

# Look for the Unexpected

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Good morning. It's nice to see the sunshine this morning in spite of the 27 degrees. This morning's readings are from Psalm 118 verses 1 through 2 and 19 to 29 and from the book of Matthew chapter 21 verses 1 through 11. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good his love endures forever. Let Israel say his love endures forever. Open for me the gates of the righteous.

I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter. I will give thanks for you answered me. You have become my salvation. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The Lord has done this and it is marvelous in our eyes.

The Lord has done it this very day. Let us rejoice today and be glad. Lord save us. Lord grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you.

The Lord is God and he has made his life shine on us. With bows in hand join the festal procession up to the horns of the altar. You are my God and I will praise you. You are my God and I will exalt you.

Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever. And now from Matthew. When they neared Jerusalem having arrived at Bethpage on Mount Olives, Jesus sent two disciples with these instructions. Go over to the village across from you. You'll find a donkey tethered there, her colt with her. Untie her and bring her, bring them to me. If when anyone asks what you're doing, say the master needs them. He will send them with you. This is the full story of what was sketched earlier by the prophet.

[ 2 : 0 6 ] Tell Zion's daughter, look, your king's on his way, poised and ready, mounted on a donkey, on a colt full of a pack animal. The disciples went and did exactly what Jesus told them to do. They led the donkey and colt out, laid some of their clothes on them, and Jesus mounted. Nearly all the people in the crowd threw their garments down on the road, giving him a royal welcome. Others cut branches from the trees and threw them down as a welcome mat. Crowds went ahead and crowds followed, all of them calling out, Hosanna to David's son. Blessed is he who comes in God's name. Hosanna in the highest heaven.

As he made his entrance into Jerusalem, the whole city was shaken. Unnerved, the people were asking, what's going on here? Who is this? The prayed crowd answered, this is the prophet Jesus, the one from Nazareth in Galilee. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The Bills make me wanna shout. Kick your heels up and shout. Throw your hands up and shout. Throw your head back and shout. Come on now, the Bills are making it happen now.

Stand up now, come on now. Stand up now, come on and shout. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Say you will. Shout it right now, baby. Say you will. Come on, come on. Say you will. Come on and shout. Say you will. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Buffalo's happening now. We're on the moon now. The Bills are happening now. They're making it happen now. We've got the spirit. A lot of spirit, yeah. We've got the spirit. Just watch it happen now.

[ 3 : 59 ] Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, let's go Buffalo. Let's go Buffalo. Let's go Buffalo. Let's go Buffalo. The Bills make me wanna shout.

I saw some of you reacting to that, right? We love sports. We love football here in Buffalo. We love our Bills. We love our Sabres. We love our Bandits.

We love them when they win. We cheer them on. We wear our team colors. We spend so much on our excitement for our sports teams.

Such huge reactions to such a little thing. So this week in our sermon series, Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places, we're focused on looking for the unexpected.

Think about the disciples must have been excited. That entrance to Jerusalem, the big splash that they were planning on making.

[ 5 : 08 ] And then Jesus asked them for a donkey. His love demonstrates peace, showing people the kingdom of heaven.

Looking for love. So keep your eyes out for it, for unexpected places. Today is the beginning of Passion Week. It's the day we celebrate the anniversary of Jesus' triumphant parade into Jerusalem.

What happened 2,000 years ago, this upcoming week, changed everything. It changed all of history, all of creation. It changed the very present and eternal destiny of all humankind.

When our Lord Jesus Christ gave his life as a ransom and a sacrificial love offering for us, it radically transformed everything. Jesus made a way through his death and resurrection for every person born on our earth to be reborn from above and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus made a way for us to experience human life in a whole new way, cleansed and purified by the Holy Spirit. Today we can live a life filled with the Holy Spirit and a life that can be lived out through that same Spirit.

[ 6 : 31 ] This is the week that Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, King David, Isaiah, and all of the prophets looked forward to in anticipation. This was the week that all of heaven had been looking forward to.

This is the week that Jesus would begin the final steps of his mission here on earth. Which, of course, brings us back to today. It's Palm Sunday.

The anniversary of the day that Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey as scores of followers surrounded him with praise and prophecies and prayers and palm branches.

There's something mystical and special about the palm tree that appealed to the ancient people's spirituality. They found Egyptian coffins with palm tree images carved on them to symbolize the passage of the inhabitant going from this life into the afterlife.

It's a time to remember the welcoming of Jesus into our hearts and our willingness to follow him. To be excited about having Christ in our life.

[ 7 : 44 ] To be excited about his unexpected love. Where do you find your excitement? I would hope that it's something bigger, better, more important than sports or politics or things.

I would hope that you would find that kind of excitement in your faith, in your relationship with God, in your salvation through Jesus. Don't you think that we ought to have some kind of excitement or enthusiasm in our lives simply because we know God?

Maybe we don't talk about our passion for Christ because we don't live as passionately for Christ or that we're worried about what others might say or what they might think.

Maybe we even doubt that God really loves us. Living passionately for Jesus isn't a matter of singing with enthusiasm, although it helps.

Wearing t-shirts with Christian slogans or flooding our Facebook pages with inspirational quotes. It's a matter of being transformed in the way that we think, that we speak and act because we have received the most amazing gift of all.

[ 8 : 58 ] We have received Jesus and God's love. And when you get Jesus, don't you want more and more of Jesus? So what do we do to get more of Jesus?

We pursue him. And the more you pursue him, the more you tell others about Jesus. That's living a life of passion and excitement. So what if we took all of that excitement we have after a Bills win?

What if we took that and served the world and showed the world exactly what God means to us? We heard in the Cairo's video the difference that love made to that inmate.

What if we went out and did that to the whole world? What if we shared God's unconditional love with everyone that we met? All of the hate that's happening in the world, what if we showered people?

What if we were the ones to make the difference to reach out? So where's your excitement? Where's your passion? How would you describe your desire to know God more and more?

[ 10 : 11 ] If I met you not in church, how would I know? God's gift of love has been given to us freely and unconditionally. He loves us so much that even though we are so sinful, he sent his only son, Jesus Christ, to save us.

To show us that unexpected, unconditional love that we should be at least as excited about as we are about the Bills. In Ephesians chapter 2 verses 4 through 10, we hear, But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions.

It is by grace you have been saved. It is by grace you have been saved, and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms of Christ Jesus. In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace and love, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves. This is the gift of God. Not by work so that no one can boast, for we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

It's in this scripture that we hear that grace and love is something that we don't deserve. God's gift of love has been given to us so freely.

[ 11 : 42 ] Several years ago I was listening to a podcast, and in it was an interview with John Piper, and he's a Baptist theologian. He said, Now having seen and read all the texts, I broadened my understanding of love as the Bible uses the term.

Now I say, it appears that the word love in Paul's use not only refers to God's character trait, or disposition, or inclination to treat people better than we deserve, but it also refers to the action, or the power, or the influence, or the force of this disposition, which produces real, practical outcome in people's lives, like being sufficient for good deeds, or enduring the thorn in the flesh, or working harder than everyone else.

I really liked that thought. It shows that not only does God show us love and grace despite our sin, but it shows that influence that God's love has in our lives.

I have a friend who's a professor at Canisius in the theology department, and he shared a story several years ago, and it made a real impact on me, a visual representation of God's love and grace.

So there was a certain professor of religion named Dr. Christensen who taught at a small college in the western United States. Dr. Christensen taught the required survey course in Christianity at this popular institution, and every student was required to take this course in his or her freshman year, regardless of their major.

[ 13 : 39 ] Although Dr. Christensen tried hard to communicate the essence of the gospel in his class, he found that most of his students looked upon the course as nothing but required drudgery.

Despite his best efforts, most students refused to take Christianity seriously. One particular year, Dr. Christensen had a special student named Steve.

Steve was only a freshman, but was studying with the intent of going on to seminary to enter the ministry. He was popular, he was well-liked, he was imposing physical specimen.

He was the starting center on the school's football team, and was also the best student in the professor's class. One day, Dr. Christensen asked Steve to stay after class so he could talk with him.

And he asked Steve, Steve, how many push-ups can you do? And Steve answered, I do about 200 every night. 200, that's pretty good, Steve, Dr. Christensen said.

[ 14 : 39 ] Do you think you could do 300? Steve replied, I don't know, I've never done 300 at a time. Well, do you think you could, asked Dr. Christensen. I can try, said Steve.

Can you do 300 in sets of 10? I have a class project in mind, and I need you to do about 300 push-ups in sets of 10 for this to work.

Can you do it? I need you to tell me that you can do it, said the professor. Steve thought and said, I think I can. Yeah, I can do it.

Dr. Christensen said, Good. I need you to do it on this Friday, and let me explain to you what I have in mind. So Friday came, and Steve got to class early and sat in the front of the room, and when class started, the professor pulled out a box of donuts.

These were not my donut holes. These were the fancy, big kind with creamy centers and frosting swirls, and everyone was pretty excited that it was Friday, and it was the last class of the day, and they were going to get an early start on the weekend with a party in Dr. Christensen's class.

[ 15 : 53 ] And Dr. Christensen walked to the first person in the row and said, Maddie, would you like a donut? And Maddie took a donut.

And he went to Eva and said, Eva, would you like a donut? And Eva took a donut. Tyler, would you like a donut? And Dr. Christensen continued to go on through the aisles, asking people if they want donuts.

Until he got to Kelly. Kelly, would you like a donut? And Kelly said no. And Dr. Christensen took a donut and put it on the desk in front of Kelly.

Because after each one of these students, before they received their donuts, Steve had to do 10 push-ups for each of them. So when Maddie took her donut, Steve jumped from his desk on the floor and did his 10 push-ups and went back and sat down, and Eva got her donut and he jumped and did 10 push-ups and went back.

And Tyler and Dan and even though Kelly didn't want a donut, Steve did 10 push-ups for her. And so it went down the aisles and Dr. Christensen got to a student named Scott.

[ 17 : 26 ] And Scott was on the basketball team and was in as good condition as Steve and he was popular. And when the professor said to him, Scott, do you want a donut? Scott's reply was, I can do my own push-ups.

And Dr. Christensen said, no, Steve has to do them. And Scott said, well, I don't want one then. Dr. Christensen shrugged and turned to Steve and said, Steve, will you do 10 push-ups so Scott can have a donut that he doesn't want?

And with perfect obedience, Steve started to do 10 push-ups. Scott said, hey, I didn't want one. Dr. Christensen said, this is my classroom, my class, my desks, and these are my donuts.

Just leave it on the desk if you don't want it. And he put that donut on Scott's desk. Now by this time, Steve had begun and slowed down a little. He stayed on the floor in between the sets because it took so much effort to be getting up and down.

And there's perspiration coming from around his brow. Dr. Christensen now started on the third row. And the students were starting to get a little angry. Dr. Christensen asked Jenny, Jenny, do you want a donut?

[ 18 : 46 ] Certainly Jenny said, no. And Dr. Christensen asked, Steve, Steve, will you do 10 more push-ups? So Jenny can have a donut that she doesn't want. Steve did 10 and Jenny got her donut.

By now, a growing sense of uneasiness had filled the room. The students were beginning to say no. And there were all of these uneaten donuts on the desk. Steve also really had to put forth a lot of extra effort to get these push-ups done for each donut.

There began to be a small pool of sweat on the floor beneath his face, his arms and his brow were beginning to get red because of the physical effort involved. Dr. Christensen then started down the fourth row.

During his class, however, some students from other classes had wandered in and sat down on the ledge along the radiators that ran down the sides of the room. And when the professor realized this and counted, he saw there were now 34 students in the room.

He started to worry if Steve was going to be able to make it. Dr. Christensen went on to the next person and the next and the next and near the end of that row, Steve was having a really rough time and it was taking him so much longer to do each set.

[ 20 : 08 ] A few moments later, Jason, a recent transfer student, came into the room and was about to come actually into the room when all the students yelled in one voice, no!

Don't come in! Stay out! Jason didn't know what was going on. Steve picked up his head and said, no. Let him come in.

Professor Christensen said, you realize that if Jason comes in, you will have to do 10 push-ups for him. Steve said, yes, let him come in and give him a donut. Dr. Christensen said, okay, Steve, I'll let you get Jason's out of the way right now.

Jason, do you want a donut? Jason, new to the room, hardly knew what was going on. Sure, he said, give me a donut. Steve, will you do 10 push-ups so that Jason can have a donut?

And Steve did those 10 push-ups very, very slowly and with great effort. Jason, bewildered, was handed a donut and he sat down.

[ 21 : 12 ] Dr. Christensen finished the fourth row and started on those visitors seated by the heaters. Steve's arms were now shaking with each push-up in a struggle to lift himself up against the force of gravity.

Sweat was profusely dropping off of his face and by this time, there was no sound in the room except for his heavy breathing and there was not a dry eye in the room.

The very last two students in the room were two young women, both cheerleaders. Dr. Christensen went to Linda, the second to last, and asked, Linda, do you want a donut?

Linda said, very sadly, no thank you. Professor Christensen quietly asked Steve, will you do 10 push-ups so that Linda can have a donut she doesn't want? Grunting from the effort, Steve did 10 very slow push-ups for Linda.

Then Dr. Christensen turned to the last girl, Susan. Susan, do you want a donut? Susan, with tears flowing down her face, began to cry. Dr. Christensen, why can't I help him?

[ 22 : 20 ] Dr. Christensen, with tears of his own, said Steve has to do it alone. I have given him this task and he is in charge of seeing that everyone has an opportunity for a donut, whether they want it or not.

When I decided to have this party this last day for class, I looked at my grade book. Steve is the only student with the perfect grade. Everyone else has failed a test, skipped class, or offered me inferior work.

Steve told me that when a player messes up in football practice, he has to do push-ups. I told Steve that none of you could come to my party unless he paid the price by doing your push-ups.

He and I made a deal for your sakes. Steve, will you do 10 push-ups so Susan can have a donut? As Steve very slowly finished his last push-up with the understanding that he had accomplished all that was required of him, having done 350 push-ups, his arms buckled beneath him and he fell to the floor.

Dr. Christensen turned to the room and said, and so it was that our Savior, Jesus Christ, on the cross, pled to the Father, into my hands I commend my spirit.

[ 23 : 40 ] With the understanding that he had done everything that was required of him, he yielded up his life. There were also observers that day who, like some of us in this room, chose to refuse the free gift.

Two students helped Steve off the floor into a seat. He was physically exhausted but wearing a thin smile. Well done, good and faithful servant, said the professor, adding, not all sermons are preached in words.

Turning to his class, the professor said, my wish is that you might understand and fully comprehend all the riches of love, grace, and mercy that have been given to you through the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ for all, now, and forever.

Whether or not we choose to accept his gift for us, the price has been paid. Wouldn't you be foolish and ungrateful to leave it lying on the desk? So Jesus paid that price for our sins and God gives us that love freely.

There's nothing that we can do to choose or lose that love. God saves us because we're not able to save ourselves. John Wesley, in his sermon entitled The Scripture Way of Salvation speaks to the expression of God's love and grace.

[ 25 : 06 ] Wesley insisted that the love of God is freely available to all. To accept that is to enter into a whole new existence. It's an identity we can never earn, nor can it be taken from us.

We're all becoming who God wants us to be. We are being made holy. And as that Holy Spirit fills our lives with love for others, we live differently.

When we give our hearts to God, we reflect that love and our lives will be changed as well as the lives of those we meet. There's nothing we can do to earn that love.

It's freely given just like those donuts. even when we don't know that it's there. It's further evidence that God meets us exactly where we are and shows us where we need to be.

Wouldn't it be foolish not to accept his gift, his love, and look for those unexpected loves in our lives? Not only how we have love, but how can we show that love to others in unexpected ways?

[ 26 : 16 ] Please pray with me. Almighty and eternal God, in your tender love towards humanity, you've sent your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ, to take on himself, our flesh, and to suffer death on the cross.

Grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility and also be made partakers of his resurrection. Through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen. So as you're leaving today, you may stop and you may accept your donut in the back of church. So this is the holiest of weeks in our liturgical year.

We've all felt that longing of love, that loss of love. And we know that to love greatly is to risk deep pain. And yet, we were made for that love.

It's what gives our life meaning. It's what gives us purpose. So we need to begin our journey of reflection this week, looking for the love that looks for us. We do have some mission opportunities to carry out that love.

[ 27 : 28 ] So we still have one fish fry left. Whether you can help or you can come eat, we would love to see you. Next week, we will also, on Easter, there will be a coffee hour as well as the 16th.

So we hope that you stop in and everybody can see each other. For Holy Week, we have a service Monday, Thursday, Good Friday, and then Saturday and Sunday.

So we hope to see you all here. And we hope that you have a blessed and a wonderful week. So go now with the love of Jesus Christ. Go with the blessing of the Holy Father.

And may the Holy Spirit move you this week so that you can go out and share that unexpected love with everyone. Amen.