

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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I See You

Joshua Symonette

Pastor Mark: Well, welcome to all seven campuses as well as our extended family online. This weekend we continue our series *Unsung*. We will do that in just a moment with Pastor Joshua. I want to make an announcement. I've been waiting to make this announcement for 20 years. 20 years ago, we took a staff retreat to the city of Baltimore and I don't remember much about it, long time ago, NCC, probably a hundred people and change one church, one campus, but what I do remember is God planting a seed in our spirit that someday we need to plant a church in Baltimore. Well, listen, that dream is about to become reality. Yeah, that's, go ahead, that's fine, (clapping).

Would you like to hear a little bit more though? Okay. So seven years ago we hire people, but God calls people and God gave us a tremendous gift as he called Joshua and Erica Symonette to come and serve as our campus pastor at our Kingstown campus. Earlier this year, the Lord began stirring their spirits and they sensed that God was calling them to step out in faith and to church plant in Baltimore and I could not be more excited. Listen, I know from personal experience, church planting is scary. It can be a little lonely. But here's the deal, they are not leaving we are sending, we are a sending church. We are going to be in their corner financially. And here's what's exciting to me. God is gonna tap some of you on the shoulder and you're going to feel that call to go with and be a part of this church plant.

And so please hear this, Pastor Joshua will continue to serve as our campus pastor at Kingstown through the remainder of 2019 and then he'll continue to be a part of our teaching team indefinitely. So it's kind of a double blessing. Stay tuned for that, there is a series coming. But listen, I love Pastor Joshua like a brother and he is someone that challenges my faith and so I just want to take a moment. I want us, we'll commission in 2020, but I want us to take a moment to just honor him as he comes and shares the word this week.

Pastor Joshua: Just want to say that I'll share a little bit more in the mission series about what we'll be doing in Baltimore. And I am only just changing my address a few miles North and shifting my assignment just a little bit, but this is still home. NCC is family, so I'm not really going anywhere, so y'all get used to it.

If you've got a Bible, will you meet me in Luke chapter number five we'll get there in just a moment. There was a show that I used to watch that actually still comes on a network called TV One and the name of the show is called '*Unsung*'. And the premise of the show '*Unsung*' was just basically to celebrate the lives of trailblazing musicians whose full stories and journeys have not been explored yet. Typically RnB, Hip Hop and jazz and blues artists were with the artists that they were chronicling. And I mean, you know just some groups back in the day, some of you may know them, some of you may not, but groups like Jagged Edge that was...Jagged Edge was real hot when I was back in the day. And then a group called Digable Planets. I'm cool like that. I'm cool like that. Some of y'all might know that. And then, hey, you might've heard this name

Blues Legend, B. B. King, {singing} "the thrill is gone". I'm gonna stop right there. But these are like artists and groups that I listened to back in the day. Maybe some of you would have listened to it and maybe kind of forgotten about. And these are also people who maybe some felt like never really got the due that they deserve.

Now throughout history and our everyday life this is commonplace we see this kind of stuff happen all the time. You have the one hit wonders and then you have the multiple Grammy award winners that are around seemingly forever. Then you got the on stage talent and then you've got, you know, the behind the scenes folks that we would never really know. You've got paid staff, you've got volunteer staff, you got a head coach that constantly gets all of the accolades and the blame but then there are assistant coaches as well. You got great school teachers, you've got tenured professors. And then I was even thinking about things like orchestra. When you think about an orchestra, you think about strings, right? You don't think about the tuba because there's only one of them. Right? But I think the reason that we tend to categorize this way, it has to do with where and to whom and how we place value. Now before you think I was valuing or devaluing any of those examples that I just mentioned those were just examples of juxtaposition. But none of the people in any of those types of roles are better or more valued than the other. But I think we tend to speak more highly or maybe even more critical of people based on their roles or their status in life.

So we've been in this six part series called "Unsung" where we are talking about people in scripture who really haven't gotten the recognition maybe that they deserve, but we maybe read right past them or maybe there are names that we've heard of and completely forgotten about. They're overlooked and undervalued, but there are things that we can learn from their lives.

This weekend though, I want to shine the light in just a little bit of a different direction. Now I read a lot and I've read a lot of research and so when you're reading research usually at the beginning of the research paper or the article, there are terms or there are definitions that are given that are defined so that they, the audience and the writer can be on the same page when they start mentioning these terms. And so just for, for the sake of those who are maybe just joining us in this series or as you've been following on, I just want to make sure that we are on the same page about what it means to be unsung.

Now, I'm not presenting research, but according to Merriam Webster dictionary unsung simply means not celebrated or praised assuming that there is an argument for celebration or praise to begin with. As I mentioned earlier, unsung or not is really about value. And the question I began to ask myself as I was preparing for this message is how can you celebrate praise or value what you don't see? And the reason I was asking that is because I believe that there are categories of unsung.

- I think you have the unheralded. Those would be maybe names you've kind of heard of or you may be forgotten about or a good segment of society would know, but they just haven't maybe gotten their due.
- But then you have the unknowns and they may be known to just a small, small group of people, but they're virtually unknown.

- And then I think to the furthest extreme, you have the unseen people who just basically don't even exist or we just look right pass.

What I'm getting at is what we see and what we don't see is an indicator of value to us. We pay and give attention to what's important to us or what has value, right? Well, this is a critical point that I think plays itself out in our lives every single day. Jesus, throughout the Gospels I think is trying to train or retrain how we see, I think the who, when, what, where, how and to whom we celebrate and give praise and give value to is what Jesus is often shining the light on.

And so this weekend as we go to Luke chapter number five I pick up the baton from Pastor Heather on last weekend who was talking about Barnabas. One of my favorite miracles is Luke chapter five. It's a man who is nameless that Jesus encounters. And I also want you to know that one of the synonyms for unsung is nameless. So Jesus encounters this nameless man, and not only is he nameless, but he's also known by his condition. So let's zoom in on verse 12 of Luke chapter number five. You can follow along with me. If you don't have a Bible, we'll have the words on the screen.

¹² While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."

¹³ Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" And immediately the leprosy left him.

¹⁴ Then Jesus ordered him, "Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them."

This weekend I want to just tag this message with a simple subject that I think will make sense as we go along, "I See You". "I See You". There's so many things that we can unpack in just these few verses that we just read and I think we could just easily simplify this and say, Oh, well, this is just Jesus healing a man with leprosy, and that is true, but I think Jesus is trying to demonstrate something for two different audiences this weekend that I want to highlight.

- Audience number one I would characterize as the enfranchised or the accredited. I think we can simplify that audience by saying it is a privileged audience. Now, I know that term privilege is kind of a buzz word in our culture right now, makes some of us feel a little bit uncomfortable but, I need you to understand I'm not talking about white privilege. I'm not talking about black privilege, which Charlamagne tha God bestselling author in Breakfast Club, host has written about, I'm not talking about that. When I talk about privilege, I'm just simply talking about for whatever reason you don't have to deal with or navigate certain things in your life for whatever reason. All right.
- The second group I think is the disenfranchised or the discredited group. I think I would just characterize that group by saying this is a persecuted group or a group that is looked down upon. And when I use the word persecuted, I'm not talking about physical persecution or torment per se. I'm really talking about a psychological and mental

persecution. I'm talking about people who are looked down upon or who are stigmatized, people who are not even seen in our culture.

But before we dive into what I think Jesus is saying to those two different audiences, I want to help you understand what is actually going on with this man, this nameless man and his condition in Luke five He has a condition called leprosy, which is a skin disorder. And when they use the term leprosy in scripture, it was a variety of different things going on with the skin that was not very pleasing at all. Not things or people you wouldn't necessarily want to be engaged with because of what they had going on health wise. It was seen as a providential disease, meaning that it was from God and you had to live outside of the camp away from everybody else. We see in the Old Testament in Numbers, chapter five Moses is actually cleansing the camp and moving people out who are what he deemed unclean. So this was an imposed segregation. Now you could live in an open village, but you could not live within a city that had a wall around it because you are ceremonially unclean. Now, this often meant that you could only be around people who had a similar condition as you or who are also outcast. That's why we see in Luke 17 that there are 10 lepers crying out to Jesus from a distance because they knew the rules. They knew that you couldn't engage in close proximity. They knew that they couldn't get close or they weren't supposed to get close to Jesus, so they just yelled out to him.

The lepers also had to cover themselves with, with special types of clothing. They also had to cover their beard if they had one, and they had to walk around warning others in their proximity by saying "unclean", "unclean". This is how they had to announce themselves. This also meant that they weren't allowed to have conversation or engagement with people around them because in this particular culture in the Middle Eastern culture to greet or engage usually included some level of embrace or touching or maybe even a kiss. So obviously if you are a leper, you were an outcast in society and you had a loss of basic privileges, you did not have equal value. Now, this was not uncommon in the culture because there were plenty of things that would make you an outcast in the society.

And here's the thing, in modern culture, sadly, we don't have to imagine what this is like because it still exists today. Even though we have advances in equality, we still have devaluing and dehumanization and discriminating and even imposed segregation, including things like shaming and canceling, which are common practices for what I call throwing people away. And we're throwing people away.

- One because they have a difference about them. Sometimes it's not a fault of their own
- Or two, there's a genuine mistake or there's some level of ignorance that has been displayed.

Those are people that we reshuffled, reassigned value to based on what we think works for us or what we think is right or wrong. And we only embrace what's comfortable, what's common and what's convenient. Why? Because messiness is not something that we really want to deal with.

But Jesus, he shows up in the Gospels and I love the way that he shows up because he is totally disrupting the cultural norms. He's breaking all the rules including to whom value is given. And

consistently throughout the Gospels he begins teaching the value system of what he calls the kingdom of heaven and in this value system he's often elevating the least likely people.

Let me just give you a few examples. If you go back to the beginning of the Gospels in Matthew five, this is where we have the Sermon on the Mount on of Jesus famous discourse and sermons and there's a little repeated phrase in there. He says, 'you have heard it said', 'but I tell you', and then he goes on to talk about these different things.

The first example I'll give you; He says, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Now listen, I know I'm a pastor and I was supposed to be good with all this. I'm still working on that one, still working on that one sometimes because it's hard to love people sometimes that are friends with you that are close to you, let alone enemies and then pray for them. That's a tough one. But, Jesus doesn't make it any easier. He goes on and says, you have heard it said, but I tell you, if anyone slaps you turn and give them the other cheek. Really, Jesus? I mean I'm not even gonna comment on that cause I know how y'all feel about that one. And then he says you have heard it said but I'll tell you if anyone wants to sue for your shirt, give your coat too. Why? I'm fighting it in court. Right? That's typically how we are and no one would tell you or look down upon you if you reacted that way. In this encounter with this nameless leper, Jesus is doing exactly what he had been preaching. He's disrupting the current value system even related to how we think about and how we ascribe value.

Let's just drill down on this book for just a minute. I mentioned earlier that I think what Jesus is doing, he is demonstrating two to two different audiences, and this is not in any particular order or sequential value, but the first audience I'm just going to say is the privilege audience, this audience has the luxury of not dealing with issues like this. And I think the only point that Jesus is trying to make to this audience, to this privileged group who doesn't, they don't have to worry about dealing with this. He's saying we need to see and touch the unseen, the outcasts and the marginalize.

Listen, you have to understand that it was socially acceptable for Jesus to ignore this man. It was socially acceptable for him to not touch this man and understand that Jesus has the power to heal him without even touching him. So technically to touch him is to make himself unclean. This is why the man said to Jesus, if you are willing to heal me, the man understood that he was breaking the rules with the closest of proximity in coming to Jesus. It says that he fell on his knees in front of Jesus and begged. He is already too close. He's breaking the rules and he understand, but Jesus understood that he was also breaking the rules by responding the way that he responded and he takes it a step further and he touches the man. This is a demonstration of vulnerability and compassion. It's the Jesus way.

You know, this is one of the reasons why at National Community Church, we have a group, a small group called "The Living Room". And The Living Room is a small group for our homeless brothers and sisters. No doubt a community among us that is unseen, no doubt, a community that we ignore, no doubt, a community that we have ascribed little to no value to. But the Jesus way says they have value also. So we created space for them to be a community, not just with each other, but with us as well. It's the Jesus way. It's also the reason why we sent a small team down to the US Mexico border. As we talk about these, these immigration issues and we're on

this side of it, or we're on that side. No, we went down to see, to understand, to talk to, to get to know, to value the people who are going through this crisis. Yes, we could send aid or we could send support or we could read a couple of stories, but the Jesus way say no, we go and we get in engaged.

It's the reason why I'm going to Baltimore, Maryland, because I believe that there are under-resourced and undervalued communities and there are hard places in our country. We talk about unreached people groups from a missional standpoint, but we have unreached people groups' right here in our country. Somebody has got to go into these hard places and build relationships and see the value in the people in the community because the Gospel is for them too.

This, this reminds me of a story that we talked about a few weeks ago among NCC'ers our brother Vondel Bethum (sp?) some people who've been around NCC for a while would, would know the name Vondel. And Vondel he's a man who had addiction in his past. He was homeless and one day he found coffee and donuts at Union Station when we had a location at Union Station. And he came and got his coffee donuts and went and turned right back around and showed up the next week and say, 'Oh man, they're doing this again'. And so he stood in line, he was waiting and there was a woman who engaged him by the name of Amy Foley. And Amy said, well, won't you come on in and have a seat? She invited him in and said, 'Hey, you might, you might enjoy this'. And so that started a catalyst of Vondel getting involved in and establishing community. Vondel even went on a mission's trip while he was still homeless. He began serving and he started to develop community.

And then there was another NCC'er, our former small group pastor Will Johnston and his wife realized that Vondel didn't have a place to stay. And so they had a nice a row home and three bedrooms and so they decided that they were gonna invite Vondel to come live with them. And they didn't just invite them to come there, they gave him a key and said, this is your house too. See Amy and the Johnstons and many others in our NCC community, they went beyond the coffee and they went beyond the donuts and they went beyond the safety of what was proper or what was accepted and they engaged Vondel. They touched his life and transformation happen as a result of it.

And we chronicle the story in a quote that Vondel said when we talked to him or we filmed his story, he said, when I was homeless, I look forward to the people coming to handout sandwiches on Sundays, now I'm a part of that. I want to give sandwiches, advice and hope and that's exactly what Vondel began to do. He eventually moved down to North Carolina and got him a house and became a deacon at a church and he continued to help people. But unfortunately, he lost his life a few weeks ago at the hands of someone he was trying to help.

This is the reality that we don't like to talk about. This is the reality that we sometimes shy away from in the church, in our preaching and teaching. But here's the thing, engaging with the outcast in our society is cool until it's unsafe and when it gets unsafe and a little unpredictable, then it gets a little shaky for us. But here's the thing, many have gone before us and have sacrificed much on mission for Jesus, and it makes sense because Jesus has sacrificed all to be on mission for us. And here's the thing, not just to save us, but to be with us. That's why his name is Emmanuel, which means God with us.

Now, here's the thing. I'm not suggesting to us that we need to be or do what the Johnstons did. I'm not suggesting that maybe if God is tapped you to do that, that's fine. I'm also not suggesting that we need to go live among the poor like Mother Teresa. But I am saying to be a Jesus follower is to see the unseen, to pronounce blessing over them and to touch them, not just to encourage them but to engage them.

The second audience that I think Jesus is talking to is the persecuted audience. This is the group that is downcast. They're carriers of certain stigmas that have been placed on them. And the reason that this is one of my favorite miracles is Jesus is compassion. This man is nameless and he's basically a throwaway. But here's the one point that I think Jesus is making to this audience. He is saying to anyone among us, those who are at any of our campuses, those who are watching us online, those who are listening via podcast, anywhere you are in the world, here is the the only point that Jesus is making. He wants to touch you and he sees you though your parents may have disowned you, friends have talked about you and turned on you. Though you may have a circumstance that you're dealing with or a situation, regardless of how that may have come about, though you may be looked down upon and not embraced and left alone. Jesus is saying, I see you right in your current situation and there is nothing about you that would prevent me from touching you. There's nothing going on with you that would prevent me from being in relationship with you. I don't care about the label that has been placed on you because you bear the image of God. And when I see you, I see him. Listen, if we follow the life of Jesus closely, this is just what he did, this is like standard Jesus. I mean, he placed emphasis on the unsung and those who are unseen, the least of these, the least likely, let me just show you a couple of other examples.

A guy by the name of Zacchaeus, he was a tax collector. Nobody liked tax collectors, I still don't think we like tax collectors. Well the tax collectors, they stole money, some of y'all still might think they're stealing money, but Zacchaeus climbed a tree one day because he was trying to see Jesus and Jesus notice him, turned around and says, Zacchaeus, I see you and not only do I see you, come on, let's go to your place and let's eat., let's hang out. That's counter to what you were supposed to do.

Then I give you another, there was a woman caught in the act of adultery and she's going to be stoned and Jesus shows up, stands in between her and those who are going to stone her, her accusers. And he basically says, I see you and not only do I see you, I'm here to protect you.

And then Jesus, he is on this huge mission; he's going to start this thing called the church. You know, he's got a strategic plan and he goes and recruits 12 guys. 12 guys you wouldn't recruit if you're starting a business. But you just need to go and just look at the history just look at the qualification, just not qualified at all. But these are the 12 people that Jesus picks and he not only says, I see you, but guess what? I'm still going to love you even though you're going to betray me, even though you're going to fall short, even though I'm gonna wish at times I hadn't picked you, but I'm still going to be there for... I see you.

This is not just isolated to Jesus' time. There's been a wave, an impact throughout history, and I love how John Ortberg chronicles this in his book called, 'Who Is This Man?' He gives these

examples of how Jesus and what he did just literally turned history around and the common things that we do now we can trace back to what Jesus did.

One of those examples he gave is with children. Here's the thing, it was not uncommon to literally throw children away back in the day. I mean literally like trash. If they were the wrong sex, they had a birth defect or they had a disease or some sort of unwanted condition, literally thrown on the trash heap. Children had little to no value, but if we look at Matthew 18 when the disciples are trying to figure out, yo, how are they going to be great? Which one of us is going to be great? Which one of is going to have the most followers? I mean, they ain't even have Twitter and Instagram and they're still trying to get followers, so this ain't just started happening. But the disciples are trying to figure out who's going to be great, you know what Jesus did? He pulled a little child in front of them and says, y'all want to be great? This is the example right here, this is the example of greatness, right here? Jesus shined a light on the undervalued, on the unseen to show them this is what it means to be. Nobody would have done that because they didn't even have value in the culture. Now, some of the most precious things to us are our children till they started tearing up stuff and not eating the vegetables, but we still love them.

Jesus said, you need to be like this. And the reason why Jesus continued to do this is because Jesus, he's in the unsung business. That's the business that he's in. No matter who you are, what you've done, or what you haven't done, what you have, what you don't have, who you are, what your name is, what your name isn't. Jesus is saying, I not only see you, but I want to touch your life.

Let me see if I can close with this. If you've ever studied or taken a psychology class, no doubt you've heard of Alfred Adler. He is a notable, Austrian physician and psychotherapist and his work was really focused on nurturing feelings of belonging and the human need for significance. Now, I'm not necessarily an Adler apologist, but I do think Adler was right about significance because significance is connected to value and the purpose of this series 'Unsung' is to highlight the value of those considered undervalued and even those unseen because there's something to be gained from it. But here's the thing. Before Adler gained notoriety, highlighting the human need for significance Jesus was already teaching and demonstrating this to us. It doesn't matter your name, your agenda, your occupation, condition, socioeconomic status, none of those are factors of value in God's kingdom. This is in part why he interacted and hung out with the people he hung out with. He knew being with the unsung and the unseen in their current state was just as significant, if not more than in their delivered or healed state.

And here's the thing, Jesus knew, I love this part, right; Jesus knew that the nameless leper needed to feel his hand before he was healed. And the reason why is because this man needed to know that he needed, or he had value in his present state before he was healed. So Jesus loved him and was willing to touch him in his mess, in his unseen state before he was healed.

We are to touch. The Greek word is 'haptomai' to adhere to or to fasten oneself to. That's what to touch means, that's the Greek translation in the New Testament. That requires greater level of intentionality, maybe even discomfort and sometimes risks. But here's the thing, whether you're a Jesus follower or not and you're feeling unseen, maybe it's a relationship status, maybe I mean It could be you fill in the blank, it could be whatever. Here's the message for you. You're not your

condition, you're not your status and Jesus sees your value in your current state and he still wants to be with you.

And here's the thing, I don't only want to just tell you that this weekend and just leave it like that. I don't want to just pray for you this weekend and just leave it like that. We as a church, we want to live this out. So at whatever location you are, our campus pastors are available to engage with you and we've got a care team that is available to help you, to walk with you, to pray with you, to help you establish community. Because this is not about trying to get our lives right, this is not about trying to get to a certain place. No, this is about engaging right now where you are in your current state because you have value even now. And the message is simple. Jesus is saying to audience one, we need to see those who are unseen and to audience two if you feel unsung or unseen, Jesus sees you in your current state.

Let's pray. God, we thank you so much for who you are. Thank you for how much you love us. Thank you that you could have easily set the reset button when we messed things up way back in the Garden of Eden, but you loved us so much that you pursued us and the Bible itself is a story of your pursuit of your love for us. And then you went a step further. You sent Jesus to be with us and to touch our lives and to be among us. Help us, those of us who are Jesus followers, let that be what we are known for and for those of us who are not Jesus followers, but we're asking and we're questioning and we're pursuing God, help us to come into contact with you. Lead us in a way that you would have us to go. We thank you that you love us in our current state, right where we are. We have value in your eyes. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.