

Five Things God Uses
Strength in Numbers
September 23, 2018

Overture

Video – “Do Life Together”

**Worship Songs – This Is Amazing Grace / Fierce
/ T&G**

Feature Song – Message in a Bottle

Video – Behind the Scenes

Feature Song – Thankful / Offering

Good morning everyone.

I'm sure you noticed (if you were paying attention) that there were two very different perspectives and emotions in the songs our band just did.

The first one, Sting's *Message in a Bottle* is a

haunting portrayal of the basic human need for relationships of significance, and the emptiness we feel when they are lacking in our lives.

The second song, *Thankful* (by Kelly Clarkson), felt a lot more positive and upbeat because it describes a relationship that not only meets our basic need for connection and companionship but one that also leads to *personal transformation*: “I’m thankful for the blessing; thankful for the lessons that I’ve learned” – even the hard ones.

I’m curious (and don’t raise your hand or call it out, just think about it) ... if you had to choose one of those two songs to describe *your* relational life right now, which would it be? Which is closer to your day-to-day reality?

Is it “sending out an S.O.S.” Or is it “thankful” that there are people in your life who not only know you and love you but are committed to helping you to become the best possible version of yourself?

Now, set that thought on the shelf for just a few minutes while we get back up to speed on where we are in this current series, *Five Things God Uses*.

A Quick Review

We've been looking at five different experiences, circumstances or practices (however you want to describe them), that are catalytic in helping us grow into the kind of person we want to be and the kind of person God created us to be.

And if you're a believer in Jesus and a follower of Jesus, that *is* God's primary goal in your life.

As we say all the time around here, "God loves you just the way you are" i.e., you don't need to do anything to earn His love and acceptance because Jesus has already done that for you. But God loves you too much *to leave you* the way you are which is why He uses these experiences, circumstances

and practices to *change you*.

After all, being a Christian isn't just about getting you into *Heaven* when you *die*. It's about getting *Heaven* into you while you *live*. That's why Jesus taught us to pray "Thy Kingdom come and Thy will be done on earth – right now, here, beginning with me and my life."

And if you ask people who have been following Jesus and who have experienced that kind of transformation in their lives, more than likely they'll mention the five catalysts that we're looking at in this series.

The first is *practical teaching* (which we talked about three weeks ago).

Practical teaching is when someone takes biblical truth and clearly explains how it applies in everyday life. It's the primary goal of what we do in every Sunday service.

The second catalyst is *private spiritual*

***disciplines* (which we talked about two weeks ago).**

Private spiritual disciplines are things you regularly do behind the scenes and alone with God *now* so that your faith is stronger *later*. As we saw, two of the most important are prayer and giving.

The third thing that God so often uses to grow us (and we talked about this one last week) is ...

Personal ministry ...

... which is serving God and people in ways that bring honor to Jesus, build up His church, and help others to know Him better.

And we learned last week that even though people often think of “ministry” as being reserved for “ordained professionals who work for the church,” in reality God calls *every follower of Jesus* to be in ministry in some way. And the primary task of the church leadership is to facilitate that.

So, that's what we've talked about so far to this point: practical teaching, private spiritual disciplines and personal ministry.

Next week we'll conclude this series by looking at *pivotal circumstances* ...

... which are the events and situations (good and not-so-good) that push us into "new territory" of some kind; things like moving or having a baby or changing jobs or even some kind of tragedy.

But today we're going to talk about the fourth thing God uses to grow us and our faith: *providential relationships*.

A Definition

So, what's a providential relationship?

Well, we all know what a *relationship* is: it's connection to and interaction with another person.

But what makes a relationship *providential* is the sense that God has had a hand in making it happen. (Actually, when *anything* is providential, that's the idea; that God in His *providence* provided something that we needed).

So, in a providential relationship, there's the sense that God has divinely intervened to bring that specific person onto our path.

For example, a lot of couples will talk about that kind of thing. They'll say "I met this guy or this gal and I just felt like we were meant to be together. I felt like God orchestrated the whole thing."

And that might be true ... especially if you were praying for God to do that.

But, what we're looking at today goes *beyond that* – beyond the sense that God brought someone into our life – because ...

A providential relationship (at least as we're

defining it in this series) *also* helps us to grow into the person that God wants us to become.

When a relationship with someone is providential

...

- Observing them
- Hanging out with them
- Talking with them
- Listening to them
- Doing life with them

... increases our faith in some way.

It has the effect of encouraging us to keep on following Jesus; challenging us to strive to become more like Him in the way we think, act and impact the world around us.

When a relationship with someone is providential we are able to see God *in* them or to hear from God *through* them.ⁱ

The Bible is full of examples of these kinds of relationships, especially in the story of how Christianity began to spread throughout the Roman world.

Not long after Jesus is resurrected, a high government official from Ethiopia is riding down the road in his chariot, reading – of all things – the biblical book of Isaiah. At the exact same time, God gives a nudge to a young Christian leader by the name of Philip and directs him to get in the path of that official – literally, on the road that went south out of Jerusalem to Gaza.

When the official comes by, Philip overhears him reading aloud ...

... and runs up and asks

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he

invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Acts 8:30-31 (NIV)

And Philip does and he explains to the man that the passage is about how the Messiah is going to suffer for the sins of Israel and the whole world. And then he explains what has just happened in Jerusalem to Jesus and how that is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the official said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Acts 8:36 (NIV)

And he orders the driver to stop. He and Philip go down into the water. And he's baptized.

And then he goes on his way back to his home in Ethiopia rejoicing in his newfound faith.

Oh, and by the way, *through him, the Good News of Jesus is introduced into Africa.*

That's a providential relationship. God ordained it. God used Philip to grow this man's faith (and eventually, the faith of many others).

Same kind of thing happens between the Apostle Peter and the Roman centurion, Cornelius. God arranges for them to meet so Peter can explain who Jesus is and help Cornelius and his family grow in their faith.

Same kind of thing happens when Saul of Tarsus becomes a believer and God sends a man named Ananias and then another named Barnabas not only to welcome him into the Christian community that he had been persecuting but also to teach him and help him grow in his faith.

And if you were to ask any follower of Jesus today who has a strong faith and is becoming more of the person they were meant to be, they would be able to tell you similar kinds of stories (though maybe not as dramatic as some of those!) ... stories

about specific people God providentially placed in their lives for that same purpose – people who were able *teach* them things that couldn't *learn* on their own or *show* them things they couldn't *see* on their own.

I'm curious: is there anybody in your life like that?

- Someone who God used to introduce you to faith, or who encouraged you to give God a chance in your life?
- Someone who challenged you to take the next step in your spiritual growth? Or who modeled for you what that looks like?
- Someone about whom, as you look back, you can say “I'm really thankful God brought that person into my life because they helped me to become more of who He wants me to be?”

Think about that for just a bit.

For me, personally, any list I would come up with would have to include my wife and our three daughters. It would also have to include the leadership team here at North Heartland: Kitti, Ladell, Shannon and Mica.

I'm certain that God put all of those people in my life to help me go and grow in the right direction. Those are all providential relationships.

But, as I look further back in time, I think of guy named *Richie Loomis*. I met Richie when I was in the 10th grade. We were both in the “symphonic band” at Bowie High School. He played French horn and I played trumpet.

One day Richie came up to me and said, “at my church we have a youth group and we’re doing this theatrical production about Jesus and we need a trumpet player. Would you be interested in auditioning?”

I said yes and I passed the test.

And for the next five years, I was part of that group, part of that church – Grace Baptist Church. And that’s where I learned so many things about following Jesus and not only that: I also learned about the power of music and drama and spoken word to communicate His message.

I think that was part of God’s plan, too, because it’s no exaggeration to say that what we do here at NHCC every Sunday is a direct result of that experience 35 years ago. And that experience was a direct result of the providential relationship between me and Rich Loomis.

So, if you like North Heartland (or you don’t) thank or blame him!

When I think about providential relationships, I also think about *Tom Hufty*. Tom was an associate pastor at Pleasant Valley Baptist Church in the late 1980s when we moved to Kansas City so I

could go to seminary. Not only was he a great youth pastor, he was also a great guy.

As part of my degree program, I had to find a mentor who would meet with me every week for an entire school year, so I asked Tom. At first he said “no” because he hardly knew me at that point, and he didn’t have time.

But a few days later he called me back and said, “God keeps impressing on me that I need to say yes.”

And, for a year, not only did that guy coach me in what it meant to be in full-time ministry, he also confronted me about me – and where I desperately needed to grow and change, specifically in the area of being patient and gracious with others like Jesus was patient and gracious with me.

So many days I walked out of his office thinking, “am I ever going to get this right?” It was hard

sometimes but it was so helpful, so catalytic in whatever positive transformation has taken place in me.

Of course, when I think about all the providential relationships in my life, none surpasses that which I have with my friend, *Rusty Savage*, who is pastor of First Baptist Church in Platte City. I've told the story before but it's worth telling again.

Almost 20 years ago ... at a conference ... speaker "burnout" ... just so happened to be there with his wife (talk about putting a person in your path - literally)

I felt God nudge – ask him “would you be open?” – nah, but I did. We've met pretty much every Thursday since then.

The Power of Relationships

So, bottom line, relationships have had a big impact on the trajectory of my life. I would not be

who I am today without those people.

And that's true for all of us. You wouldn't be you with the relationships in your life.ⁱⁱ

In fact, *scientists are actually* catching on to the importance of relationships.

As I was preparing for this message, I read one study that found that being lonely and isolated was as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic. It was as harmful as not exercising and twice as bad as being obese.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even worse, in another study of 7,000 men and women, researchers found that during the nine-year period of the study “people who were disconnected from others were roughly three times more likely to die than people with strong social ties.”^{iv}

So basically, if you're a smoker who doesn't have

any relationships, you're doomed. It's all over.

So, science says that relationships are important.

Not only that, if you think about it, some of *the greatest memories* we all have are tied to relationships. When we remember things like holidays and vacations and other significant events, we almost always think about the people who were there and the things happened with them.

In addition, some of *the greatest pains* of our lives come from relationships. People we were close to, people we trusted hurt us in some way. And a lot of still carry wounds from that which affect us every day.

Furthermore, some of our *greatest regrets* are tied to relationships. When we look back over our lives we say, "if only I hadn't run around with that crowd" or "if only I had not gotten connected with that individual" things would be so much

better for me today.

So, again, point is ... relationships are exceptionally powerful. They have the ability to move us and to mold us ...

... which is why so much of what we read in the record of early Christianity has to do with relationships and why there is an unmistakable assumption that followers of Jesus need to be – *and will be* – connected to other followers of Jesus ...

- Even when it's hard because of personality differences
- Even when there's misunderstanding and conflict
- Even when there's sin and broken trust (and there will be because people who belong to Jesus are still sinners and still do sinful things from time to time).

Regardless of all of that the undebatable truth is

that ...

You will never be the person you were meant to be – you will never become the very best version of yourself – apart from relationships with other Christ-followers.

There is no such thing as a *successful* “Lone Ranger Christian.”

That’s why God uses providential relationships. That’s why when maturing believers tell stories of how God worked in their life, they’ll point to certain individuals and describe the impact that their connection and interaction with that person had on their life.

In the Christian faith, everybody has a “somebody” who pointed them to Jesus or helped them along the way. And everybody can be a “somebody.”^v

Getting Practical

Now, at this point, I know that some of you are thinking, “Ok, Rick, I get what you’re saying but I’m not sure this is very practical because, by the very definition of the word *providential*, this is a God-thing that happens in a person’s life. You can’t manufacture this. You can’t make a providential relationship happen.”

True that.

But what we *can* do is to put ourselves in a position where providential relationship might happen.

We can be proactive and intentional about how and who we form relationships with.

Look, there is no debating the fact that the quality of our friends eventually determines the quality of our lives. Every person you spend time with is either going to build you up or tear you down in some way.

The Bible records a very short but powerful

observation along these lines. King Solomon of ancient Israel (the person that the Bible calls the wisest man who ever lived – other than Jesus) ...

... once put it like this ...

*Walk with the wise and become wise,
for a companion of fools suffers
harm. Proverbs 13:20 (NIV)*

If you hang out with people who are making good decisions and who are heading in a good direction, that will impact you in a positive way. And it's possible that one of those folks might even turn out to be a providential person in your life.

But if you hang out with people who are negative about God, negative about life, always the victim, always looking to play the system – “fools” Solomon calls them – then you're headed for trouble.

The Apostle Paul writing centuries later to Christ

followers in Corinth expressed that same idea ...

... when he wrote to them:

*“Bad company corrupts good
character.” 1 Corinthians
15:33 (NIV)*

Turns out that Paul was actually quoting one of the well-known poets of that time^{vi} which means this isn't exactly rocket science here. It's common sense.

So the question is ...

- Who are you walking with that is help you become the best version of yourself?
- Who is working against that purpose in your life?
- Who do you need to spend more time with?
- Who needs to get less time?

There's no question that the beginning of a providential relationship is God's domain but you

and I have a role to play, too, in where and with whom we spend our time.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying ... because I know some of you are thinking, "yeah but didn't Jesus hang out with 'sinners'? Didn't he hang out with people who we might call 'bad company'?"

Yes, He did, absolutely. But ...

- He was also a lot more centered on what really matters than most of us are.
- And He didn't spend all of his time in time in those relationships.
- And He was the influencer not the influenced.

So, just to be clear, I'm not saying we should shut ourselves off from "fools" (to use the biblical terminology) but that the balance of our time needs to be invested in the company of people who are heading in the direction that we are.

And if you're not interested in that – if that idea isn't appealing to you, you probably need to ask yourself what direction you're truly heading in.

If you're saying “I really want to become more of the person God intends for me to be, I want to be more like Christ” and yet, you don't want to spend any time around other people who are heading in that direction, I don't know ... but I think you might be kidding yourself.

Because the truth is ... when you think about growing from where you are right now in your faith, it will not happen without the involvement of another person because, in the Christian life, everybody has a “somebody.”

... which is why the pastors of this church believe it is so important for people who come to North Heartland to get connected in Christian friendships. It's why we are always talking about new small groups forming and inviting people to join. It's why we're always talking getting

involved by serving on a team of volunteers.

See, you can only grow so much in a *row* ...

... sitting in a worship service, in a row like you are right now, listening to a message (as good and practical as it might be).

At some point you have to get in a *circle* ...

... where you are face-to-face with other people who are also seeking to grow and to serve Jesus.

That's why, again, so much of the earliest Christian writings make so much of believers being connected with "one another."

- Teach one another
- Serve one another
- Encourage one another
- Pray for one another
- And above all, love one another.

That doesn't happen here in this room. It can't.

You can only grow so much in a row. At some point you have to get in a circle.

“Oh Well” vs. “What If”

Now, over the years as a pastor, I've discovered that a lot of people understand this idea and even agree with it. In fact, they'll hear me or one of the other pastors promote a specific kind of small group or a serving opportunity and they'll sense an internal nudge from God: “hey, you should go down front and find out about that” or “you should fill out the response card and indicate your interest.”

But they don't do it because they think “if I do that, it might not turn out like they're saying. I might not connect with the other people who sign up. I might not enjoy serving in that way or with that team of people.”

And what happens is that they miss out on what might turn out to be a providential relationship. They don't realize that the nudge they feel might actually be God directing them and bringing other people onto their path!^{vii}

And they also don't realize that if their worst fears materialize and whatever they signed up for does turn out to be a bust ...

- Oh well, I gave it a try.
- Oh well, that didn't work.
- Oh well, maybe next time.
- Oh well, at least I put myself in a position where God could do something providential.

And here's the thing – and I can't take credit for this statement because I didn't think of it myself – but it's so true that I'm going to repeat it:

A life of “oh wells” is better than a life of “what ifs.”^{viii}

It's better to be saying "oh well" than to be saying
...

- What if I'd said yes to that invitation?
- What if I'd given that small group a try?
- What if I'd rearranged my priorities so I could serve on that volunteer team?

I think about my friendship with Rusty and the positive impact that's had on my life and how, at that point, neither of us could have predicted the kind of mutually beneficial relationship we have developed over the years.

What if I hadn't followed up on that nudge to ask him if he wanted to hang out every week? I mean, it was awkward because I had to bare my soul and say "I'm not perfect. I need help. I need a buddy to kick my butt and pat me on the head."

And what if he hadn't said yes?

But I did ask and he did say yes.

And the worst that could have happened was, after a couple of weeks or a couple of months, we would have said, “oh well. Nice try but this isn’t really helpful. It’s not turning out like we thought it would. Oh well.”

But here’s my point: all it takes is one “yes” to completely redirect the course of your life. That is the power of providential relationships. We can’t make it happen but we can put ourselves in a position where it can.

And if it doesn’t, “oh well.” And isn’t that better than “what if?”

Now, here’s the flip side to that.

In the same way that God has brought providential people into your life, *God also wants to use you as a providential person in someone else’s life.* God wants to use you to help bring them to where they need to be; to help them become the best

possible version of themselves which can only happen when they know Jesus and follow Him.

I think one of the most depressing things I hear as a pastor is when someone who has been a Christian for a long time who has a lot to offer to younger people – both younger in age and younger in their faith ... when someone who has been a Christian for a long time says “well, I don’t really need a small group. I’m kind of beyond that right now.”

And if that’s your situation, let me say that I understand that there are seasons of life where that’s true.

But I also have to say it’s just as true – and I hope you will never forget this, I hope you will never forget what it was like to be new in the faith or wanting to grow but not knowing what to do ...

I hope you will never forget that there are a whole bunch of people who need you. There are a whole

bunch of people who one day, when they tell their faith story, might mention *you* as one of the people who God providentially brought into their life.

In the Christian faith, everybody has a “somebody” so be the “somebody” that somebody was to you.^{ix}

Just do for them what was done for you.

So ... question:

- Who in your life needs a nudge or a conversation?
- Who needs a push or maybe even a kick in the butt towards God?
- Who needs you to step up and take a risk?
- Who needs you to invite them to come to church with you?

As I’m saying that, someone is coming to mind.

Listen ... you could be the providential person that God sends into their life.

And I know that thought is a little scary. And I know your first thought is to say “no way” because if you take the risk, and you get involved, they might shut you out. They might say no to your invitation.

Oh, well. It’s not because you didn’t try. It’s not because you didn’t make the effort. Oh, well.

It’s a lot better than a “what if.”

Don’t live your life with a bunch of “what if’s” because what if the “somebody” in your life didn’t take a risk on you.

Friends, what I know for certain is that God wants the people in our lives to know Jesus and to follow Him and to grow in Him and to become the best possible version of themselves. And we can’t *make* that happen. But we can make ourselves *available*

to be the “somebody” that somebody was to us.

Conclusion

So, let’s wrap this up.

Here’s what I want you to remember from today (and by the way, if you forget it, you can always watch the replay of this message on our website or app or listen to it on our podcast).

You will never be the person you were meant to be – you will never become the very best version of yourself – apart from relationships with other Christ-followers.

That's why God uses providential relationships to help us to grow into the person that God wants us to become.

We can't make that happen but what we can do is to put ourselves in a position where a providential relationship might happen.

That means we have to move beyond just the row and get into a circle where we

connect face to face.

And if it doesn't work the first time or the second time or even the third time, "oh well, at least we tried."

Because a life of “oh wells” is better than a life of “what ifs.”

Would you stand for a closing prayer and a blessing?

And as you're standing ...

- Just a quick reminder to check out the flyer in the program for more info about small groups.
- And also, if you want to know more about volunteer teams you can stop at the information center on the way out and give them your name and contact information and our volunteer coordinator, Julie Smoldt, will get in touch with you.

Let's pray.

Father in Heaven, everybody here has a "somebody" who is part of the reason why they are here today.

And right now, we want to say "thank you" for bringing that person or persons into our lives. We pray your blessing on them. We pray that even today in some way, they would sense your smile and your "well done, good and faithful servant" for what they did for us.

And, Lord, some of us need to become the "somebody" that somebody was to us. And that's a little scary so I pray that you will open the door and give us courage to do and say what needs to be done and said.

Blessing

Now, may the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord make His face to shine upon
you.

May the Lord lift up His countenance upon
you

And give you peace.

Amen.

See you next week!

Endnotes

ⁱ Andy Stanley, Five Things, Providential Relationships

ⁱⁱ This section is inspired by a message by Chris Yaunches, Hope Community Church, found at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kbgpgbddwlg&t=0s&list=PLARdFEUGcdhGDIMcA0WT_9uher_92l6UX&index=4

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/jul/27/friendship-relationships-good-health-study>

^{iv} <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/12/well/live/having-friends-is-good-for-you.html>

^v Shawn Spradling, Centerpointe Christian Church

<https://cpcc.church/messages/providential-relationships/>

^{vi} The Greek poet Menander

^{vii} <http://www.bellefontefait.com/5-things-god-uses-to-grow-our-faith-providential-relationships-sermon-from-1102016/>

^{viii} Spradling

^{ix} Spradling