

Made for More
The X-Factor
January 23, 2022

Good morning everyone!

I'm so glad to you're here in the building or watching online as we continue in our series *Made for More*, which began last Sunday with an attempt on my part to describe "the more" that you and I are made for.

I mean, it's one thing to say that "you are made for more than who and what you are today" and quite another to describe what that "more" actually is.

So that's what we talked about.

And we saw that there is good reason to talk about it because it deals with the issue of *identity* – an issue which is getting so much

attention these days in our culture.

- Who are we, really?
- And what are we meant to be?

And we discovered that, on the very first page of the Bible, God answers those questions.

**At the pinnacle of His creative activity,
Moses writes that ...**

God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." Genesis 1:26 (NIV)

And that's what God did.

God created mankind in his own

image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." Genesis 1:27-28 (NIV)

At the very beginning of creation, God makes it clear who humans *are* and what they – what we – are meant *to be*.

As humans, we are created in the image of God, and we are meant to reflect *His* glorious nature (His character, His essence, even His mission as a creator) in our world.

That's our identity. That's who we are meant to be ... at least, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

And I said last week, I know that not everyone here or watching is a Christian so, obviously, you might not agree with that, or with the idea

that God is the First Mover behind creation (however it eventually played out).

And that's OK.

I just think that this particular vision of individual purpose and identity is far better, far more fulfilling, and far more accurate than anything else out there or anything we might come up with on our own.

... which is why I love the quote from the great Christian author and philosopher, C.S. Lewis ...

... which we read last week.

“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.

“The dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship ...ⁱ

If people ever became what they were intended to be ...

- Every good quality and characteristic you can think of ...
- Every good thing that reflects the image of God ...

... it would be *that* glorious.

And that's what you were made for. That's the person you were meant to be.

And our purpose as a church is to help you move in that direction, regardless of where you are right now in your life and in your relationship with God.

In fact, the way we often say it around here is ...

“You were made for more. We can help.”

So, in today's message – as well as in the messages to follow over the next month or so ...

My goal is to share with you *how* we can help; what we're doing so that people who engage with us can become more and more of the person they were meant to be.

Of course, even *saying that* might sound a little arrogant. "We have it all figured out and if you'll just do what we say, you too, can experience the abundant life."

So, let me be clear: that is not the intention whatsoever.

In fact, what I'm going to share with you throughout the rest of this series isn't some secret super-spiritual knowledge that we have that no one else has.

Pretty much any church that encourages people

to know and follow Jesus can help you do the things we'll be talking about.

So, there's no arrogance or exclusivism intended. I just want you to know what you can do to become more of the "more" you were made for and how we can help.

Defining "X"

And today, we're going to look at the most important thing you need to do (and *I* need to do) if we're ever going to become the persons we were meant to be and want to be.

I call it the X-Factor.

Have you ever heard of the X-factor?

I don't mean this guy.



I read somewhere that he's not allowed into Arrowhead anymore. I guess he got in a fight the last time the Chiefs played the Bills.

And I don't mean this.



I never watched it but, from what I understand, they stopped making that show several years ago.

What I mean by the X-factor is ...

A variable in a given situation that could have the most significant impact on the

outcome.ⁱⁱ

It's the undefinable and intangible element that can be the difference between success and failure.

Now, in my experience, whenever people talk about the X-factor – like in a project or in a budget – it's typically negative.

The X-factor is the event you haven't thought of or the expense you didn't account for that can mess up your plan big-time.

For example, seven years ago when we thought about remodeling this auditorium and putting in sloped seating, the contractor gave us a price and said it was good *unless* there was an X-factor.

I said, "what do you mean?"

He said, "well, if you excavate this area and you find a Cadillac buried down there and we have

to dig it out, that would be an X-factor.”

Of course, we all laughed at that.

Funny thing is when they started digging ... no, they didn't find a Cadillac!

But they *did* find an underground streambed from the Line Creek watershed which runs right under this part of the stage on which I'm standing.

So, we had to put in a sump pump, which cost us more money – fortunately, not as much as having to remove a Cadillac, but still it was an X-factor.

Now, even though the X-factor is often thought of as negative, it can also be *positive*. It can be the undefined variable or the intangible element that causes a plan to *succeed* that otherwise would have failed.

And if you miss it or overlook it or leave it out,

you will *not* succeed, which brings me to my point.

From years and years of observing myself and others, as well as the world at large, I have come to believe ...

... that most people are unaware of the X-factor that could make all the difference in us becoming who we were meant to be and who we want to be.

We're ignorant of (or we choose to ignore) the single greatest element which would enable us to become more of the "more" we were made for.

And there are a host of reasons for that – which I think will become obvious once I tell you what it is.

So, what is it?

The X-factor I'm talking about is an ongoing and regular connection with God.

Let me say that again: the X-factor that could make all the difference that most people today are unaware of or choose to ignore is an ongoing and regular connection with God ...

... which kind of makes sense if the “more” that you're made for is to reflect God, to image God, to be filled with every good and godly quality you can think of.

Like Sheep

One of my favorite scenes from the life of Jesus (as recorded for us by the eyewitnesses to His life) is found in the 9th chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew has just finished describing how Jesus called him (of all people!) to follow as well as how Jesus healed many others ...

... and he writes this:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

... which is kind of a summation of what Matthew has just described and what he himself had experienced.

And then he writes – and I love this about Jesus.

When he saw the crowds ...

When Jesus saw all those people in all those towns and villages going through the motions of their everyday lives ...

And when He went to the places where they were supposed to connect with and encounter

God ...

... he had compassion on them ...

His heart was broken for them.

And Matthew tells us why:

*... because they were harassed
and helpless, like sheep without
a shepherd. Matthew 9:35-
36 (NIV)*

Have you ever seen a harassed and helpless sheep?

Unless you grew up on a farm or live on a farm, probably not.

Lucky for you, as I was preparing for this message, I actually came across a short video of a harassed and helpless sheep.

Check it out.

Video Clip – HARRASSED AND HELPLESS (1.0 min)

It's amazing what you can find on YouTube.

Now the guy who made that video didn't tell us *why* the sheep ended up on its back, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't by choice.

Maybe something happened to scare it, or it just did something foolish which sheep tend to do.

But no matter how it happened, that sheep was helpless to do anything about its situation *without a shepherd*. Without a good shepherd, that sheep would have died from a heart attack.

And I think that's what Jesus was seeing in all the people in all those towns. They had no shepherd. They had no guide.

They had no connection with God, which is ...

- Why they were harassed and helpless
- Why they were spiritually and emotionally dying
- Why they were not experiencing the “more” they were made for.

And, sadly, the same thing could be said about *our* towns and *our* villages and *our* cities and even, in some case, our churches.

There are so many people going through life like sheep without a shepherd – without a regular and ongoing connection with God. And they are – we are, at least some of us – harassed and helpless.

As I’ve told you before, I try to limit the amount of news I watch these days because I’m just sick of the partisanship and gamesmanship and the

hypocrisy of politicians who, when they are not in power, are against something and then, when they are in power, are for it.

And just to be clear, that happens on both sides of the aisle. Today it's liberals. Tomorrow it will be conservatives because it was them yesterday.

But when I'm able to step back from my frustration and anger, I realize that what I'm seeing truly is a bunch of sheep without a shepherd, or at least without a *good* shepherd.

I mean, we have many "shepherds" in this world who offer us guidance. They're just not very good because they do not lead us to become the best version of ourselves.

- And because we do not know or acknowledge the true Shepherd ...

- Because we do not have a regular and ongoing connection with God ...
- Because we're ignorant of or chose to ignore that X-factor ...

... we're a mess physically, emotionally, spiritually, and even politically.

Everywhere you look, you see people struggling with darkness and depression and other forms of mental illness. Suicide rates are rising.

Everywhere you look, you see increasing anger, hate, greed, and envy.

People are quick to tear others down by slandering and gossiping. There's less and less respect for our elders and even God. Murder rates are rising.

More and more people are simply aimless and lost.

I think almost all of that can be traced to ignorance of and/or rejection of God.

Actually, that idea is not original with me.

It comes from the Apostle Paul's description of people who are *ignorant of or reject God*.

He wrote that ...

As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. Romans 1:21-22 (NIV)

Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. Romans 1:29 (NIV)

They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents.

They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy.

Romans 1:30-31 (NIV)

Now, I know that some of you are thinking, “I don’t know, Rick, you’re making a pretty big jump here from what Paul wrote to what’s going on in our culture right now. There could be lots of other reasons why all that bad stuff is happening.”

Maybe. You might be right.

But it’s incredibly hard for me *not* to believe that there is at least some linkage between the decreasing connection with God and the increase of all these terrible things we’re seeing.

It's incredibly hard *not* to believe that the loss of ...

- The shepherding influence of God in our lives (collectively and individually)
- And the ongoing connection with God (collectively and individually)

... has contributed to a dramatically increasing number of physically, emotionally, and spiritually harassed and helpless people ...

... which, quite frankly, at least some of the time, includes *me*.

When *I* get like that – like the picture that Paul paints – it can almost always be traced to a disconnection from God in my life.

And I'm pretty sure that the same is true for you.

Connecting With God

Point being ...

- The X-factor that most people are missing in their lives ...
- And one of the keys to becoming more of the more you were made for ...

... is an ongoing and regular connection with God.

... which is why one of our four “transformational objectives” here at North Heartland is to help people connect with God.

When we say “you were made for more and we can help” that’s one of the things we can help with.

Actually, it's one of the things Jesus *told us* to help with.

Right after Matthew writes that Jesus had compassion on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd, because they were harassed and helpless ...

He tells us that Jesus then said to his disciples:

“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.

In other words, “there’s a whole world of people out there who are just waiting for someone to show them and help them connect with God.”

“Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Matthew 9:37-38 (NIV)

“Pray that the Father would send people to help those who are harassed and helpless.”

Well, OK. But who are those people?

- It’s the people who already know God and connect with God and walk with God.
- It’s the church (or, at least, it ought to be).

So, I want to talk to you for a few minutes about how we try at North Heartland to help people – meaning you and me and the folks we sometimes bring with us – connect with God.

And as I said at the beginning of this message, we’re not special or unique in this. We’re just trying to be intentional about it.

We understand the importance of this spiritual X-factor and we’re committed to doing what we can to make it happen.

So, let me just give you the list of the three things we do towards that end. Then I'll go a little deeper into each one.

1. First thing is to help people make their initial connection with God by receiving Jesus.

2. Second is to help people maintain an ongoing connection with God thru weekly services & occasional "worship nights."

3. Third is to teach people how to spend time connecting with God on their own.

INITIAL CONNECTION

Now, let's talk about #1 – the "initial connection with God."

And this is confusing to a lot of people especially if you weren't brought up in church or don't know much about Christianity ...

... because what most people think is that everyone starts out connected with God and then, along the way, they do something so bad or sinful or whatever that the connection is broken.

And then they need to do something to restore it – maybe something religious like penance or begging for forgiveness or maybe just turning over a new leaf and “being good.”

Of course, a lot of people believe that *they themselves* never do anything bad or sinful enough to warrant that kind of disconnection from God so, personally speaking, this is pretty much a moot point.

Instead, if there’s anybody sinful or bad enough to be disconnected from God, it has to be “them” – however we might define “them.”

But that’s now how it really is – at least according to Jesus.

How it is, really, is that we are all *born into sin* and, therefore, we *start out as disconnected from God ... which means we need to become* connected to God for the very first time.

And I say a little more about how that happens in just a few minutes.

Actually, I'll help you do it if that's what you need.

ONGOING CONNECTION THROUGH OUR SERVICES

But let's talk about #2 - maintaining a connection with God through services like we're doing right now.

I mean, that *is* the goal of what we're doing right now.

Wherever you are in your spiritual journey, we

want you to experience some kind of a connection with God in this time, meaning ...

We want you to be able to express your heart and mind to Him and also hear His heart and hear His mind.

- And that can happen through the music you hear when the band “performs” a song like the one Richard sang before the message.

What a great reminder that song was that it’s not so much that we want to connect with God as it is that God wants to connect with us.

He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end and yet, he desires to call us His friends.ⁱⁱⁱ

- Connection with God can happen through the songs we all sing together.

I've lost track of the number of times we sing a song and the words we're singing truly express to God what I'm feeling and experiencing in my life – good or bad ...

... and the number of times God speaks back to me through those words we sing.

- Connection with God can happen through the teaching that I or one of the other pastors gives.

So many times, I walk off this stage and I wonder, “did that do anybody any good at all? What was I thinking when I wrote that?”

... only to have someone say, “have you been following me around? That was exactly what I needed to hear. God was speaking through you.”

Now, the thing about connecting with God in a service like this one is that it doesn't always work the same way.

Sometimes, it might happen only through the music. Sometimes, it might happen only when we sing together or only during the message.

Some days – really good days – it happens through all three of those.

And other days – not so good days – it might not happen at all.

And there are a lot of reasons why that might be. It might be you, it might be me, it might be the music.

It might even be God seeing if you'll show up even if it's not amazing just because you love Him.

But the thing is, you never know in advance

how the connection will happen which is why just showing up for “church” matters.

Just being in the room or watching online on a regular and consistent basis.

And let me say a word about that – about being in the room (or onsite).

There are some people who simply cannot do that.

- Older people like my dad who is 88 years old. I’m lucky to get him to come to my house for Christmas dinner or to watch the Chiefs. He’s not coming to this building. And that’s OK.
- And then there are people who have social anxiety or some health condition that prevents them (like COVID).
- And then there are people who are out of

town for some reason or another.

And for those folks, that's why we have livestream. And I'm so glad we do.

But if you're not one of those folks and you're not onsite, you're cheating yourself.

One of the things I have heard over and over from people who have come back onsite as the COVID situation improved is how much better "this" is than the online experience, especially if you have small children.

Again and again, I've heard people say, "we didn't realize what we were missing. We forgot until we came back into the room."

It's just better and better for you.

And speaking of better for you ... are you aware of all the positive benefits of coming to church on a regular basis?

And by “regular basis” I mean more than once a month.

A couple of months ago, I read an article describing some of the benefits and I’m just going to read you a portion of it. This is stunning.

A number of large, well-designed research studies have found that religious service attendance is associated with greater longevity, less depression, less suicide, less smoking, less substance abuse, better cancer and cardiovascular disease survival, less divorce, greater social support, greater meaning in life, greater life satisfaction, more volunteering, and greater civic engagement.

In addition, regular service attendance

helps shield children from the “big three” dangers of adolescence: depression, substance abuse, and premature sexual activity.

Finally, people who attended church as children are also more likely to grow up happy, to be forgiving, to have a sense of mission and purpose, and to volunteer.

Bottom line ...

Our research suggests that religious service attendance specifically, rather than private practices or self-assessed religiosity or spirituality, most powerfully predicts health.^{iv}

And in the article they go on to discuss why they believe this is true but it’s just stunning, isn’t it?

In fact, it’s *so* stunning that it makes you wonder why, with all the money our politicians want to

spend and are spending on public health, they aren't promoting church attendance which wouldn't cost a dime.

CONNECTING WITH GOD ON YOUR OWN

Ok, last but not least, let's talk about connecting with God on your own.

And this one is a little more involved. It actually requires more training than it does teaching which is why we primarily address it in a class we offer from time to time called "Connect 101 – Developing Intimacy with God."

But basically, this is where you take a Bible and a notepad or a tablet and you read, and you think, and you write, and you pray. You let God speak to you in that time and you speak to Him.

And just like going to church, sometimes it blows you away and sometimes it doesn't.

What matters over the long haul ... where the traction really is ... is just showing up again and again and again.

And over time and with practice you are actually able to develop the skill of connecting with God in yet another more way.

Invitation

Ok, let's wrap this up.

There is an X-factor – an element that most people overlook – that is the difference between staying the way you are and becoming the person you were meant to be.

And that X-factor which could make all the difference is an ongoing and regular connection with God ...

... which is why helping people do that – providing ways for people to do that and learn

to do it on their own – is one of the major objectives of this church.

It's one of the four things that intentionally try to help people do.

And I'll talk about the other three in upcoming weeks ...

... but I said earlier that I would say a little more about becoming connected to God for the very first time because I'm sure that's what at least a few of us need today.

One of the most helpful ways to visualize this is an illustration I saw many, many years ago when I was a teenager.

And I've used this before but it's so clear I'm going to use it again.

It's called "the bridge."

And, in this illustration, it's like we're all on one side in what the first Christians called "the dominion of darkness" and unrighteousness and death ...

And God is on the other side in His kingdom of righteousness and life ...

And there's a gap in the middle which means that, from the moment each of us is born, we're all separated and disconnected from God.

At the macro level, it's like two countries that are separated in every way possible. There's conflict and tension because the values and norms are so different.

So, the obvious question is ... *what can be done about that?*

Let me first tell you what *can't* be done.

Acting *over here* on our side like we belong *over*

there won't put us over there ...

... any more than learning French means that you're suddenly a citizen of France.

More directly, trying your best to act good and pure and holy (and hiding it from everyone else when you're not acting that way) doesn't make you good and pure and holy. It doesn't make you a citizen of God's Kingdom.

You still belong to the "dominion of darkness" – even if you're nicer and better and more moral than everyone else.

So, if that won't work, what can be done?

Paul describes it like this:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8 (NIV)

God has taken it upon Himself to bridge the gap.

Somehow, in a way that I don't think anyone fully understands, Jesus' death and resurrection made it possible for us to leave our "dominion of darkness" and be united with our Heavenly Father and receive citizenship in His Kingdom.

As Paul put it in another letter he wrote:

He has rescued us from <what?>

... the dominion <the kingdom, the environment, the nation> of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.

Colossians 1:13 (NIV)

That's why I think if Paul were here today, he would say "This graphic of God on one side and you on the other, that's exactly right."

“But God wants to rescue you from the consequences of sin and death and place you into the kingdom of light.

“And *not* through your most sincere attempts at good behavior, but through something He has already done and offered for free in Jesus.”

“You just need to walk across the bridge that God has already provided.”

And I want to help you do that if you haven't already done so.

So, I want to ask everyone to bow your heads and if you need to receive Jesus as your savior this morning, pray along with me silently.

Jesus, I believe that You are who you claimed to be.

I believe You are God in the flesh.

I believe You died on a cross.

I believe You rose from the dead.

I agree with you that I am a sinner
Even though I might be better than some,
I am not totally righteous in Your sight.
I am unable to atone for my sin.

I accept what you did for me.
Please save me from my sin.
Come into my life and bring me into Yours.
Help me become more of the “more” you
have made me for.

Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

ⁱⁱ Source: www.theidioms.com

ⁱⁱⁱ I'm referring to Jon Mark McMillan's song *Future Past*.

^{iv} From <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/november/church-empty-pews-are-american-public-health-crisis.html>