

Reset  
*A Little Help*  
August 16, 2015

**PRELUDE – Who Is Like Our God  
Congregational Worship – All Because of Jesus  
& I Am Free  
Feature – “With a Little Help from My Friends”**

Good morning everyone.

If you are ever going to be the person God has intended for you to be ... if *I* am ever going to be the person God has intended for *me* to be ... you (and I) must have a little help from our friends.

That’s what I want to talk to you about this morning.

As I said last Sunday, shortly after we launched North Heartland Community Church many years ago, we were wisely advised to develop a

high degree of clarity on what we hope to see happen in the lives of those who would regularly and systematically engage with our ministry over the long haul - for six months or six years or however-many years.

And we decided, based on what Jesus told the first disciples to do (and what they actually did after Jesus returned to His Heavenly Father) that our primary goal would be *life transformation*. We decided that our goal would be to take anyone who is willing to go on the journey with us – regardless of whether they’re believers in Jesus or they’re still searching; whether they’ve got it all together or they’re falling apart – we decided that we would take people *just as they are* and help them to become more like Jesus and less like themselves.

If you’re part of North Heartland or you are thinking about becoming part of North Heartland, you need to know that, above all

else, *that's what we want to see happen in your life.* That's why we do what we do as a church. We want you, in your nature and in your character – in the way you think, feel, react and live your life – to reflect more and more of the nature and character of Jesus. We believe that's God's ultimate goal for your life.

And we believe that as you move towards that goal, you will experience more and more of the “abundant life” (as Jesus once described it).

*“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” John 10:10 (NIV)*

Of course, as I said last week, it wasn't enough for us to decide what the goal is. We also had to decide what we would *do* as an organization to facilitate that kind of transformation.

And, given that most people do not have unlimited time to devote to church

involvement, we realized we that we would have to be very strategic and limit ourselves to those activities that, over time, would have the highest impact in a person's life.

So, we decided we would focus on just three things: three high-impact habits that anyone can engage in ... that, if they *did* engage, consistently, with an open heart and an open mind, would facilitate the work of God's Spirit.

The first of those three habits I talked about last Sunday.

**Discover (and keep on discovering) the grace and truth of Jesus by regularly engaging in environments where you are reminded of it ... which, at North Heartland, is primarily our Sunday morning service.**

And I won't go back through all of that – if you weren't here you can check out the message online through our website or our app ... I won't go back through all of that other than to

say that we believe it's the power of truth and grace *together* that produces transformation in a person's life.

- *Truth* says that we are more flawed and lost in God's sight than we would ever believe. In fact, we are so flawed and lost that it took Jesus living the perfect life we should be living and dying the death we should have to die in order to save us from our sins.
- *Grace* says that by simply trusting in Him and what He did (instead of our own efforts to atone for our sins), we are more accepted and loved by God than we would ever dare to hope. It's by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that we are completely and forever forgiven of all our sin – past, present and future.

If all you get is truth, you're probably going to

become legalistic and judgmental. If all you get is grace, you're probably going to settle for less than the life God wants you to have. That's why, if you're a Christian, you need to be reminded of and to experience both of those again and again. It needs to become a regular and systematic part of your life.

That's also why, as I said last week, we decided many years ago that our goal in this hour together every Sunday morning would *not* be to provide "the greatest worship experience in town" (as wonderful as worship can be). Nor would it be to provide "the greatest verse-by-verse Bible teaching" (as useful as biblical knowledge can be).

We decided our goal was (and is) to provide a creative presentation of truth and grace that takes real life issues and uses them to reveal the truth about us and the grace offered to us in Christ because we believe, over time, that's what's going to change us. That's what's going

to make us more like Him and less like us in real life.

And that's why I said last week (and we'll move on after this) ... if you're a Christian and this is your church and you're hoping to become more of who God intends for you to be ... *you should be here. Every Sunday.* Or, you should listen or watch online when you can't be.

And if that sounds like too lofty of a goal to shoot for, put it in context. It's 52 out of the 8,736 hours per year that you have available. More importantly: where else are you going to encounter truth and grace in this way? Who else cares that you *do*?

Anyway ... first transformational habit: discover (and keep on discovering) the grace and truth of Jesus by regularly putting yourself in environments where you are reminded of it.

But the second transformational habit ... the

second activity that we invite people to engage in regularly and consistently over time is to ...

**Connect (and keep on connecting) in Christian friendships.**

If you are ever going to be the person God has intended for you to be ... if *I* am ever going to be the person God has intended for *me* to be ... you (and I) must have a little help from our friends.

*But not just any old friends.* We need friends who are on the same journey of transformation as we are; friends who are also (as we are) discovering (and continuing to discover) the truth and grace of Jesus in their own lives; friends who are Christians.

**Friends on a Journey**

And that's not just my idea. In fact, of all the principles that can be drawn from the New



Testament on “how to become more like Jesus” there is none greater and none more prevalent than the idea of connecting with and befriending others who are on the same path.

- First of all, every book and letter in the New Testament except for one was written to a group of people – not to individuals.
- Second, the Gospels make it clear that Jesus came to form a *community* that would follow Him – not a band of disconnected individuals.
- Third, much of the instruction both from Jesus and the apostles has to do with relationships in that community.

But far overshadowing those reasons is the incredible story of what it was like to be a Christian in the days right after Jesus’ was raised from the dead and returned to his

Father.

**Luke writes in the second chapter of the Book of Acts that ...**

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.*

*All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.*

*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.*

*And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

*Acts 2:42-47 (NIV)*

Do you see the connection here? The caring and friendship here? It's amazing, especially when you consider that these folks were from different racial, ethnic, political and social backgrounds.

Of course, the question is ... why was their connection so important? Why *is* it so important?

We could read passage after passage to answer that question and probably use up what is left of the time we have this morning. But, instead, I want to focus on just a few – very briefly.

The Apostle Paul once wrote a letter to a group of Christians in the city of Ephesus. And, in it (as in several of his letters) he compared their

relationships with one another to the way the human body works.

**He wrote:**

*As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. Ephesians 4:16 (NLT)*

For example, in the human body, as the hand moves and does its work, it also strengthens the forearm. As the arm moves and does its work, it also strengthens the shoulder.

“It works the same way with you all,” Paul is saying. “As each of you becomes involved with other believers, you bring things to the table that help them grow to be more like Jesus.”

The Apostle Peter is even more direct about it.

## He writes:

*Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. 1 Peter 4:10 (NIV)*

“God wants to use *you* as part of the transformational process in someone else’s life,” Peter is saying, “so let Him do so.”

The flip side of the coin, obviously, is that God wants to use *other* in-the-process-of-being-transformed followers of Jesus as part of the transformational process in *our* lives.

So what does it mean to connect in Christian friendships? What does that look like?

One of the best illustrations I’ve ever seen comes from the old classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*. You know how it goes. Dorothy and her dog, Toto, have been tossed “somewhere over

the rainbow” into the Land of Oz. But she wants to go back home, so she embarks on a journey to see the Wizard, believing he can help her get there. That’s the “transformation” she’s looking for.

And she’s not on the road for very long until she meets up with two other characters who are also in need of transformation: Scarecrow, who is not very smart and needs a brain, and Tin Man, who is not very sensitive and needs a heart. So, she invites them to join her and the three of them set out together.

All is well until they encounter a seemingly ferocious beast, the King of the Forest, Lion. As we watch what happens, pay particular attention to what is revealed about him and how the travelers respond.

**Video – The Wizard of Oz: Cowardly Lion Scene**  
**(2.2 min)**

(Begin) Lion growling/barking at Tin Man

(End) Dorothy: “It’s alright now. The Wizard will fix everything.”

## **The Gifts of Christian Friendship**

I think it’s safe to assume that Lion had probably never really connected with any other creature until he joined up with Dorothy and Scarecrow and Tin Man. He had to keep up the image that he was courageous and tough and didn’t need anyone else.

But, when he became part of that small group of travelers, all of that changed. In fact, *everything changed* because of three amazing gifts that he received from the fellowship of the yellow-brick-road.

### **1. First of all, he received the gift of personalized truth and grace.**

After Dorothy challenged him about his behavior: “shame on you for picking on a straw

man and a little dog” she quickly cut to the *bottom line*, the truth: “Why, you're nothing but a great big coward!”

Deep down he already knew that was true, but once someone else said it to him face-to-face he was able to own up to it. “You’re right, I am a coward” ... and he went on to describe that weakness in great detail *as if he had been waiting for the day he could confess it; just waiting for the chance to drop the facade.*

And in that moment when the truth was revealed, something very wonderful happened. Instead of being judged and condemned and cast aside, he was treated with grace. He was *accepted*– just as he was and not as he should be – as a fellow traveler on the road to transformation.

“Wouldn't you feel degraded to be seen in the company of a cowardly lion?” he asks.



“Of course not,” Dorothy answers, as Tin Man and Scarecrow nod in agreement.

And they could respond that way because all three of *them knew the truth about themselves and about each other*. Each one of them had a flaw or weakness that needed the help of the Wizard and those flaws and weaknesses were on the table for all to see. And since *they* had been set free from the need to appear perfect, it was natural to extend grace to Lion.

And friends, if we’re going to become more like Jesus and less like us, we need people in our lives who will do that for us. We need people who are close enough to us and who know us well enough to hold up the mirror and reflect back to us the good and not-so-good so that we can see and admit things about ourselves that we might not *want* to see or admit. That’s why Paul writes that it takes people who “speak the truth in love” to us for us to “grow up in Christ.”<sup>i</sup>

But we also need those same people to be able to tell us the truth about *themselves*; to admit that *they, too*, have not yet arrived at perfection so that we can be released from the need to pretend we are better than we are. That's why James says that we're to admit our faults to one another.<sup>ii</sup>

That's what the gift of personalized truth and grace looks like. And that's part of what it means to connect in Christian friendships.

The second gift that Lion received (and the second gift we receive when we connect in Christian friendships) is ...

**2. The gift of simple companionship – the knowledge that he was not alone on the journey.**

Just after that scene ends, the four travelers begin skipping their way down the path and singing “we're off to see the Wizard; the

wonderful Wizard of Oz.” And it’s obvious their joy comes not just from the hope of what the Wizard might do but also from simply being in it together.

And you and I, if we’re Christians, also need that same gift of companionship. All Christians do because this journey is not easy.

In fact, when you look back at the story of the very first Christians, and you see how much time they spent together, what you don’t see is *the reason* they did that. Back in the first century, when a person became a Christian ...

- They also became guilty of breaking a Roman law that forbid the establishment of any new religion. And they were immediately subject to hassle at best and persecution at worst.
- On top of that, if they also happened to be

Jewish, because they were joining a movement that claimed that Jesus was God in the flesh, they were considered guilty of blasphemy. Even though Luke tells us that they enjoyed the favor of all the people, it wasn't too long until they were barred from the synagogue and, in many cases, thrown out of their homes and disowned by their families.

Being a Christian in the first century was potentially a very lonely experience.

Now, obviously, you and I don't have it *that* bad ... at least not in terms of physical persecution or suffering. But, it's no exaggeration to say that if you're a Christian these days – if you're someone who believes that Jesus really is who the Bible says he is and that He really did what the Bible says he did and therefore He should be the Lord of our lives – if you're a Christian, you are increasingly maligned by our culture because of what you believe.

Being a Christian, even today, is potentially a very lonely experience. And to know that you're not alone – to personally know other believers who are joyfully, gladly walking with you – makes a big difference.

That's part of what it looks and feels like to connect in Christian friendships. That's why it's so important.

But there's one more gift that Lion received from his fellow travelers ...

### **3. The gift of personal encouragement – inspiration to “keep going anyway.”**

The journey to OZ was not a walk in the park. There was an enemy who was set on discouraging and even destroying them: “the Wicked Witch of the West.” And because it was so scary, there were many points along the way when Lion wanted to quit.

But, he didn't because his friends wouldn't let him. Because of their influence (which several times took the form of literally dragging him), he didn't give up.

In the same way, we need people in our lives who will personally give us the gift of encouragement because the road that a follower of Christ travels is no walk in the park either. Not only is the culture becoming antagonistic towards us, the Bible says that we, too, have an enemy who would like nothing better than to discourage and even destroy us ... which is why there is so much written in the New Testament about Christians encouraging one another.

**For instance, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it like this:**

*Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*

In other words, “let’s challenge each other to keep moving forward on this journey of transformation no matter what.”

**“And, because this is so critical to the process,” he adds ...**

*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another ...  
Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV)*

“Let’s be disciplined about connecting with one another,” he says, because, apparently, some of the Christians in that area had developed *a bad habit of blowing off time spent connecting with one another.*

So, he says, “you can’t do that if you want to experience the kind of life-change that God has in mind for you. You have to regularly and systematically put yourself in environments

where you can connect (and keep on connecting) in Christian friendships.”

## **In Real Life**

... which actually completes the full definition of the second habit, which is to ...

**Connect (and keep on connecting) in Christian friendships by regularly engaging in relational environments where you receive (and give) the gifts of Christian fellowship.**

Gifts like personalized truth and grace, and simple companionship and personal encouragement to keep following Jesus. And there a many others we could talk about if we had the time.

But the question is ... how do you get into a relational environment where that happens?

I'll be honest with you. It's not easy.



- First of all, it takes meeting the right people.
- Secondly, once you meet the right people, it requires you (and them) to carve out a block of time to meet together on a regular basis.
- And, then, once you meet the right people and carve out a regular block of time, it takes even more time (sometimes even years) for everyone to develop enough trust to tell each other the truth and offer grace and encouragement.

It's not easy. But it's worth it.

In fact, just the other day, I got an email from someone in this church who lost someone close to them and is still working through the grief process. Here's what it said:

“Life goes on and I keep putting one foot in front of the other, so that beats the heck out of what I have done in the past when grief came to call. If I have one takeaway from all my time in Small Group it’s that those people really did teach me how to grieve and keep going. What a blessing they have been in my life!”

Now, I know this person and I know their small group. It hasn’t always been easy but they’ve been together for a long time – years.

And it’s made a difference *for all of them* ... which is why, as a church, we have developed a small group system. We want everyone here to have the opportunity to connect in Christian friendships and experience, at least in some way, the gifts of Christian fellowship.

Now, our system is not perfect. Sometimes people get in a group and it just doesn’t work

for them. But we keep trying anyway because *sometimes it does*. So three times every year – at the beginning of the school year, in the beginning of the New Year and at the beginning of summer – we open up the door to our small group ministry and begin a new small group season.

And this morning, we want to offer everyone who is not currently in a group the opportunity to check out what's available in the upcoming season and see if something might fit. We've got groups of all types – social groups (about companionship), Bible study groups, marriage improvement groups, groups for people just starting out in the faith. And we're going to end this service a few minutes earlier than normal so that you can check it out at our small group rally in the commons.

And I hope you'll do that because if you're ever going to be the person God intends for you to be ... if you're ever going to experience the

abundant life that Jesus promised ... you've got to have a little help from Christian friends.

Let's pray together.

<PRAYER>

It's not easy to rearrange our schedule, step out once a week, and get involved in a small group. It's a hassle to pack up the kids, drive across town, and risk connecting with other people.

But give us a vision, God, of what might happen if we did it anyway. A vision of what might happen if we changed our schedule and intentionally and regularly invested some time with a small group of Christian friends who gave us the gifts of truth and grace, companionship and encouragement.

Amen.

**Dismissal to rally**

1. Next week ... Mystery Sunday! Can't tell you what we're doing but it will be memorable. So be here and be on time – 9:00 or 10:30.
2. If you have kids, please wait until 10/11:30 to pick them up from Adventureland.

## Endnotes

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i Ephesians 4:15

ii James 5:16