

Shine Through God-Centeredness

“Thee” vs. Me

July 10, 2016

PRELUDE – Finding Who We Are

Worship Songs – Finding Who We Are / Lord I Need You

Prayer – Rick

Lord, the truth about us is that we do need you right now. We need you not only for our salvation and righteousness but, also, we need you in our nation. We’ve seen some terrible things in recent days; despicable acts of violence and hatred and we wonder “when will it stop? What is the answer?”

We know that You are not only grieved by

these things but that You are part of the answer. And so we turn to you in this hour for strength. We ask your Holy Spirit to be with the families of Alton Sterling and Phil Castile and also with the families of the officers killed and wounded in Dallas. It's hard to imagine *any* of those folks being comforted in this time but we ask You to lead those who love them to surround them with whatever they need.

But Lord, we know that another part of the answer to what we are seeing is *each of us* as individual men and women but, more than that, *all of us* who collectively make up your church – this church and all other Christ-following churches in this nation. Together You have called *us* to shine the light and make a difference. We pray that in our time together this morning You would give us

wisdom and direction on how to do that.

Amen.

And we'll talk more about that in just a few minutes but first, a few things you need to know about what's going on here at North Heartland.

Video – Announcements / Generosity

Feature – This Little Light of Mine / Offering

Video Clip – SPIRITUAL RECOVERY (0.9 min)

(Begin) Kellon Nixon: “When you start to hear the shooting and see the shooting ...”

(End) Kellon: “How can I teach him? How can I raise him?”ⁱ

In the 22 years I have served as pastor of this church, I've had the opportunity – and the burden – to give a message following some of the most wicked and shameful acts and situations that we've been witness to as citizens of this nation:

- The massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado.
- The Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski scandal.
- The terrorist attack of September 11th, 2001.
- The torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib.
- The greed-induced economic meltdown of 2011.
- The massacre at the Emanuel Church in Charleston last summer.
- The terrorist attack at San Bernardino

last Christmas.

- And, in recent days, we've had to talk about the pending nominations of a clinical narcissist, a congenital liar and a pothead to the highest office in the land.

But *never*, in all my years as pastor, have I felt the urgency with which I am speaking to you this morning concerning the events of this past week. If ever there was a time and a need for the light to shine in the darkness, it is now.

I'm sure you're well aware that following the tragic shooting deaths by police of two African-American men – Alton Sterling and Phil Castile, 12 police officers in Dallas, TX were shot (and five of them killed) by a lone African-American sniper whose stated

purpose was “to kill as many white officers as possible” as payback. It was the deadliest attack against law enforcement since 9-11.ⁱⁱ

On the day after the attack, Dallas Police Chief David Brown had this to say.

Video Clip – WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT
(2.0 min)

(Begin) Chief Brown: “We’re hurting ...”

(End) Chief Brown: “Please. We need your support.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 1>

Now, I certainly don’t mean to minimize what happened in Minnesota or Louisiana. I hope and pray that that the truth comes out and that justice is served for those men and their families. But when the climate of our culture is such that Chief of Police in a major U.S. city says that he and his officers

don't feel much support most days, something is dreadfully wrong.

What's interesting – and sad – is that this perception on the part of law enforcement isn't limited to Dallas. Morale among police nationwide is at an all-time low, including right here, in Kansas City; in Missouri. And so, I don't want today to be like most days for those men and women who are sworn to protect and defend us. I don't want there to be any doubt that we, the people of NHCC, value and honor those who, as Chief Brown said, literally put their lives on the line for us daily.

So, if you work in law enforcement or if you are in the military, I'm going to ask you to do something right now that I know you don't want to do because you don't do your

job for applause. But I'm going to ask you anyway to stand up where you are right now so that we can say "we support you."

<< Law Enforcement Officers & Military Personnel stand>>

Before you sit down, let me pray for you.

<<prayer>>

"This has been a week of profound grief and heartbreaking loss," said our U.S Attorney General, Loretta Lynch. "After the events of this week, Americans across our country are feeling a sense of helplessness, of uncertainty and of fear."

A NY Times article this morning describes the mood like this:

Just days after the United States celebrated its 240th birthday, people in interviews across the country said that the nation increasingly felt mired in bloodshed and blame, and that despite pleas for compassion and unity, it was fracturing along racial and ideological lines into angry camps of liberals against conservatives, Black Lives Matter against Blue Lives Matter, protesters against the police. Whose side were you on? Which victims did you mourn?ⁱⁱⁱ

Or, as Charlie Beck, chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, recently told a class of cadets:

“We have broken into tribes. All of a sudden it becomes more important

who your parents are, what the color of your skin is, than whether you are American.” But “this is not about black lives, or brown lives or blue lives,” he added. “This is about America.”^{iv}

And he is right about that. This is about America. It’s about who we are as a people. And it’s a big deal.

As I watched what was happening in Dallas last Thursday, my primary emotions were *shock* and *bewilderment* and *a sense of dread* that, as a culture, we are crossing lines and entering into territory from which, history shows, it will become very difficult to return. For a citizen to randomly attack and kill police officers who had nothing to do with an injustice that took place elsewhere sounds far too much like what happens

“somewhere else” in the world; specifically, in backwards, regressive and oppressive cultures where vindictiveness and revenge are the rule rather than the exception; in places where police and military personnel eventually become so demoralized that they give up and give in to elements of corruption.

Is this the road we are now on as a nation?

I hope that it is not. But I fear that it is, despite of all the well-intentioned heartfelt pleas for us all to rise above it and treat one another with respect.

“We must reject the easy impulses of bitterness and rancor,” said Attorney General Lynch, “and embrace the difficult work — but the important work, the vital

work — of finding a path forward together.”

In an interview with CNN on Friday, Malik Aziz, the deputy chief of police in Dallas, said:

“Days like yesterday or the day before — they shouldn’t happen. But when they do, let’s be human beings. Let’s be honorable men and women and sit down at a table and say, ‘How can we not let this happen again?’ and be sincere in our hearts.”^v

NY Times op-ed columnist Charles Blow, in his column entitled “A Week from Hell,” wrote that:

“This is a time when communities, institutions, movements and even nations are tested. Will the people of

moral clarity, good character and righteous cause be able to drown out the chorus of voices that seek to use each dead body as a societal wedge?”^{vi}

I hope we will. But I fear we will not.

And not just because I’m overly negative or in shock at what I’ve seen. I fear we will *not* “embrace the work of finding a path forward together” and I fear we will *not* be “honorable men and women of sincere hearts” because it has become abundantly clear that our society at large and *especially our leaders* – political and civic – have forgotten where those kinds of people come from.

Or, to be more precise, they (and we) have forgotten what it is that *serves to produce*

people of moral clarity, good character and righteous cause. Virtue doesn't just happen by osmosis.

And because we have forgotten where virtuous people come from and what produces them, we are in grave danger as a republic. Quite frankly, today we are in far more danger from ourselves than we are from ISIS or any other extremist organization. We are in danger of imploding from within. And that danger grows with each passing day that we ignore both *the virtue that freedom requires* and *that which produces virtue*.

Let me say that again. The danger to the way of life we've been blessed with as Americans grows with each day that we ignore both *the virtue that freedom requires*

and *that which produces virtue.*

Freedom & Virtue

And that's really what I want to talk to you about this morning. So, let me take those two ideas one at a time and let's start with the first one, the relationship between freedom and virtue.

Freedom (which by any measure is the hallmark and the uniqueness of our nation) cannot exist (at least not for very long) without virtue.

One of the great paradoxes of freedom is that you really *can't* do whatever it is you want to do at least not for very long.

For example, I am free to eat as many Krispy Kreme donuts as I want but, if I do

that every day, eventually I'll get sick and maybe worse. In order to remain free to eat Krispy Kreme donuts, I have to show some restraint. I have to limit myself. I have to exercise self-discipline. That's what virtue does.

In our backyard, we have two gorgeous sunflower plants that have each grown like crazy with all the rain we've had. They're both up to about five feet tall. However, one plant is thriving and the other will probably die soon.

The difference between the two? On one plant, we tied the main stalks to three dowel rods. The other, we just let grow because we didn't have any more rods (and we keep forgetting to buy more rods). Both plants are "free" so to speak but one has

limits on how far out it can spread while the other does not. If we don't get three more rods, and soon, that one will die.

Virtue constrains freedom in such a way that freedom doesn't wind up choking itself out or toppling under the glorious weight of it.

The Apostle Paul understood this when he was writing to the Christ-followers in the first-century city of Corinth. A huge part of Paul's ministry and teaching was helping Christians understand that it wasn't by trying to obey God's law that they were saved. It was by God's grace shown through what Jesus did on the cross.

And that meant that whenever they sinned they were not under condemnation. There

was no penalty from God because Jesus had taken that on Himself.

And *that* meant that they were free – truly free – from the law. They didn’t have to keep it to be considered righteous before God. They understood, as we sang earlier in the service, that their righteousness was Jesus.

And *because of that*, some of the Corinthians were living as if there was no reason to do anything other than whatever they felt like doing in the moment – even if it violated God’s law.

Here’s what Paul wrote to them.

“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have

the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.
1 Corinthians 10:23-24 (NET)

You're free to do what you want any old time (like the popular song says) but when you actually *do* what you want any old time – when you do not limit yourself – the results may not be beneficial and constructive. And not just in your own life but in the lives of others.

“Freedom isn't only about what you want,” Paul is saying. “It will eventually become your prison if what you are doing isn't good for you and for others.”

Earlier we heard from Kellon Nixon, who is a pastor in Dallas and who was also at the

rally with his five-year-old son. The reporter from MSNBC later asked him what he thought the solution to the racial tension was and he gave two answers. I'm going to show you both of them but pay close attention the second answer. Let's watch.

<END SLIDE SET 1>

Video Clip – WHAT AMERICA NEEDS (1.2 min)

(Begin) Kellon Nixon: “That’s tough. I mean, my first answer ...”

(End) Kellon: “...no matter how materially rich we are.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

He’s right.

We are free in this country to pursue prosperity. But when we don’t put limits on

that pursuit – when it outstrips our desire to be moral, then we lose our heart and our soul. We’re really at the bottom no matter how materially rich we are.

Of course, probably no one in the history of our nation has understood this better than our founders. To them it was obvious, or “self-evident,” that self-government, or a democratic republic, could only be perpetuated by the self-governed.^{vii}

Benjamin Franklin said: “Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom.”

John Adams said, “Public virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private Virtue, and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics.”

George Washington said: “Virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government [or government by the population]” and “Human rights can only be assured among a virtuous people.”

James Madison stated: “To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical [imaginary] idea.”

Samuel Adams said: “Neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt. He therefore is the truest friend of the liberty of his country who tries most to promote its virtue.”

“You want to be a free people?” Adams was

saying. “Then promote virtue in your country.”

And what is virtue? One writer says that virtue is an all-encompassing word that includes the characteristics of “goodwill, patience, tolerance, kindness, respect, humility, gratitude, courage, honor, hard work, honesty, chastity, responsibility and faithfulness. Virtue rejects prejudice and discrimination, affirming that all men are created equal.”

And freedom cannot exist without it. Freedom cannot exist without virtue.

Sadly, however, virtue has fallen on hard times in America. It’s too old-fashioned. It’s too “right wing.” It’s too conservative. It better fits previous generations –

generations that we, in all of our modern wisdom, have come to realize were just backwards and repressed.

And what's really ironic about that is that, as virtue has decreased in America, more and more limits are being placed on our freedoms. That's why there is so much talk, for instance, about gun control. And it makes sense. When a nation as a whole is growing less virtuous, the only way to ensure stability in society is to limit freedoms.

- A nation full of self-absorbed and selfish people *shouldn't* be allowed to own guns.
- Self-absorbed and selfish people should *not* be allowed to say or write whatever they want. They'll be too

mean and hurtful.

- And they shouldn't be able to assemble or protest. Who knows what they'll do?
- And self-absorbed and selfish religion is a danger to society so it should be outlawed, too.

And this is one option for this country going forward. Limit our freedoms.

Of course, if we do that we probably shouldn't call it *America* any longer because it's precisely the opposite of what was intended; of what we have been gifted as citizens.

The Source of Virtue

But it doesn't have to be that way. We *could*,

as a society (and more importantly, as individuals), seek to become more virtuous and therefore more able to handle the freedoms that we're promised in our Constitution.

Of course, that would require understanding – and admitting – where virtue actually comes from. As I said earlier, it doesn't just happen. It doesn't magically appear in people. Instead, *it is formed in them*. The founders of our country understood that, too.

So where does it come from? What is it that produces virtue in people?

John Adams said it best:

“We have no government armed with power capable of contending with

human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, [and] revenge ... would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net.

“Our Constitution was made only for a moral and *religious* people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Remember what Kellon Nixon said in that first video clip? He said that when he got home and reflected on what had happened he began to wonder that if “maybe it’s not black lives matter or all lives matter; *maybe it’s just my life matters*. Maybe it’s just *my family’s life matters*.”

And then he said, “I had to be reminded

that God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind” which is a direct quote from the New Testament (2 Timothy 1:7).

Then he said, “If I let the mentality [of just my life matters and my family’s life matters] ... if I let that mentality overwhelm me then who can I help? How can I teach my son? How can I raise him?”

In other words, “if that becomes my mindset, what good am I to this culture?”

Pretty incredible because, in that one statement, Nixon is not only making the argument for virtue as the foundation of life together as nation; he is also pointing to the *source* of virtue ... God, which, as I’m sure you noticed, he came out and said

directly in the second clip. We need to admit our need for God because ...

Virtue comes from being God-centered (which, coincidentally, happens to be the topic of this series).

Now, obviously, God-centeredness can mean many things.

To John Adams and several other founders, God was an unidentified Supreme Being who created the world and had a hand in the affairs of nations and individuals and therefore, nations and individuals owed that Being their best attempt at being morally upright as that Being would one day judge the world. In their minds this Being was at the center of everything and everything revolved around that center.

In addition, a person who believes that god is in the tree in their backyard and hugs it every day and asks it for wisdom could be also described as god-centered. I think they're probably deluded but, if they get wisdom from that and it leads to virtue then, OK, that's helpful as it concerns our nation.

In addition, a person who believes in Allah and prays five times daily could also be described as God-centered. And if that belief produces virtue in them (and I don't mean a despicable and phony virtue that says it's good to kill infidels and non-believers which is clearly a deception to any sane person) ... if belief in Allah produces virtuous living, then that, too, is helpful to maintaining the freedom of our nation.

That's why the founders had the wisdom to design a system that protected and provided for religious pluralism. They understood that religion and god-centeredness produces virtue and virtue ensures that freedom doesn't spin out of control and become a path of self-destruction.

Christian God-Centeredness

Of course, here at NHCC, we're Christians and so, the kind of God-centeredness I want to talk about in the next three Sundays that follow is a bit more focused than the unidentified Supreme Being portrayed in our founding documents. It's the God who revealed Himself, we believe, in Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, we aren't able to go into a lot of depth this morning as our time is growing short. However, I want to do briefly draw just a bit of a picture of what God-centeredness looks like. This isn't really a proper definition (in the way we defined *generosity* and *graciousness*) and we might not have a definition because the term "God-centered" is fairly obvious. A God-centered person is someone who has God at the center of their lives. Duh.

But to flesh out just a little of what that looks like will be helpful, I think. And you can help me on this. Audience participation time. Ready?

Who was the most God-centered person in the Bible?

Hint: he was a pretty big deal in the New Testament.

It's Jesus! Jesus was the most God-centered person in the Bible. He said, "I and the Father are One. I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Whatever He does, that's what I do." It's pretty hard to get much more God-centered than that! So, if you want to see what a God-centered person looks like, start with what Jesus did.

However, I think there's an even better way to get a picture of what a God-centered person looks like. And we can see it in Jesus, too.

Over the years, I've noticed that you can tell a lot about what people believe about where God is in the Universe by how they

pray and what they pray about.

For instance, a lot of my prayers – and I would bet a lot of yours – sound like this:

- Dear God, I really need this. Can you get it for me?
- Dear God, I really wish ... could you please take care it?
- Dear God, I'm really afraid of such and such. Can you keep it from happening?
- Oh, can you also bless my food, bless my family, bless my team?

My prayers, most of the time, are very me-centered because, in my mind, *I* am at the center of the Universe. Oh, God *is* a nice, handy addition to my world. In my world (which is completely centered around me) I have my job, my family, my friends, my

hobbies, and oh, looky, there's Jesus and the church, too. Isn't that special?

But when Jesus – the most God-centered person in the Bible prayed, it sounded a lot different. Do you remember the prayer He taught?

Sure you do. Audience participation again. Here we go:

Our Father who art in Heaven
Hallowed be Thy Name
Thy Kingdom Come
Thy Will Be Done on Earth as it is in
Heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors
Lead us not into temptation but

deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.

Who is that prayer about? *God*. God's Name and Glory. God's Kingdom and dominion. God's will and purposes. Even the "Give us" part is about God: God's provision and God's protection.

Bottom line and if you're looking for a first-step towards a definition, it would be this:

A God-centered person lives as if it's all about "Thee" (to use the KJV biblical terminology) and not about Me (because it is).

Now, we're going to get specific about that in the next three weeks but I want to give

you just one very practical thing in that direction this morning, again, from the life of Jesus.

Do you know what Jesus – the most God-centered person in the Bible and who ever lived – do you know what Jesus did every Sabbath day?

He went to church.

Well, actually, He went to *synagogue* because the church didn't exist until after His resurrection, but it's the same principle. The most God-centered person who ever lived went to church ... every week.

Why? Because that time out of worship and teaching was a concrete way for Him to join

the assembled congregation as a sign and proclamation that “this whole world is about Thee and not about Me.”

Conclusion

Now, at this point, you might say, “well, that’s pretty interesting but how does God-centeredness produce virtue? How does living a life that puts God in the middle make the world – and my life – better?”

Well, Paul once explained it pretty well in his letter to the Galatians. In chapter 5 he writes:

*When you follow the desires of
your sinful nature ...*

In other words, when you live with you at the center of everything ...

... the results are very clear:

Interesting – that’s kind of like what Kellon Dixon said. Then Paul goes on to describe what happens when we put ourselves instead of God at the center of the Universe.

*sexual immorality, impurity,
lustful pleasures, idolatry,
sorcery, hostility, quarreling,
jealousy, outbursts of anger,
selfish ambition, dissension,
division, envy, drunkenness,
wild parties, and other sins like
these.*

When there is no God at the center, Paul says – and experience proves – there is no virtue.

But ... the Holy Spirit produces

*this kind of fruit in our lives:
love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
gentleness, and self-control.
Galatians 5:19-23 (NLT)*

What does that sound like? *Virtue*. God at the center; the Holy Spirit of Jesus at the center of our lives produces virtuous thoughts, attitudes and behaviors.

Now at *this* point, I think some of you are probably drawing up the conclusion for me. “Now comes the part where Rick says that America needs to turn back and put God in the center of everything and all will be well.”

But I’m not, though I think that would be

true. In fact, I think we would all be a lot better off if our leaders and politicians knew a little more about the Constitution and our founders than their constituency and therefore encouraged our citizenry to pursue virtue instead of government pork and handouts and favors. But that's not going to happen any time soon.

Truth is ... I'm not so much concerned that *America* in general needs to turn back to God and put God in the center as I am that *Christians* need to put God in the center.

- See, it's Christians who need to start living as if it's all about Thee and not about me.
- It's Christians who need to start praying as if it's all about Thee and not about me.

- And it's Christians (and I'm probably going to make some people mad) ... it's Christians who, quite frankly, need to start prioritizing church attendance because it's pathetic.

I get it – we all travel, I do, too. We all have different jobs. We all have kids in sports.

But seriously, one day of the week ought to be holy – set aside to the Lord. That means if you can't be at service, you go to church somewhere. You watch on livestream. You have a little time where you sit and do church on your own. Sing, read, pray. One day a week you do what the most God-centered person in the world did – you make proclaiming God's glory through worship and teaching a priority.

- “But I don’t have to go to church.” True. But your freedom to travel or sleep in and skip church isn’t beneficial or constructive to you and to this nation.
- “But I don’t like church.” Who said church is about you?
- “But there’s not a church like NHCC.” That was the case for almost 2,000 years and yet believers in Jesus found a way to prioritize.

Listen friends without strong churches in this country – where people actually show up to worship and volunteer and give – we’re sunk. Because who is going proclaim the glory of God and invite and challenge people to live virtuous lives? No one. Your kids are at stake. Your family and your country are at stake.

And virtue leaks. I need to hear good preaching. I need to worship. I need to be reminded of Who this really is all about. No one ever drifts towards something better.

Weight gain ... just stopped recording and stopped working out. Drift. Fat.

You want to be a good citizen and do your duty? Stop worrying about who you will vote for and be a virtuous person. And remember that it doesn't happen by osmosis. Virtue leaks. Keep putting yourself in environments where virtue is encouraged.

<Prayer>

This world needs strong churches

This world needs god-centered men and women

Grace and mercy of Jesus

Feature – Jesus (Citizens & Saints)

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Recap generosity project – up to 33
2. Graciousness project still going on – details at table
3. Day of fasting and prayer this week for our nation

Prayer pastor - Kitti

Endnotes

ⁱ Rev. Kellon Nixon, MSNBC interview following the Dallas shootings, <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc-news/watch/eyewitness-i-m-recovering-spiritually-today-721382467654>

ⁱⁱ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/09/us/dallas-police-shooting.html?_r=0

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/us/a-struggle-for-common-ground-amid-fears-of-a-national-fracture.html>

^{iv} <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/nyregion/in-week-of-emotional-swings-police-face-a-dual-role-villain-and-victim.html>

^v <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/10/opinion/how-america-heals-after-dallas.html>

^{vi} <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/11/opinion/a-week-from-hell.html>

^{vii} This statement and the following quotes are from <http://wjmi.blogspot.com/2011/04/no-liberty-without-virtue.html>.