

October 5-6, 2019

Message to Heritage as I Retire from Pastoring

Good evening/morning! I guess you have heard the news:) What can I say about my 15 years on staff here at Heritage. It has been such an amazing journey and I wouldn't have traded it for anything in the world. Well almost😊.

How did I get here? People have asked me how I came to be a pastor and I chuckle. If you knew half my story, you would know it was all God. It's because of our wonderful savior, Jesus Christ, whose patience and amazing grace compelled me to surrender my life to Him 30 years ago after finally realizing I wasn't in control of my life. I needed a savior and I finally believed all of God's ways were for my good.

I was baptized when I was 10 so I grew up with faith, but I left the church when I left home for college at 17 and thought my parents and God were too controlling. Karen and I were married in 1976. We moved to California to find a dream. I mean we had a lot going for us. I was 22 and a college dropout. She was 17. This is where I look back and begin to see God's grace in my life. I found a career with AT&T. We finally bought a house and our neighbors invited us to a Billy Graham crusade in Anaheim. We both recommitted our lives to Christ in 1985. I began hearing God's call. 3 kids later, we eventually moved to Atlanta and found a wonderful church in the inner city that was full of disciple making, campus ministry people, who loved Jesus in a way that I never experienced.

We were in an in-home bible study and somehow between the word of God, the conversations of how it applied to life, the dots connected, and I got it. I began to believe in the God of the bible for the 1st time in my life and soon after, surrendered my life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I experienced being born again. My life hasn't been the same. At 35, I began to absorb everything I could read and listen to about God. This time for love, not fear.

This is a verse that became one of my life verses.

John 14:21 "whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. And I too will love him and show myself to him". Another translation says "to reveal" himself. I thought to myself. If Jesus, the son of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords is willing to reveal Himself to me, I will try to follow Him and all of his ways. This became my life purpose! And what are the Lord's commands? They are about love. What did Jesus say are the greatest commandments? To love God with our whole heart and love others like ourselves. I don't know about you, but on the surface loving God is the easy part. Loving others like myself?.....that was a tall order! I really liked myself. Karen would say I loved myself☺ and still do.

And so, Karen and I have tried to live our lives following the ways of God and after 3 married children, 7 grandchildren and 43 years of marriage, we have been blessed beyond our wildest dreams.

This is what I want to leave you with. It's about love. But what I want to say about it gets a little more challenging. We have to choose to love God and other people. It goes against our nature. Our nature is to love ourselves above all else. But we can do this. Jesus totally understands and left us with his power and presence in the Holy Spirit, who gives us the power to overcome our sin nature, and be more like Jesus. But it's still a choice. I've titled my message. **Choose to Love**. That's how I summarize my experience here at Heritage. I've learned to love when it's hard, to trust God in some difficult situations, and it has brought me closer to Him.

Let me tell you pastoring is not easy. I don't always feel like being on. And I used to get so angry with people I was ministering to for not doing what they knew to do over and over again. And then suffering for it. I was talking to one of my mentors about it and he asked me a question. How do you think God feels when I do the same thing? Sad, not angry. Ughhhh! I was done! I have never forgotten that, and the Lord graciously took me to another level of understanding grace, for me and others.

We have to get our queues from Jesus himself who trusted God all the way to the cross. **Hebrews 12:2 "for the joy set before him he endured the cross"**.

There is a passage in Matthew 25 where Jesus is laying out what it means to love Him, to follow his way.

Matthew 25:31-46 New International Version (NIV)

The Sheep and the Goats

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I

was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

⁴⁴ "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

⁴⁶ "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

This passage at the end of Matthew 25 is the last story he is telling his disciples before he prepares for the end of his life. From chapter 18 on, Jesus has been telling stories about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like.

In this last story, He is separating out those who really loved him, and those who didn't. Those who will say "Lord, Lord" and He will say, "I never knew you". And they sounded shocked. Beloved, I didn't intend for this passage to put the fear of God in you. But thank God, we have his word and we won't have to be shocked. This is reminding us what it means to follow Jesus and all of his ways. As a pastor here at Heritage, I've been learning more about what this means. Does this mean we have to earn our way into the kingdom? No, but it means, how we live our life should be evident that we are truly following Jesus, we know his heart. It reminds me of the words of in the book of **James 2:26, "faith without**

works is dead". Or the words of Jesus in **Matthew 7:24, "therefore anyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built their house on the rock.**

Jesus focuses on 4 groups of people; the prisoner, the poor, the stranger and the sick. 2 things spoke to me as I have been thinking about this.

1st, He equates loving him, with loving people. There is no vertical without the horizontal. Does that speak to you? 2nd, He especially cares for the **"least of these"** that I believe today we would consider the **"marginalized"**, those considered **"insignificant or peripheral"**. People who often can't provide for themselves for one reason or another.

How do we as the church engage with people who suffer from these challenges in life?

Now on the surface, you may feel like you have a good heart for the "least of these" and they don't all fit into a category of being "marginalized". Let me read this statement and see if your hearts aren't pricked a little.....or a lot, like mine was.

"you thirsty, hungry, sick people, you need to work hard like I did so you have to get your own water, food and healthcare... and you folks in Jail... if you do the crime you do the time... you should have gotten an education and a job like I did and you wouldn't have to be out there stealing, selling drugs etc...my well earned money is being taxed enough as it is."

When I read this, to be totally honest with myself, I have had some of these thoughts and feelings. And I probably still do to some extent. Especially as I got educated and had some level of financial stability or success, life became more comfortable and I surrounded myself with people who were comfortable...and away from "the least of these". I've always said, "don't forget where you came from", but I think I do at times.

Let me share some experiences since I've been on staff here that has opened my eyes to some things, especially my attitude toward "the least of these".

These 4 groups reveal God's heart for all people, and I think exposes our biases, prejudices, preconceived judgments of certain people.

1st of all, prison is no joke. I remember when I went to Marion Correctional Institute for the 1st time and those steel doors shut behind me. Ooh, that was scary. I got to know a former prisoner who changed my life. He became a close friend that has been in and out of jail over the 20 years that I've known him. I met him in the business world and as I got to know him old problems resurfaced. I learned he had an addiction to crack cocaine and had been in prison. He relapsed and started blowing my phone up and talked about giving up, wanting to end it. I think at this point, I wanted to run. This was hard...but God. He told me he put Tim in my life for a reason and it had nothing to do with business. I learned to set boundaries, but also to make myself available. Personally, he's a great guy. I love his personality and He knows I love him.

Something I became aware of about a year ago. There is a big problem with mass incarceration in this country, and it's affecting thousands, millions of people and their families. The prison population in 1980 was around 300,000. Today it's over 2 million. Please read a **book called "Just Mercy"**. It opened my eyes to the need for change. They are also making a movie about it. Thank you, Debbi Roberts, and others here like you who are great examples of supporting and loving the prisoner.

How about the poor? I was just reading a book that said there are more than 3000 verses in the bible about the poor. It reveals God's heart for the poor. Obviously, Jesus is telling us how important it is to help the poor. He doesn't break down whether they deserve it or not. Does that affect whether you help someone or not?

One of the things I've learned in the care world is through our benevolence ministry. We help people who have a short-term financial need. We believe our mission is to not only help them at that moment, but also come alongside them to help them improve their financial health. It allows us to get to know them, encourage and pray for them.

If we just do this work through paperwork and emails, you don't get to know people, and understand their situations and circumstances. You find it's not as easy as it appears to pull yourself out of a financial rut. And it doesn't take much for circumstances outside of your control, to change, and now you're struggling financially.

Without pressing in and getting to know people who are struggling, we can have an attitude toward them that is so judgmental. I have learned a lot from this. There are some good resources out there now that educate you on what it means to live in poverty and the struggle to get out of it. I have a friend that teaches one called **"Answers to Poverty"**. You can find out more at **answerpoverty.org**.

How about the stranger? Who is the stranger among us? In this text it has been interpreted to mean foreigner or traveler.

Who is it in our context? I suggest that it is anyone who is different or foreign to us for one reason or another. And that difference, causes us to have preconceived ideas, prejudices, or biases about them, that divides people, causes distance or at least apathy or indifference.

Here is one example of a time when I chose to reach out to someone I thought was different.

Sarah; tattooed, pierced and colored hair.

I know something about feeling like a stranger. How do you think a minority typically feels in a predominantly white setting? How many of you have been to a black church? It's different right? A little foreign, different style of music, preaching, etc?

Here is a little of my journey. We found Heritage in 1997 at Heritage Middle School with maybe 150-200 people.

Ruth Morgan and Kevin Genth were the 1st 2 people we met, and I can honestly say we felt more warmth and friendliness than any place we visited in 6 months after moving here. We kept attending and found the doctrine and mission lined up with our own beliefs and calling. But it was an all-white church. Would we be able to love and be loved, like we experienced in our all black church in Atlanta? As we got to know the leadership and people, we felt the presence of the Lord and this was in our neighborhood which were the 2 main things we wanted.

Early on we were invited into people's homes and got to know people. It erased any doubts about our decision. We got into a life group with the Gents and Halls and experienced family. We are still close today. Thank you Gents and Halls for loving us in!

Fast forward to 2012. Obama is up for re-election. One of our pastors confided in me that he had to sneak into Central High School to see Obama because he would catch too much flak from his church. Was this because Obama is black or because he was a democrat? In a class I was teaching, I settled a dispute between 2 people of a different race over politics. Feelings were hurt. These things are dividing us in the church. They are barriers to having real relationships. And this is nothing compared to the tension that's going on in our society that we're a part of and interact with every day.

In the last few years I've been really concerned about it. Some disturbing events have affected me and my family as part of the African American community. It has me

asking a question; what should we, the church say about it, do about it? How can we make a difference?

And there seemed to be this silence. It really bothered me, so I began to talk to people about it. That has been very helpful, but brothers and sisters, let me be honest. Our silence causes me to feel more like a stranger sometimes. I feel the pain of my brothers and sisters of color who have suffered more than I. You've heard it said, "in the end, we remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends". I am beginning to understand that more and more.

I've been on a journey for the last few years learning a lot and having some great conversations. That has given me hope. Behind the scenes we are working on some things to help equip you as the church to make a difference and be reconcilers that you will hear more about later. One thing I'm clear about is that as followers of Christ. Allowing our differences to divide us in the church and be silent to the injustices in our society is not following Jesus and living out the gospel. We have many opportunities to reach out to the "stranger" among us, in our church, in our neighborhoods, in our work places, in our communities? Listen to one man's story of stepping out of his comfort zone. Jeff

The sick.

This has been the main focus of our Care Ministry of which I have been a pastor for 10 years. I had black hair and was 2 inches taller when I started. Sorry Kari😊. Yes Kari Wharton the wife of Joel Wharton who, if you haven't heard has become our next Care Pastor. We are going to

commission him toward the end of the service and I'll be able to talk about him more then 😊.

Jesus also considers the sick as the least of these. I think most people would say that they probably do this pretty well, although when you look out our society and see all of the elderly who can't take care of themselves anymore and people in hospitals that don't have anyone to even visit them, let alone look after them, it's sad. I don't see that here. I have met some amazing care givers of loved ones among you and it even paved the way for me when that time came. I would say for critical situations, more of you can step in and care, better than you think. Just being present is one of the 1st things we emphasize in our chaplain training. We can all do that.

There is a type of illness that I would like to bring your attention to and that's those who suffer from mental illness. It is still very hard on both sides; people who suffer are afraid to talk about it for fear of rejection. People who have loved ones who suffer don't understand it and do a terrible job of responding. It makes the situation worse, and the relationship suffers.

When I came into Care, my thoughts and opinions about mental illness was 180 degrees from where I am today. I didn't understand why people continued to suffer when they should just get over it. Or they haven't had enough faith to get healed from it. And then I met Mary. Mary had suffered most of her life. She came to Heritage and made it her home. She would have episodes and I was the Care Pastor. I went to a psych ward for the 1st time in my life. Almost as bad as going to a prison. All I knew to

do was to go and be present. Mary did the rest. She showed me how to care for her. She gave me room for my misconceptions. She helped me grow. Back then it was Pastor Eric Wharton and his son Joel, who was the director at **Pathways** also helped to educate and equip us the pastoral staff to care for those who suffer mental illness. I went from being her pastor to being her friend. Thank you Mary.

I think the statistics tell us that every person today will experience a loved one or close friend that will suffer some level of mental illness. Please turn toward them, not away. There is also a wonderful resource we have through Heritage called **Hope and Wellness** for the sufferer and families of sufferers.

You know the way we love people has a significant impact on their relationship with God. Especially to the "least of these". Jesus is saying it's so significant it has eternal implications. It's the mission of reconciliation. Our love helps to reconcile ones to God because it's only possible through Christ. It's a significant part of the gospel message that we must participate in. And we can help change the world, 1 person, 1 family at a time! But we have to choose this way because it's not natural, it's not easy. We have to be intentional about it. Choose to love church! This is my parting message to you as your pastor.

How do I say thank you?