasn’t going to stop him. He had a plan so much bigger than they could imagine, and his death was not the means whereby he would be stopped. It was the means whereby he would fulfill God’s purpose. That’s the first group.

The second group wants to hail Jesus as king, but they want a military leader. They want a political solution. They want to overthrow Rome. So what does Jesus do? He gets a donkey and rides into town. They are waving palm branches, which are a symbol of nationalism. They are calling him the King of Israel and he says, “Listen, I am coming in humility. I am coming as a gentle messiah. I am coming as a savior. I’m not going to overthrow Rome. Rome is going to execute me. The kingdom I bring and the kind of king I am is completely different from your agenda.”

We have a group of elders that lead this church. We are about to have an ordination this fall, where we will ordain some men who have been in a provisional period. We are just adding a new elder as a provisional period. Juan Bruno is going to serve as provisional elder. We will take a period of time where we will ask you if you think this man should serve the body as an elder. He will pray about it and we will pray about it. It’s an important role in the church. It’s a role where those individuals are asked to govern the church. No one man in that group has more authority than another. I am charged with leading that group, so practically, functionally, there is a certain authority that God has given me, but I have one vote amongst six right now.

One thing we say to these men as we evaluate our lives. We say, “Listen, there’s one thing that’s a deal breaker, and that is if you come into this with your own agenda.” There is just no room for a man, even if he thinks he’s right, even if he thinks it’s a good thing that he wants, you must come and serve this church by saying, “I will lay down my life for this church because I am seeking God’s agenda.” I realize that no one person can arrive at that. We need a plurality. We need a team. I respect the other men on this eldership and I will defer all of my preferences to God’s agenda, because no man owns this church. This church belongs to Jesus Christ.

That’s an illustration of what this passage is all about. You can’t come to Jesus until you give up your agenda. You just can’t, until you adopt his agenda. The way it comes to us is very much like what we see with these two groups. You’ve got the group that wants to kill Jesus and the group that wants to exalt him. You think, “Well, I’ve got to just choose sides.” Jesus is saying this – it’s very, very important – “Your need is so much deeper than this debate that’s happening on the surface. Your need for salvation goes much deeper than you are aware of.”

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Jesus doesn't really please either group and eventually, just a few days later – if this is not instructive when it comes to human nature – a few days later the very people that are waving palm branches, hailing Jesus, are shouting, "Crucify him." So we see that in order to follow Jesus we have to give up our own agenda.

Look at verses 20-26 as we read them, because they really lay out for us this whole idea and they really help us on International Sunday to focus on what's going on. In this passage we see that some Greeks arrive; some non-Jewish people show up to the feast. These are probably God-fearers. They are not full converts, necessarily, to Judaism, but they believe in God. They fear God. They see God moving amongst the Israelites, and they respect it -- kind of like Cornelius in Acts Chapter 10, kind of like the centurion who has a servant that's healed by Jesus and he built a synagogue for the Jewish people.

These Greeks come and say, "Hey, we want to see Jesus!" They come and find Andrew and Philip and they are wanting to see Jesus. Look at what happens; look at Jesus' response. His response is not, "Yes, I'll see them" or "No, I won't see them." But his response in verse 23 is: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Their arrival – see this – their arrival is the sign to Jesus that his hour is now at hand.

We've been reading this in the book of John, where people are plotting to kill Jesus, they are coming after Jesus, and they are unsuccessful because his hour had not yet come. The hour for his death, the hour for his sacrifice, the hour where he would give his life as the Lamb of God and wherein he would be glorified and we would be set free from our sin had not come. But what signals to him that now is the moment? The arrival of Gentiles.

John is saying to all of his readers that Jesus is not just a national king. He is the King of the nations. And he will give his life so that there will be an abundant harvest. What does Jesus say after he tells them this? Verse 24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus is saying, "I'm going to give my life. I'm going to, like a seed, die. And there is going to be an abundant harvest, and this harvest is a harvest of the nations." God will strongly support a church that has this as a core value. This is pleasing to the Lord.

Funny story: When we were trying to navigate our way into this facility, we called the bank. We said to the bank, "Listen, we need to borrow so much money." I think it was about two and a half million dollars. These are rough numbers, please, these are not exact. We were raising money to put with it. We had some. We had sold our property. All of this was going together for this financial deal. The banker tells me, "Well, Brian, you know, we're not sure we want to lend you the money, because you've been at the church for a while and if something happens to you, we are a little nervous. So if we loan you this money, we'll probably take out what's called a key man policy. We are going to insure your life." I went home and told my wife that night, "Hey, I'm a key man! Aren't you lucky?"

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The next day the bank called and said, “Listen, we’re not going to loan you all this money. We talked to the board and they are like, “What kind of pastor would lead a church to sell a perfectly good building to buy a rundown shopping center?” I went in 24 hours from a key man to just a stupid man.

So, here we were. We were in this situation where we couldn’t find a bank to lend us the money. So the owner of this property, who was a Jewish man said, “You know what? I’ll loan you the difference.” He loaned us about a million dollars, held the note. Within a year or two the value of this property had doubled. It was worth twice what we had initially paid for it, and the bank came to us and said, “Hey, we’ll buy out the previous owner. You guys are a solid risk.”

As I told you, just account after account of impossibilities that God erases because he wants you to see this: In a world that’s divided by gender, by race, by class, those who are in Christ are united, and that this is the heart of God, and that he establishes you in unity, and that it does matter. Jesus gave his life—listen—for an enormous harvest from the nations. The nations belong to Jesus and he delights in seeing them come together to worship him. He accomplishes this through his death.

This is important and relevant for your own salvation and how we deal with these difficult issues of sexism, racism, classism. Those meeting Jesus on that day in those various groups were unable to see and comprehend what Jesus was doing, because the salvation that was needed was much deeper than they could comprehend. It was a salvation of their own hearts. It was a transformation. It was a forgiveness of sin and a transformation deep within. The issues that they thought they needed to be saved from were up here on the surface, but they were much deeper. Jesus would give his life as a sacrifice for their sin so that they could receive new hearts and the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God.

So we see that on a personal level, my need for salvation—I tend to focus on all the external things, when Jesus is saying, “No, you need a new heart. You need cleansing. I am giving my life so that you might personally be saved.” And he accomplishes this by the giving of his own life.

When we are saved, Jesus tells us, we follow him. Look at verse 26: “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.” When we follow Jesus, we are brought into communion with the triune God, with Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Jesus basically says this: “I must die. You must follow me.” Here’s what’s in between, verse 25: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Alright, do you see how that joins these two ideas? Your need for salvation, the world’s need for salvation is so much deeper, Jesus has to die. He does it in a unique, counterintuitive way. He gives his life to pay for sin. You must follow Jesus in order to be saved. What’s in between? You must die. In order for Jesus’ death to be secured for you, you have

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to give up your own agenda. You have to lay down your own life and follow him -- and it is counterintuitive. It is contrary to what we think.

We want to stand there with the crowd and wave palm branches and say, "This is great! God, come and conquer! We will follow you! We will hail you as King." And Jesus says, "Listen, what I need to conquer is in your heart. Will you lay down your life and die so that you might have eternal life?"

So, why do we celebrate International Sunday? We could look at this a number of ways scripturally. We could start with all the Old Testament scriptures that tell us about caring for different people. In fact, in the Old Testament scriptures there is what has come to be called the "quartet of the vulnerable." The Old Testament prophets, in particular, would talk about four groups of people that the people of God needed to care for. It wasn't that you had to be in one of these four groups, but it was a way of describing everyone who was in need. Those four groups were: the orphan, the widow, the poor, and the stranger in your midst – those who had immigrated in.

Scripture repeatedly teaches that those classes or groups of people reflect our true spiritual condition. We are in spiritual poverty. We are strangers to God. We are aliens. We are orphans. We are widows. Spiritually, we are outside of the family, outside of the land, outside of belonging, and God brings us in and saves us. So, as Christians, our hearts are automatically sensitive to those physical categories. Do you understand? Are you with me?

We could just start right there and say, "Wow, this is a theme throughout scripture." But there are deeper theological purposes, deeper theological reasons. We understand from scripture that every person is made in the image of God and every person is valuable before God, and that we are to love everyone, regardless of race, gender, social status, or class. So, we read a verse like this, Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Do you see? Racism, classism, sexism -- in Jesus Christ the salvation that is provided for us goes deeper.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate it is like this. We have the first black president in the history of this nation. He served two terms. We have the first female nominee for president in a major political party in the history of our nation. The other political party (you may or may not know this) has a nominee. Just in case you want to match these up: The president is Barack Obama, President Obama. Hillary Clinton is the nominee for the Democratic Party. And in the other party, Donald Trump (you may or may not know this) has an immense following amongst a group of poor Anglos, poor whites, who are saying they have never had a political voice. It is a strange thing to see poor whites pointing to this billionaire saying, "That's our voice."

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Now, here's what's interesting. It's a completely new dynamic politically. First black president, first female nomination, crazy rich white man representing crazy poor white people, right? I don't mean they're crazy, I mean very poor. And we are more divided than ever before. That's my contention. We have more racial division, more sexism, more classism, and the more we try to address the issues, the more we push our agenda, the more we try to find solutions, the further and further apart we seem to be getting. I believe scripture is saying it's because the solution is deeper than you think, and it's only found in Jesus.

So church, we are positioned in a place to say, "Listen, you've got to go deeper than the groups that are choosing sides on these various issues. You've got to go deeper than most any of the movements that are there." I'm not saying that there's no right or wrong and that the issues aren't represented. I'm just saying we're not going to find a solution at that level. It's only going to be found in Christ.

Let me take this application a little bit further. When we bought this building – this is just how messed up some things are – we had a bagel restaurant here. Now, we are surrounded by people that come from the islands. We are surrounded by all kinds of people in this particular neighborhood, but not a lot of bagel eaters, right? We inherited something from the past that was not really on point in terms of its marketing. This bagel restaurant was dying. I was eating all the bagels I could. We needed their rent. So, I'm over there one day eating bagels and grits, a wonderful combination, and there was a pastor from Nashville who was visiting. I remember sitting there -- we had just started and he said, "Listen, Brian, I need to tell you this. You need to know there's a good chance that you are not going to succeed in having a diverse church, because we did pretty much exactly what you did. We went into transition in a diverse area and we are all white to this day, years and years later." I said, "Brother, you are not encouraging me right now." He goes, "What you are trying to do is harder than you may realize."

I just said, "Listen, I have no idea except I'm just trying to obey God. I believe God has called us to do this, so I'm going to be obedient to the Lord." I've sought counsel and I haven't gotten a lot of answers in terms of how to do it. Riverside, I want to tell you: God has done this. You are a work of God. And when people say, "So what did you do strategically?" I say, "Well, we showed up and worshipped Jesus and preached the gospel." That's it. That's our strategy. Love people because God loves us. Start by loving God.

Now, I'm going to prophesy for a minute. I don't know that this is a prophecy. I'll tell you five years from now if it's right, if it was prophetic. I believe our best days are ahead of us, Riverside, and I want you to get this focus: In all the noise, just get people into the kingdom. Get people into Jesus. You bring them to Jesus, he will clean them up. He will start to deal with all of the bigotries and prejudices and all the things that are out of whack in our own hearts. You love God. You keep dying to your own agenda, and watch what God will do. Watch how he just creates Lazaruses -- he just raises the

dead all around you. And the testimonies of those individuals just fill the place, and God is glorified. Jesus is exalted and he keeps drawing people unto himself. Amen? Let's do it. Let's do it together. Amen.