

**Message: “Smile Your Blessing Smile”**

**You’ve heard the expression, “what’s in a name?”** I never realized the depth of meaning in a name until I met Esperanza and her family. The Filipino naming tradition is like other cultures in that you have different names. There’s your given name, names that are titles and a birth order name. There are also nicknames, pet names and descriptive names.

**For example, our family knows us as Esperanza and Eric.** We’re also lola and lolo (grandma and grandpa), tita and tito (aunt and uncle), ate (sister) and kuya (brother), and Big E and small e. Many of you have similar names as well. All of them have meaning.

**We hear other kinds of names in life, too.** Some names are hurtful. Other people call us by those names. Maybe we’ve used some of these names. Sometimes we think of ourselves in harmful ways as well. You know the names I’m talking about.

**Criminal. Loser. Homeless. Other. Sinner. Alone. Depressed. Unloved. Unworthy.** We hold onto these, and other names. When we do, they continue to have the power to hurt us, change us and distort our relationship with God and the people around us who want to love us.

**Jesus knows these names, too.** He encountered them in his life. But he wasn’t defined by them because of the power of God’s love. And because of the shalom he brings through the power of his name. This leads us to our scripture for today.

**Matthew starts his letter by telling us who he’s writing about, Jesus.** He doesn’t tell us much about Jesus’ birth, compared to Luke. But Matthew does tell us Jesus’ names. First, we find out angels told Mary and Joseph the baby’s given name is Jesus (Luke 2:21, Matthew 1:21). Then Matthew goes to great lengths to tell us Jesus’ other names. They are important.

**Jesus has many names that are titles.** Matthew tells us he’s the son of Abraham, son of David, and Christ, the Greek word for Messiah, which means Anointed One. Matthew references the titles given by Isaiah: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal One, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Matthew is being clear. This child ticks all the boxes. There can

be no doubt. Jesus is the long-awaited Savior, come to save us! He is the son of God. Glory be to God! Amen.

**For me, Jesus’ most important name isn’t really a name.**

It’s a description. A descriptive name tells us something about the nature and value of a person. For example, being known as a giver is a signal of how people see some of us. Jesus has a special name. He is known as Emmanuel. Isaiah and Matthew both tell us what this name means: God is with us.

**Jesus is God incarnate.** Incarnate is a churchy word. What it means is the God of the universe is present in human form. That’s who Jesus is. The God who created all that was, is and will be chose to enter creation, empty of power and might to be with humanity. This is mysterious and supernatural, but it lies at the core of our beliefs.

**Why did God do so?** God came to save us. Jesus, God’s son, came with grace and mercy to restore our covenant relationship with God. It had become so broken by humanity, it needed to be restored. And so, as the offended party, God reached out to us to let us know God wants to be in relationship. God gave us another chance. God came to us, not in power and might, to change the world by force. God came to us in the way of shalom, to bring peace and prosperity to all people, everywhere.

**God came to us in a way showing God identifies with us.** God honors each of us and the relationship we have with God. Jesus not only came to save us; he shows us a new way to live.

**So how does this work?** Let’s turn to the final chapter of the “Field of Dreams” to see one illustration. In our last chapter, we encounter Dr. Archie Graham, played by Burt Lancaster, who showed us a new way to look at the second chance we get. Let’s not regret our lives, but remember the good we’ve done, the lives we’ve touched. We can look ahead to what is to come. Sacrificial love always comes with benefits.

**After Dr. Graham leaves, the players call it a day and begin to head back into the cornfield.** Shoeless Joe invites Terry to come with them. Ray gets angry because he isn’t invited. Terry calms him and promises to write about his experiences in the cornfield.

**As Mann disappears, Shoeless Joe smiles at Ray and says, “if you build it, he will come.”** This was the promise Ray heard at the beginning of his journey. Joe glances toward home plate, where the catcher removes his mask, revealing himself to be Ray’s father John as a younger man. Ray suddenly realizes his task wasn’t to ease Shoeless Joe’s pain, but the pain he and his father share. Ray realizes Shoeless Joe is the one who’s been speaking to him the whole time. The distance he’s traveled is to this moment. This is *their* second chance.

**Ray introduces his family to his father, without referring to him as his father.** His Dad never met them. Annie figures it out. Ray and John talk, finally getting the chance they didn’t have in life. As John begins to leave, Ray calls him as Dad and asks him if he wants to have a catch. John happily accepts and in the distance hundreds of cars are seen approaching the field, the promise the people will come.

**We can hold onto hurts and pains for years, decades, even a lifetime.** We can get twisted and lose sight of the path of peace. It’s easy to fall into a fight or flight way of living. But it comes with a cost. Physical, mental and emotional stress all weigh on our soul. We experience these symptoms as trauma. Sadly, they don’t just affect us. They affect our family and friends as well. Unresolved hurts can change us, so we end up living half a life because of fear. Living a life of peace means changing the way we are and how we live. But we need help to do so. Fortunately, God gives us a gift to make it possible.

**To save us from life without joy, hope, love and peace, God gave us the greatest gift of all: Jesus.** God didn’t close shop and start over. It was certainly in God’s power to do so. But this isn’t the way love works. God is love. God loves us before we even know what love is. So God chose to do something so amazing, so wonderful and so mind-boggling we must share it.

**God came to be with us.** And so, Jesus, the Christ-child, was born in a manger. Jesus came to give all of creation another chance. God’s act of sacrificial love changed the course of eternity. The spiritual forces of darkness and evil can’t win. No matter what calamity we may face as a people, as a community, as neighbors, as a family, God is with us.

**God loves us so much, God took the ultimate chance** so we might have a second chance, third chance, fourth chance ... you get where this is going, right? A heart of forgiveness doesn't count. A God of mercy forgets the past. A Mighty Counselor listens, carefully and deeply, to every word and thought we utter (and those we can't). We can do the same for others, offering forgiveness and another chance, loving others and caring for them.

**God didn't come with full power and majesty then because that wasn't what we needed.** We needed Jesus as a child, vulnerable, needing love and care in the same way we do. This gives power to Jesus' invitation for us to become part of his family, as his equals. He shows us the ropes, different ways to do good work. Like any healthy family, we're taught values and how to live and be together in good times and in bad. As we follow Jesus, we learn ways to live in shalom together. All people can prosper, not just the rich and powerful.

**Best of all, we get to invite others into the family.** God does the work of adoption. All we have to do is take the chance offered to us and pass it on. Love comes down all the time. Christmas is when we remember how much grace we are given. I invite you to remember your smile, for God loves you. You are blessed.

*Let us pray:*

Holy God, we thank you for bringing us to this season of faith, hope, love and peace. As we look at our lives, we see evidence of the countless ways you provide for our needs. Let gratitude well up in our hearts and overflow in generosity to others. Draw us outward to see ways we can joyfully share what you have given. Let our acts of kindness as a church bear good fruit in the world. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Matthew 1:18-25 (CEB)**

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

*Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,  
And they will call him, Emmanuel.*

*(Emmanuel means “God with us.”)*

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.