

(Connor) Good morning, and welcome to Connection Community Church, and welcome to Youth Sunday! We are excited to share with you some of what God has been doing in our lives and build on some of the things you just heard students share about how God has worked in their lives throughout this year.

My name is Connor Walsh, and I'm in 11th grade. I go to Appo High School, and a few of my interests include baseball, hanging out with friends and serving the community. I have been involved in Connection Youth for about a year now. I gave my life to Jesus in October of last year and I became a disciple member at connection in March this year.

(Timmy) My name is Timmy Ceban, and I'm in 9th grade at Middletown high school, and a few of my interests are baseball, sports photography and hanging out with my friends . I have been involved in Connection Youth since 6th grade .

(Gabby) Hi, my name is Gabby Yaiser, and I'm a freshman at Appo High School, and a few of my interests include softball, other sports, and hanging out with my family. And I have been involved in Connection Youth since I was also in 6th grade.

(Connor) - Opening Prayer **lets pray** - (Heavenly Father, thank You for bringing us together today. Thank You for waking us up this morning, giving us breath in our lungs, and allowing us another chance to gather in Your house. We don't take this moment for granted. Thank You for Your love, Your mercy, and Your grace that carries us each day.

As we enter into this service, we ask that You fill this place with Your presence. Prepare our hearts and minds to receive Your word, and help us set aside every distraction so our focus can be fully on You. Let everything said and done today honor You. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.)

(Gabby) This fall, the youth ministry did a special series called Revival Generation that focused on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and live in God's transforming power. We continued in the winter talking about how following God transforms our relationships and everything about how we live our daily lives. One of the things that kept coming back in all of the lessons and conversations was that God doesn't just want us to know about Him, but he wants us to follow him.

Disciples aren't just people who show up on Sunday to put out a good image to the world. Real disciples follow Jesus, imperfectly but authentically, and it changes who they are and how they live their lives. That's our act of worship, it's more than singing a song or posting a Christian meme, it's about being transformed by God's love. And to be transformed by God's love, you have to take a step back and just let go and just trust God.

(Timmy) At the Winter Retreat, our big theme was "worship" and we focused on how no other name is greater than Jesus. It's in Jesus' name that everything changes, chains are broken, and we draw close to God. And it is Jesus' name that we carry out into the world to make disciples who also draw close to God.

(Connor) Our Sunday Night Series and Winter Retreat all center on the same idea: We are called to be disciples whose lives are an act of worship to God. When we live this way, God gets a hold of our hearts and transforms how we think, how we love, and what we hope for until we are almost unrecognizable.

We learn about this in 2 Corinthians 5:17 where it says that “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come.”

For me, that is a verse I’ve lived over the last year. This past summer was one of the hardest seasons of my life. I went through a phase of intense anxiety, trying to balance baseball, my friends, and my family all at once. It became overwhelming, and I kept relying on myself because I thought there was no one better to trust.

When my baseball recruiting window opened, the pressure got even heavier. I felt like I had something to prove to everyone, and that weight was something I put on myself. At the same time, I wasn’t performing how I wanted - I was struggling at the plate and making mistakes in the field. Between practices and trying to be there for everyone else, it felt like I never had time for myself.

The week leading up to youth summer camp, I didn’t even want to go. I was supposed to be a leader, but I hadn’t fully put my faith in God. I barely read scripture, and I didn’t feel ready. I didn’t know how I could lead others when I felt so lost myself.

At one point, I hit a really low place. I started to think that maybe everything would be easier if I just wasn't here anymore - that maybe the anxiety and fear would finally go away.

But going to camp changed everything.

I realized that all the anxiety, fear, and pressure I was carrying wasn't meant for me to hold alone, it was meant to be put in God's hands.

Learning about God's grace shifted something inside of me. I began to understand what it means to trust Him and not just myself.

Since then, I've wanted to treat others with the same love that Jesus showed me. He took the weight I was carrying and gave me peace.

I truly believe that Jesus saved my life.

(Pause)

Committing your life to Christ may not be the easiest journey, but for everyone here or listening online, you guys already did the most important step and that's just to show up!

My whole journey started when my brother started coming to Connection about 2 years ago now. Before that, my family didn't have a church that we attended regularly, so growing up I didn't always think a lot about God. My

first service was at Easter last year because my mom wanted both of her boys to be at church, and up until then I would just stay home or make plans because I didn't really get Christianity yet.

I have known Mrs Bonnie and Coach Jeff through baseball for years, and soon after showing up for Easter, I had a group of people who, if I went to church, encouraged me to show up more often. As I started to show up, I got offered this youth junior leader role for the youth summer trip. It was that offer and experiencing summer camp that God used to change my life.

This past year God has worked in my life in so many ways. I have met new people and I created a new circle of friends. I choose to surround myself with people that encourage and push each other to do the right things. My fire is burning strong, I'm in a healthy relationship centered around Christ, I have learned to let go of grudges and to love anybody and everyone no matter how hard it may be because that's what Jesus would do...despite all that, the anxiety came back, but something was different this time, when I felt like I was losing myself, that's when I fell to my knees and started praying. I woke up the next morning and everything was okay.

So I've started to think that maybe just maybe God is allowing pressure in your life as a thorn in your side to keep you humble and reliant on God, to

say God I trust you with this thorn in my side... because the Lord sees those tears, he knows where you have been discouraged, he knows where you're hurting, he knows where you're battling shame, he knows about those things in your past that you hope nobody finds out, he knows what's going on in the inside, he knows your tired, he knows you feel frustrated with yourself, he knows you feel like you should be further along.

In John 13 verse 7, Jesus says "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." (John 13:7) This verse changed my life, all the worry, all the hurt, all the pain, it all happens for a reason and when it seems like it's happening for no reason that's not the case because it's all part of God's plan.

(Pause)

If you were to ask me a year ago where I would be, I would have never expected this to be my answer, but there is something so beautiful in looking back on who you were and seeing how God transformed you to who you are today.

Instead of giving up my life - I gave my life to someone who wanted it.

That's why I want to tell people about Jesus, because I got transformed from something that felt incurable, and I want to share that opportunity with people who need to find a true permanent solution to their temporary problems.

When I think about who I was before Jesus, I was broken, but now, I'm whole.

(Timmy) For me, my story is a little different. I grew up at Connection Church from the time I was born. When I was three years old, I said that Jesus was my friend, and insisted that I wanted to be baptised with my older brother. I have seen the pictures and sort of remember the day, but I was so young that I didn't really know what it all meant. I just thought that's what you did in church. But I kept coming to church with my family every week and kept growing.

Then, when I was 8 years old, me and my family were staying at a hotel for a baseball tournament, and I couldn't sleep, so my mom was reading me Bible verses from the Bible in the hotel drawer and I felt God really calling me to truly accept him in my life so we prayed right there in the hotel room

and I surrendered my life to Jesus. I remember really feeling like God was talking to me through those words and wanted me to give him my whole heart.

Still, though, I was young and God was working in each stage to grow me up into His kingdom. When I was 13, things changed again for me. We did a series at youth called Absolute Basics of the Christian Faith, and that taught me a lot about communion, baptism and God's grace. Later, we did a series called This Changes Everything which focused on how we are supposed to let our faith change our lives.

My mom helps lead the youth group here. So at the end of those two series, when she told the group about an opportunity to reaffirm their baptisms and talked to me about it, I thought hard and prayed about it. Last time, I didn't fully know what it meant to be baptized. So this time, if I did it, I wanted it to be something that was between just me and God.

After thinking about it, I knew that I wanted to have a moment where I remembered standing up and claiming my faith in baptism. It was a way of saying that I am choosing to live as a disciple now that I am old enough to

know what it means. So last spring, I reaffirmed my baptism, and that was another big step on my discipleship journey.

This does not mean I always get it right. But it means that I am doing my best to choose to follow Jesus every day. Through daily prayer and Bible reading, and being involved in youth ministry and going to church each week. None of that makes me a Christian, but it all helps me stay on track in my faith walk.

When I think about my life, I was taught the Bible growing up, but now I claim my own faith.

(Gabby) My story is similar to Timmy's. I also grew up in the church, and I also have grown in my discipleship and worship over time. Last year, for Youth Sunday, I was part of the message and I talked about how I didn't know an exact time that I became a disciple of Jesus, but that I knew stages of my life when God challenged me to change certain things that have drawn me closer to Him.

This year, I get to focus on a different part of discipleship, the part where we not only receive salvation but we share it.

After calling us new creations, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 goes on to say, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: **19** that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

This means that just like God has brought us back to Him and transformed our lives, part of our act of love and worship is to bring other people that same hope.

In those stages of my life where God transformed me, I decided to start reading a bible verse online and just talking about things because nowadays if you want to share things most of it is online. After I started getting more comfortable with the videos, I started talking more and eventually started feeling more joy. I do these videos every night and even if I have a bad day, I can always rely on the time I spend with Jesus and that time sharing his love with others also. My goal with these videos was

to not only hold myself accountable for loving Jesus, but to also share that love to others. And over time a lot of my friends have told me that I am an inspiration and have encouraged them to take a deeper step into their faith.

I have also encouraged others to do these tiktok videos like one of my best friends, Alyssa. When people message me about how much those videos have helped them it just makes me really happy because I get to know that even from something so little it can have many different size impacts on other people. And getting to share Jesus' love to others can fully change you and allow you to feel whole because you're not only following Jesus but you're also making disciples that hopefully end up making their own disciples.

Over the past year or two now my favorite gift to give is Bibles. Everytime one of my friends has a birthday I make sure it's okay and fully customize a bible for them so that maybe they can take a step into their faith like I did. And it's one of my favorites because it is the gift that just keeps giving no matter what.

For those of you that may not know me, I play softball and sometimes I struggle to remember the true reason I am playing, which isn't for myself but for God. Everything we do should be for him because he is the reason we are here. On my travel team I have a great group of girls and we all pray before the game and I always try to remind people and myself of Psalm 96:12 "Let the fields be joyful and all that is in them" because if we weren't happy and having fun while playing what is the point.

When it comes to sports, a lot of girls feel comfortable enough to come to me and ask them to pray for them or with them and another way I show my faith is by my walkup song for softball. It is always "goodbye yesterday" by Elevation Rhythm because without Jesus I wouldn't be where I am now.

Spreading the love of Jesus can truly be anywhere while you're doing anything, even softball or social media.

When you share that love with others, you can bring a sense of hope because sometimes you may be the only Bible someone reads, so you have to think about how you want to come about as Jesus to them. What I mean by this is that some people don't know Jesus, and the way you reflect things and go about them as a Christian matters because people pick up

those things. If you claim to be a Christian, you should be trying to live a Godly life and spreading God's love to others.

A lot of days I take a second and I ask myself the question of “if someone were following me all day, and I didn't know it, would they know that I know Jesus?”

It's so important to reflect Jesus and his love in everything we do.

For a while there, I was lost, but now I'm found and get to share the love Jesus has given me with other people.

(**Connor**) There is not just one path to discipleship. People can come to God at any time in life, no matter their history or struggles or past.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*

God saves us in incredible ways that sometimes we don't even come to a realization of until later. Last week I was listening to worship music in the car, and I got all emotional because something clicked with me. I have always been confused when the term “Good News” is brought up when

reading scripture and it all came together. I understand the term of good news now, because it's like "Good News" you might sin everyday and most of the time we don't even realize what we are doing, but Jesus died for our sins, his blood pays our debts and he loves us with his mercy and his grace. God's grace is everlasting no matter how far you feel from God because he is right there with you the whole time. You can't earn it, he already chose you, he chose humanity as a whole, whoever wants it, has it. Allow it to change you.

There will come a day when you don't have to hurt anymore, and you don't have to suffer, and you don't have to go back to the addictions, and the struggles, and you don't have to sell yourself short anymore, you don't have to do any of that anymore, that's not who you are. I mean you know yourself better than I know you.

You know the things you did 24 hours ago, you know the things you've been doing this week, this month, this year. You know the 1% you're withholding from God that's stopping you from experiencing the full love of God, you know these things and they are never going to fulfill you.

You might not even be going back to them because you want to sin. It just feels familiar, maybe it just feels comfortable to go back to but you know it's time to stop, But that doesn't have to be you anymore, everyone can change and you don't have to have it all together.

Look at Mark 5, a dude with 3,000 demons rolls up on Jesus, what does he have to offer, he has nothing on the table. And Jesus still sets him free.

You don't have to get your life together, the most unqualified of unqualified people get to come to the stage and God says "That's the one I want."

I want the most Unqualified, the most broken, the most lost one out there, that's the one I want. You don't have to wait to get your life together or until everything is perfect to come before God because he sees it all and he forgives and heals everything with his grace.

(Gabby) Being a disciple isn't about suddenly being perfect. God is the only perfect one. Everyone following Jesus is on a journey to be more like Him, but that journey takes a long time and has ups and downs along the way. But we can be encouraged because Philippians 1:6 says "*Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*" The Apostle Paul was confident

that the good work God began in the people of Philippi would be fulfilled, and we can be confident too.

God doesn't pressure us to be perfect but instead we put that pressure on ourselves. And putting that pressure on ourselves makes us forget that Jesus is the only perfect person and he doesn't expect us to be perfect. As many times as we sin and mess up Jesus will continue to take it all, because when he was on the cross he was thinking about every single one of us. And in reality God just wants us to live a life FULLY for him and share that with others. So that eventually hopefully they can experience the same things we do.

Following Jesus is putting your FULL trust in him, not just like half or a quarter but your full faith. Just like if you fill up a water bottle only halfway it's not gonna last as long, and that's the same way for your faith. If you only put half your faith in Christ, you won't always follow him because eventually you will get drawn back into the ways of the world. So when you put your full faith in him, it allows you to finally realize that God has a plan for you and is going to be with you no matter what even if you hit rock

bottom because sometimes you have to hit rock bottom to realize God is the rock at the bottom.

(Timmy) Being a disciple also doesn't mean everything is always amazing and there's no trouble. Jesus even said that in the world we will have trouble. But being a disciple means knowing God tells us we do not need to be afraid. The Bible actually says "do not be afraid" over 300 times. One of those times is in Isaiah 41:10 says, *"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."* Following God means knowing that you are never alone.

Living as a disciple means when God calls you, you can always trust you will have the strength, and help, you need.

It can be tempting to be scared to follow God, or trust when things are difficult. I saw an example of this in my life last year. We had prayed for me to find the right baseball team after a very difficult experience. I ended up in a really difficult situation where things weren't good. I was tempted to feel like God wasn't listening, or maybe didn't care about little things like that.

But then a door opened, and everything changed. It wasn't about being on a team that always won. It was about God putting me in a place where I felt like I belonged and connected with the players and coaches. It was an answer to prayer. I could have been frustrated and afraid, or mad at God when things weren't going well, but after a time of difficulty, I saw how God was working things together for me to be blessed and that could not have happened if I didn't have the difficult time first.

I know baseball is small compared to all the things people face in life, but when I see God work in this, it helps me remember that I can trust him in everything.

(Connor) To be honest, opening up about my mental health was something that was really hard for me. I prayed for this for a while and Jesus told me it was time. I first opened up about it when I was baptized in my testimony, I was afraid how people would view me as a person, but thinking about it more I realized the amount of people I can share my story with and then people who may be struggling with mental health realize that they aren't alone. You are never alone, you always always always have Jesus to go to.

Today, I shared my mental health journey because I want to break the stigma around mental health and welcome anybody and everybody to experience the everlasting love and mercy of God. But all of us have a different path. If you are struggling with anxiety, or feeling like there is no hope, it is important that you speak up and talk about it. God can bring you peace, but God can also put people in your life who will help you get the support you need to restore your hope. Never suffer those feelings alone.

(Gabby) Being a Christian doesn't change what you deal with, but it changes how you deal with it. You get the choice of how you want to fight your battles and who you want to fight them with. And no matter how low you go, Jesus will always meet you where you are because he cares about you. If you don't remember anything any of the 3 of us have said today I hope the main thing you remember is that you are not alone.

So many people think that Christ followers and Christians are just so called perfect and don't struggle but we struggle too. The thing is we know who to go to when we are struggling while others might not. So the next time you feel like you're not enough or know someone that feels like that, remind

them of the reason they are here and ALWAYS love like Jesus because you never know how far a small act will go.

(Timmy) Everyone's faith story is different. We come from different places in life. We have different struggles. But the end result of surrendering to God is the same. The three of us have different stories, but we have one God. The three of us have different journeys, but we have one destination. We are saved by God's grace, disciples, called to share the love of God with the world.

Please pray with me...

God, thank you for the chance to share our stories today. We pray you would bless everyone here and help them know you. We pray anyone here who does not know your love and salvation would take a step of faith today. Thank you that we are never alone. In Jesus name, Amen.