

How to Build Something Great
Put the First Thing First
August 27, 2017

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO

**Worship Songs – Rejoice / Prayer / My Worth
BTS – Video**

Drama – “Vince Bueller’s Day Off”

**Feature – “Give Until There’s Nothing Left” /
Offering**

Good morning everyone.

I think I probably should start out by letting you know that it was *purely a coincidence* that the offering happened during that particular song, “Give Until There’s Nothing Left.” We weren’t trying to send a subliminal message or anything – although if you picked up on it, we might just chalk that up to the Lord speaking to you. 😊

Anyway ... I think you’ll see that the song (and the skit that happened before it) really does

have to do with what I'm going to be talking about this morning ... which, as Shannon said, is "putting the first thing first" – the third of six principles that will help you build something great, whether that something is:

- A business
- A team
- A family
- A church
- Your own personal life.

As I explained in detail last week, these six principles are actually based on the six core values of North Heartland: those things that are important (and unimportant) to us as we go about doing life together as a body of believers; what we emphasize (and what we don't) as we attempt to produce a ministry that ...

- Reaches spiritual seekers
- Builds a family of believers

- And impacts our community

That's our three-fold mission statement. That's why we exist.

But our *values* are what defines the unique *perspective* with which we go about *accomplishing* our mission and what it *feels* like to be part of it.

As I said last week, whenever people say to me “something about North Heartland feels different” – this is why. It's our values. And living according to our values is what creates our *culture* as a church.

By the way, the same thing is true for your family or your business or your team. Your values lived out over time is what produces your culture. The question is:

- Are you satisfied with that?

- Do you *like* how it feels to belong to your family?
- Does your spouse like how it feels? And your kids (if you're a parent)?
- If you're a business owner or a leader, would the people who work for you (or follow you) say they like how that feels?
- Are they – and you – satisfied with the culture you've created?

If not, these six values we're talking about will help you move beyond mediocrity towards greatness because not only are they biblically-based, they're transformative. They will change *you* and whatever it is that you are building.

And I know that to be true because they've changed not only this church but me and my

family.

So let's review very quickly.

In the first week we talked about the value of *a holistic perspective* on what it means to be “successful” ...

... redefining and broadening our definition of success to include *all three elements that are present* in whatever we're trying to accomplish: the people, the process and the production.

Then last week we looked at the value of *authenticity* which we defined as being appropriately transparent and vulnerable about our weaknesses and failures – “losing the mask” so to speak.

And we talked about why that matters in a congregation but also the transformational power that it has in other venues such as ... your family, your business and your team or anything

else that involves people.

If you were not here for either of those messages, as always, I strongly encourage you to watch, listen to or read it in the media section of our app and website – especially if you are in any kind of a leadership position (including family leadership).

Of Food & Feeding

But today, as I said, we're going to talk about "putting the first thing first" which seems kind of obvious, doesn't it? I mean, where else would you put the first thing?

However, years ago, when we were just beginning to build this thing we call North Heartland, we learned the hard way that most people – including our leadership, including me! – *had no idea what the first thing was.*

Furthermore, when they – we – finally figured it out, we would often put it way down the list of priorities. Not intentionally; it's just how things worked out in practice.

So, let me tell you how we happened to discover this principle. As I mentioned last week, at about five years into our life as church, we hit a time of crisis.

- At that point, we'd been doing mobile church since 1994 with no end in sight. And it was getting old.
- And there were a lot of unmet expectations among the 300 or so people who were part of our congregation ... in large part because we had not put much effort into clarifying our mission – *what exactly we were doing* (and *not* doing) - and our values – *what exactly mattered* (and what *did not*) as we carried out that mission.

At that point, we were just trying to *survive* from week-to-week so we were hesitant to risk running anyone off!

Instead, what we did was to try very hard to be all things to all people; to meet every need (spiritually speaking) that we became aware of.

So, in addition to our service every Sunday morning ...

- We had weekly small groups and Bible studies.
- Plus a mid-week service that featured a lot more congregational worship than we do on Sundays. (And since we were mobile, that meant another set up and tear down each week, plus childcare. It was hard to do).

- Plus a men's ministry and women's ministry.
- And retreats and special events.
- And a lot of one-on-one mentoring and counseling.

We were working hard trying to please everyone and meet everyone's needs but, in spite of all that, the number one criticism we heard ...

The number one complaint was "I'm not being fed."

Now, if you're not a church person you're probably thinking "wait a minute. Are you saying you guys were serving meals at all of those things and there wasn't enough for everyone?"

No. So let me translate for you.

Whenever a Christian talks about “being fed” they’re talking about “spiritual food – nourishment for the soul” so to speak ... which is a concept that runs throughout both the Old Testament and the New.

For example, speaking through the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, the Lord said:

*“Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters.*

*And you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!*

*Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without
cost.*

*“Why spend money on what is
not bread, and your labor on
what does not satisfy?*

*Listen, listen to me, and eat
what is good.”* *Isaiah*

55:1-2 (NIV)

And he was not speaking about literal food. He

was talking about coming to Him.

Jesus himself talked about this same idea.

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.” John 6:51 (NIV)

The earliest church leaders referred to it as well.

Peter wrote that new believers in Jesus ...

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. 1 Peter 2:2 (NIV)

And another leader used the same metaphor to chastise older followers of Jesus who had not grown.

He wrote:

You have been believers so long

now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food! Hebrews 5:12 (NLT)

The point of all this is that, if you're a follower of Jesus, you're supposed to grow in your faith and in your character and therefore you need "spiritual food."

Of course, someone might say, "Well, Rick, I don't see the problem. Christians need to be fed. And your people back then were telling you they didn't feel like they *were* being fed. You guys must have been doing something wrong."

That's what we thought, too.

And we spent a lot of time beating ourselves up as leaders until it finally hit us that ...

Well, let me put it like this: because you and I live in a very consumeristic society, we tend to think of almost everything in terms of producers and consumers.

<diagram> For example, whenever someone goes into business ...

... we implicitly understand that their goal is to produce something that someone consumes. If they do it well enough, people will come back and keep buying and that business gets to stay in business. In this model, the consumer has no real responsibility other than to be a savvy shopper.

And because we do live in such a consumeristic society, most people tend to apply the producer-consumer model to church.

<diagram> In this case ...

- The church leaders and whatever volunteers they can round up to help them are the producers.
- Members and attenders are the consumers.
- If the church provides a good product – *if people feel like they are being “spiritually fed”* – then the members and attenders keep coming back and the church stays “in business” so to speak.
- The only real responsibility of Christians in this model is to be a savvy *spiritual* connoisseur. Find the church that feeds you best ... until of course, you don't feel like you're being fed.

Now, there is an element of truth in that model. Churches – specifically, pastors and leaders – are supposed to provide “spiritual food” for

their people.

After all, Jesus' commission to Peter (as the leader of the future church) was "feed my sheep" – and He wasn't talking about providing grain for farm animals.

The problem comes when followers of Jesus think of "feeding" only as what they receive from an occasional experience of *worship and teaching*.

It's only what you get from this experience, right now.

And as we began to listen more closely to those who were complaining about not being fed, we discovered that ...

- A lot of them weren't part of a small group.
- Or they never came to a mid-week service.
- Or they rarely read the Bible or prayed on

their own.

- Or they only came to a Sunday service once or twice a month; some because they had to work, some because they stayed out too late Saturday night or they simply chose to do something else.

And what they were getting out of that occasional experience simply wasn't enough. Not a big surprise.

And that's when it hit us: even if a church could produce the greatest spiritual development programs in the world, in the end, each person must take responsibility for their own spiritual health.

Just like you can lead a horse to water, you can create programs for Christ-followers, but you can't make them eat and drink.

In the end, spiritual health and vitality comes down to you and me (assuming we're following

Jesus) figuring out what it takes to be “fed” and then making decisions and creating structures in our lives that allow us to go after that.

And when we realized that, it profoundly changed the way we thought about what we were doing ... so much so that it became one of our six values: *personal responsibility for spiritual health*.

And we decided that we were no longer going to try to be all things to all people. Instead ...

- We would do what we could do well with the resources we had (both in terms of people and money), focusing on those programs and activities with the highest leverage (spiritually speaking).
- And then we would challenge people to take responsibility for their spiritual health by fully engaging in what we offered

AND also by going beyond what we could offer.

And I'll explain what I mean by that in just a minute but there's a little twist to the story that led to another "aha" for us.

The "First Thing"

As we dug into why people felt like they weren't being fed, we also discovered that many of them were our key volunteers. They were working hard for the Lord and for the church (for free!) but they didn't feel like they were getting anything back. To quote the song we heard, they were "giving until there was nothing left."

And to be completely transparent about it, that was happening with a lot of our staff people, too. They'd show up early on a Sunday morning, set up their stuff (remember, we were a mobile church back then), do their job, tear it down and

then go home.

Then, during the week, they'd run a small group or some other program while trying to get ready for the next Sunday. It was "all ministry all the time." They – *we* – were like the guy in the drama – we could never be fully "off."

And that's when we realized that not only do people have to take responsibility for our own spiritual health: *that responsibility needs go to the top of the list – to be the top priority*, otherwise we simply won't get around to it.

We need to put the first thing first and that "first thing" is *ourselves and our own spiritual welfare ...*

... which sounds quite selfish, especially from a Christian perspective since Jesus calls His followers to serve others as He did and to give ourselves away.

But I'm not talking about being selfish in a self-

centered or self-satisfied way. What I'm talking about is *sustainability* because a lifestyle of giving yourself away like Jesus did *requires that you first have a life and a self to give.*

Let me say that again: a lifestyle of giving yourself away like Jesus did requires that you first have a life and a self to give.

Or, as we say all the time around here: you can't give away what you don't have.

And Jesus himself is probably the best example of this.

In the very first days of His ministry, after a long day of teaching and healing and a confrontation with the Pharisees (the religious leaders of his day), Jesus had gone to Peter's home for dinner and a quiet evening.

But when the people of the town found out where He was staying, Mark's biography of Jesus says that they ...

... brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons.
Mark 1:32-34 (NIV)

Sounds exhilarating – but also exhausting ...

... which is why Mark continues: “the next day, Jesus slept in.”

No, that’s not what he wrote. 😊 Here’s what he wrote:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

A while later ...

Simon Peter and his companions went to look for

*him, and when they found him,
they exclaimed: "Everyone is
looking for you!"* *Mark*
1:35-37 (NIV)

Translation: "Jesus, people want you to *give even more.*"

And Jesus *did* – though not to that particular group. He told the disciples it was time for them to move on so He could give to others to whom he had not yet ministered.

But He understood that He couldn't do that – He couldn't just keep on giving and giving – without putting the first thing first: *himself and his own physical, emotional and spiritual condition.* And that's what He did all throughout His ministry.

Luke tells us that it was typical for Jesus that ...

*... vast crowds came to hear him
preach and to be healed of their*

diseases. But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer. Luke 5:15-16 (NLT)

Now, think about the significance of this – especially if you’re a Christian. If you’re not, this may not mean all that much to you.

- Jesus – the Son of God, God in human flesh – understood and accepted His limits. He knew he couldn’t just give and give until nothing was left.
- So Jesus – the Son of God, God in human flesh – embraced the principle of personal sustainability. He didn’t feel bad about putting himself first so that He had a self to give away.

If He needed to do that, then I think it’s pretty obvious that we who follow Him need to do it, too.

In Real Life

But, at this point, I suspect some of you are thinking, “Well, that’s good to know, Rick, if you’re talking about how to build something great *like a church*. But how does it apply to building a family or a business or a team or anything else?”

I think it works the exact same way.

Most organizations and individuals rightly believe that greatness demands a high-level of personal commitment to reaching goals. You don’t build a great business or team or even a family without a lot of hard work. It doesn’t “just happen.” Even if you have a lot of natural ability or talent or personality, at some point that ends and hard work begins and it goes on and on for a long time.

For instance, when our kids were little, I

remember so many days saying to Jetta, “Do you feel like all we did today was discipline children?”

Honestly, some days it was so draining – as was the thought that we’d have to do it all over again tomorrow. But that’s what it took (in part) to produce great kids. It was hard work.

And our ability to keep on doing that work *for years* was sustained by putting the first thing first – *ourselves* – and taking responsibility for our own physical, emotional and relational health.

For instance, when our kids were little, we had what we called the “bedtime buzzer.” We’d wind it up (this was long ago back in the days before smartphones) and we’d say, “When the buzzer goes off, it’s time for bed.”

And 15 minutes later, it would buzz and almost always they would say, “Why do we have to go

to bed? Can't we stay up longer? You guys stay up longer."

And we'd say, "Yes, we do. And you should be happy we do because mommy and daddy spending time together alone *without you guys* is what makes our family strong. So, give us a kiss and go to bed. We'll see you tomorrow."

From our kids' perspective that seemed selfish. And we *were* being selfish but not in a self-centered way. (Well maybe a little).

Our purpose was *sustainability* ... because a lifetime of giving yourself to your children (at least while they are in your home); the prolonged effort that it takes to build a great family requires that you first have a life and a self to give.

You cannot give away what you do not have which is why you need to put the first thing first – and that's you.

And, as to how that works in building something great in other areas of life like a business or a team or anything else, I think you can probably brainstorm some good ideas or research what others have done and apply it to your situation.

Spiritual Food

But since most of us here this morning (or tuning in online) are Christians, what I want to do in the time that remains is to talk about what “personal responsibility for spiritual health” looks like; what it looks like for followers of Jesus to put “the first thing” – themselves – first.

And, again, not so we can be self-centered or self-satisfied but in order to have a self to give away.

Far too many of us have been taught that Christians are supposed to give and serve until

it hurts – until there’s nothing left. So the typical mindset (and experience) we have as His followers is one of “have to” and “got to.”

- I *have to* serve this person, love this person, forgive this person, support this person, etc.
- I’ve *got to* give to the poor, witness to my friends, volunteer at church, etc.

The Christian life becomes an exercise in gritting our teeth and just doing it because *we have to* and *we’ve got to*.

Now, if you do that long enough, what happens is you eventually get burned out and bitter because you’re always giving but never receiving. You’re not feeding your soul.

Remember, you *need* to be fed. It’s right there in the Bible!

Furthermore, as we've discover, *you need to take personal responsibility for being fed.* You need to make it a priority. It's your life and no one else's.

Question is ... how do you do that? What feeds the soul of a Christ-follower?

Well, let's start with the most obvious way which is what we're doing right now:

Being present for a Sunday service where we discover (and keep on discovering) the grace and truth of Jesus in song and in spoken word.

And I'll point out again (as we learned many years ago) that only being here once or twice a month isn't going to be *enough* to feed your soul. It's better than nothing. Far better.

But, as I said earlier, we decided then that we were going challenge people to take

responsibility *by fully engaging.*

And so, to some of you, I just need to say: *part of the reason you feel bitter and burned out is because church attendance is just one option among many for your Sunday morning.*

Now, to be clear, I'm not talking about people who have to work on Sunday. I'm talking about people who decide they're not showing up because ...

- They're too tired to get up.
- Or they've got too much energy to sit down for an hour.
- Or the weather is too bad.
- Or the weather is too nice.
- Or they don't like the topic we're talking about. (Hey, sometimes I don't like it either).

There's always some excuse or something else

to do other than showing up or tuning in.

One of my regular prayers in recent months is that we would each realize what a blessing and a gift it is that we *can* show up to worship and learn without fear, because in so many parts of the world that simply is not true.

But showing up regularly – *fully engaging* – is more than appreciating that *you can*. It's part of putting the first thing first. It's part of being fed.

However, as important as Sunday services are to our spiritual health and well-being, it still isn't enough.

So what else is there? Three other habits that provide nourishment to our spirit: *solitude*, *community* and – oddly enough – *ministry*, which seems a bit counterintuitive so we'll have to explain it a bit.

Let's take them one at a time.

Solitude is time alone with God (and only God).

It's doing what Jesus did when He went to solitary places and withdrew to the wilderness (though you don't have to do that).

And during that time when you're alone with God you could do a lot of different things.

- You might pray for yourself and others.
- You might read a passage from the Bible or from a devotional or a Christian book.
- You might listen to and sing songs of worship.
- You might express gratitude and thanksgiving.
- You might just sit quietly and "listen" – remembering that you are loved not because of who you are and what you do but because of whose you are and what He's done.

Now, make no mistake, this is very hard to do mostly because we live in such an active and connected world. So, to make this work you have to turn everything off – the tablet, the smartphone, the laptop – or go to “airplane mode” (maybe we should call it “God Mode”). Turn it off and be alone.

And I know that’s really hard but it’s part of putting the first thing first.

Community is connecting with other followers of Jesus who love, encourage, and challenge you to keep following Him.

One of the reasons we have a small group ministry here at NHCC is to enable people to take part in community.

But there are other ways to do that. You just need to find some folks who are wanting to follow Jesus like you do and then be very intentional about saying, “let’s get together on a

regular based for the purpose of encouraging and challenging each other.”

This is what I do almost every Thursday morning with my friend, Rusty Savage, who is the pastor of First Baptist Platte City.

And honestly, there are a lot of times when I want to sleep in. And there are a lot of times on a Wednesday night when I feel too tired to go to my small group. But, putting the first thing first – *myself* – so that I have a self to give means getting up and going anyway.

And almost always, I am glad I did. Because I am spiritually fed by the time and the people I am with.

So, that’s solitude and community. Let’s talk about ministry.

Ministry is using your talents and skills to serve others for the sake of Jesus and the

Gospel.

And the most typical way to do that is not by quitting your job and going to seminary – though some should do that.

The most typical way to do ministry is through *volunteerism* – taking on a role and responsibility, not just a one-and-done kind of serving – whether at church or in some other way where the Good News of Jesus is proclaimed or demonstrated.

And lucky you, we have a volunteer fair this morning where you can learn more about how to do that here at NHCC.

Of course, the idea of ministry as feeding is somewhat counterintuitive because when you volunteer and serve, it seems like you are only giving out, not receiving. But Jesus himself said that was not the case.

One day, Jesus and his disciples stopped for lunch outside of a town in Samaria. Jesus' friend John writes that they all went into town to get lunch while Jesus sat down by a well.

While they were gone a woman came to the well to draw water and Jesus struck up a conversation with her. Long story short, after hearing him and being ministered to by his presence she realized that He had to be the Messiah.

John writes that ...

Just then his disciples came back. They were shocked to find him talking to a woman, but none of them had the nerve to ask, "What do you want with her?" or "Why are you talking to her?"

The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone,

“Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?” So the people came streaming from the village to see him.

Meanwhile, the disciples were urging Jesus, “Rabbi, eat something.”

But Jesus replied, “I have a kind of food you know nothing about.”

“Did someone bring him food while we were gone?” the disciples asked each other.

Then Jesus explained: “My nourishment comes from doing the will of God, who sent me, and from finishing his work.”

John 4:27-34 (NLT)

In other words, part of getting fed is doing ministry.

Why is that? It's because when you do ministry, you actually get to *see* and *experience* God at work through your efforts.

And that experience will fill your soul IF ... IF ... it is balanced with the experience of solitude and community. You and I need all three of those: solitude, community and ministry.

Now, the balance of those three might be different for you than it is for me. You might need more community than I do.

And there might be temporary seasons where we're out of balance for what's healthy. That's just life and it's OK as long as you don't live there; as long as you take responsibility to put the first thing first ...

... because Jesus didn't call us – if we're His followers – to give until there's nothing left. He called us to give from a full heart. He called us to give out of what we've received.

Conclusion

And so as we close this service today, we're going to take a little bit of time to do that; to receive. The band's going to do a song that invites us to hit pause and just breathe; to just relax and rest.

Holy Spirit we give you this time to do what you want to do in us. Fill us up. Feed our souls for the sake of Jesus and His Kingdom. Amen.

Feature – Breathe

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Kitti down front for prayer
2. Volunteer Fair

Endnotes

