

“20”

*With a Little Help from My Friends*  
September 21, 2014

**PRELUDE – Come People of the Risen King**  
**Worship – Come People / Great God Who Saves**  
**Feature – “With a Little Help from My Friends”**

Good morning everyone.

In the Gospel of Mark chapter 2 we read that ...

*Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth.*

*“Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. Mark 2:13-14 (NIV)*

The Gospel of Luke chapter 5 continues the story:

*Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Luke 5:29-30 (NIV)*

*Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Luke 5:31-32 (NIV)*

As Ladell said, today we’re continuing in our series “20” ... and as we approach the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Grand Opening of NHCC (which is the first Sunday in October), we’re looking back at the things which motivated us in 1994 to try and start this church – which also continue to motivate us today.

And it’s no exaggeration to say that that little story I just read to you is one of the greatest motivations we had then and now. To be more exact, it’s the part of the story that says ...

*Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. Luke 5:29 (NIV)*

When we read scripture, a lot of times it’s fun – and actually instructive – to try and mentally put yourself into the story and try and imagine what people were thinking and doing; how events went from point a to point b and why.

In this particular story, there’s a huge opportunity to do just that between the verse we just read and the verse that came before it. Jesus says to Levi (who, by the way, later changes his name to Matthew and very likely becomes the author of the Gospel of Matthew) ... Jesus says to Levi, “Follow me” and he does. And then Levi throws a party for all of his friends where Jesus is the guest of honor.

What’s not revealed to us is what happens between those two short sentences. There’s nothing about how much time elapsed between the calling and the party he threw. There’s also nothing explicitly stated about Matthew’s thought process – why he came up with the idea of throwing a party. And there’s nothing stated about all the work that it took (and it would have taken work) behind the scenes to pull off the party.

But it’s not hard to imagine what happened ... when you understand that Matthew was a Jew ... working as a tax collector ... for the Roman government. For those three reasons, Matthew was considered to be a traitor to his race, to his country and to his religion. In addition, it’s highly likely that he had become very wealthy by over-charging people on what they owed the government. That’s how tax collectors made money in that day.

So, it's not a stretch to say that Levi, or Matthew, was not a popular guy in first century Hebrew society ... as indicated by the response of the Pharisees to Jesus and his disciples showing up to the party. The only friends a guy like Matthew would have ... were other tax collectors and sinners.

But something had happened to him. Jesus had come into his life. Matthew had said yes to him. And now he was – along with the other disciples – following Jesus and learning from Jesus.

Now, as I said, we don't know from the scripture how long it was that Matthew followed Jesus before he decided to throw this party but logically, I think, there had to be a little bit of time. I think Matthew had to come to the point where he felt a connection with Jesus and with the rest of the disciples. I think he probably had to have an experience of feeling accepted; feeling like he belonged. I think he probably had to have a sense that something in his heart was changing for the better because he'd been in a relationship with Jesus.

And I think when he got to that point, it occurred to him: “*what about all my tax-collecting buddies that are left behind?* I want them to know Jesus like I know Jesus. I want them to experience what I have experienced. I want them to grow and change like I am growing and changing. But I'm not sure I can explain it all to them very well.”

And then I think Matthew began to wonder: “What could I do to get a bunch of my friends and their families (and maybe even *their* friends and families) up close and personal with Jesus? I mean, they won't stand in the crowds when Jesus goes around teaching because the people hate them. And they certainly won't go to the synagogue when Jesus is teaching because people like them – and like me – aren't welcome there. According to the Pharisees, we're *unclean*. And they're probably right.”

And I can imagine that Matthew pondered this for a few days and then it hit him. “I know. I'll create an environment where all my friends (and their friends) will feel safe. I'll create an experience that feels like it was designed with them in mind (because it will be). *I'll throw a party* with Jesus as the guest of honor and just let him be Jesus; let him do His thing; let Him speak to them in ways they'll understand ... in hopes that some of them will want to follow Him like I did.”

And then, I can imagine Matthew going to Jesus and the disciples and pitching the idea. “Guys, I know I haven't been around very long. And I know most of you are surprised that I'm even a part of this group. Believe me, I am, too. But I have a favor to ask. Would you help me reach my friends and their families?”

And then he shares the vision of the party he wants to throw.

And Jesus – who never could resist a good party (which is why the Pharisees labeled him “a drunkard and a glutton”) – says yes. And he turns to the rest of the disciples and says, “boys and girls, we're *all* going to Matthew's party. He needs our help and we're going to give it to him.”

And that's what they did.

Now, other than the fact that the Pharisees stood outside and debated Jesus' disciples over their involvement, we don't know the result of that party. We don't know if any of Matthew's buddies became followers of Jesus. My hunch is that it turned out much like it does today whenever people get up close and personal with Him.

- Some go all in and life is never the same.
- Some follow for a while then get distracted.
- Some debate it for a while and then decide it's not for them.
- Some dismiss Jesus right away. “It's not my cup of tea. I have no interest.”

We don't know what happened, but that's not the point of the story.

**The point is that Matthew wanted his irreligious friends and co-workers to have the opportunity to meet Jesus and discover what He was all about. *But he couldn't do it on his own.* He needed a little help from his friends.**

## Our Story

... which is why this story was so motivating *to me personally*, back in the days when we were putting together the core group of 35 adults and a dozen or so kids who would launch this church.

For me, the launch of NHCC wasn't a move up the career ladder from youth pastor to senior pastor. For me, NHCC was – and still is – an opportunity to try and do what Matthew did: to create an environment every week where irreligious men and women ...

- Men and women who don't typically go to church ...
- Men and women who feel “unclean” before God (because they are) ...
- Men and women who most “church people” wouldn't expect to find in church ...

North Heartland was – and is – an opportunity to create an environment every week where irreligious men and women – some of whom are *my* friends, my neighbors and my acquaintances – can meet Jesus and discover what He is all about.

But North Heartland *also* was – and is – an outgrowth of the realization that I couldn't – and can't – do it on my own. None of us can. I need a little help from my friends who already know Jesus to reach my friends who *do not* know Jesus. And from what I can tell from hanging out with you, you're in the same position. You need help with this, as well.

I'll never forget how and when this first dawned on me. I've told this story before but I think it's worth telling again because when you understand this, you'll understand why we do a lot of the things we do in our services (and don't do some things that a lot of other churches do).

In the early 1990s when I worked as a youth pastor at Park Hill Baptist Church, we lived over on Valley View Drive not far from the church. One day, a nice young couple named Kevin and Diane moved in next door and we began to hang out with them a bit. We learned about them, and they learned about us, and then one day they found out that I worked at the church on the corner. But they still liked us, even though they themselves weren't churchgoers.

One night Kevin had a few of his friends over and, apparently, they started talking about “religion.” I just happened to be outside at the time and he called out from his porch, “Hey, Rick, this is your department. Come on over and talk with us for a minute.” I can't remember what the conversation was about, but I walked away knowing that a) Kevin didn't know much about God and b) he was open to knowing more.

So, one day not long after that, I got up the courage to invite him and Diane to church with us. And much to my surprise, they said ... “sure. When do you want us to show up?” So we set a date and we all went to church together.

It was a great service. I had a little part in it and thought I did my part pretty well. The choir, I thought, sang really well that day. Our pastor preached what I thought was a really good sermon that day.

Afterwards, Kevin and Diane came over for lunch. And I said, “Well, Kevin, I know you're not much of a church person. But what did you think of the service?”

I'm not exaggerating when I say that the next five minutes completely changed my life. Kevin said, “It was nice. But I was kind of surprised that it started out so somber. The music before the service reminded me of being in a funeral home.”

That made sense, because this was a guy who'd never been a churchgoer and the only time he'd heard the organ played was at funerals.

Then he said, "I didn't understand why the singers all wore those robes. Is there something special about what they're doing that requires them to do that? And I didn't understand why the pastor stood behind that big desk. It felt like maybe he was trying to hide or something. And I didn't understand the words to the songs we sang. (We were singing out of the hymnal). And it felt weird because nobody was singing anyway. And ... and ... and ..."

Now, just so you'll know, Kevin was one of the most easygoing and pleasant individuals I have ever known. He wasn't being negative or critical. He was just answering my question. And he was genuinely confused.

When he and Diane left that afternoon, I remember having an awful feeling in the pit of my stomach because it hit me: *I had given up a really good career as a software engineer to invest my life in something my regular-guy next-door neighbor couldn't begin to relate to.*

That was bad enough but it got worse when I started thinking through the implications. "So, if Kevin and Diane are ever going to get up close and personal with Jesus, it's going to have to happen *outside* the environment of church. I'm going to have to create a *separate environment* – a separate offline Bible study in my house so they can understand the gospel. And then, if they actually decide to become Christians, I'm going to have to figure out some way – again, offline – to teach them what Jesus said about life and how he wants us to live."

Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying. There's nothing wrong with doing those things. In fact, I had a leader in a national Christian organization challenge me that that was exactly what I should have done.

But it all seemed so inefficient to me. And I had a lot of questions running through my mind.

- Shouldn't the church help me with this? And not just me: what about the average Christian – someone who isn't in full-time ministry like I was – who knows a dozen Kevin and Dianes? What are they going to do?
- Why should all of this be the job of one individual alone? Why is it all up to me – or any other follower of Jesus who wants their irreligious friends and families to be able to get up close and personal to Jesus?
- Shouldn't churches be set up so that church members can bring their irreligious friends and family and be confident that those friends and family will experience a high-impact, well-planned, culturally relevant and understandable presentation of truth and grace in an environment that feels like it might have been designed with them in mind (because it was)?

To make a long story short, over the next several years, through a series of divine appointments and miraculous movements of the Holy Spirit, God said, "Rick, I want you to solve that problem. I want you to gather a group of people who will start a church that every Sunday attempts to create an environment that helps Christians who need help reaching their friends – just like Matthew needed help with his friends; just like you need help with Kevin and Diane."

So that's what I did.

On our very first Sunday, October 2, 1994, Kevin and Diane came to the grand opening of North Heartland. And so did our neighbors across the street – Keith and Cinda – who, unbeknownst to us, had been hearing about this new church that was going to start up from Kevin and Diane! And they were part of our church for several years until both families eventually moved away from the area, but not before I had the privilege of baptizing Kevin at Smithville Lake. He had received Jesus. It was one of the highlights of my life as pastor of this church.

But you know the best part of the whole thing? *It wasn't all up to me.* God used the church – the *whole* church working together – to connect with that one guy so that he could be led to Christ. I just got him here and God did the rest through all of us ... which, as we learned last week, is how it's *supposed* to work.

The Apostle Peter – one of the guys who befriended Matthew and helped to throw that party – once wrote a letter to the Christians under his leadership.

### **And here's how he put it:**

*As you come to [Jesus], a living stone rejected by men but chosen and precious in God's sight, you yourselves, as living stones, are built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood ... 1 Peter 2:4-5 (NET)*

*You [plural – all of you who are Christians] are a chosen race [even though you are of different races ethnically and geographically].*

*You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation [even though, a lot of times, you don't act very holy].*

*[You are] a people of [God's] own [possession], so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9 (NET)*

In other words ...

- Ordinary people (not just pastors and ministry leaders) ...
- Just as they are (not people who are perfect – people who are just following Jesus and growing) ...
- Right where they are (you don't have to become a missionary or quit your job for the ministry) ...

... are, in the mind of God, priests, representing him to the world. And that means Every Christian – in the “right now” of their life – has a part to play in seeing that these virtues of Jesus are proclaimed.

But this is not an individual task. That's Peter's point. He's saying that each of us (if we're Christians) are like living stones in the walls of a spiritual house that's being built. Which means we are meant to join together with other priests (ordinary Christians) to build the spiritual house – the church – so that the goodness of God (the grace of God, the mercy of God, the gospel-the good news) can be shared with far greater power than any of us could ever hope to accomplish on our own.

### **Getting Practical**

Now, as I said at the beginning, the point of all this is to simply remember one of the fundamental motivations for launching this church 20 years ago:

**That all of us who call NHCC “home” would be able to get a little help from our friends (everyone else who calls NHCC “home”) in helping our irreligious friends and family get up close and personal with Jesus.**

Let me say that again. One of the fundamental motivations for the launch of NHCC in 1994 was that those who call NHCC “home” could be helped by everyone else who calls NHCC “home” in reaching out to our irreligious family and friends and neighbors and co-workers.

And *this remains a fundamental motivation* for what we do today.

The question was – and still is – what does it take to pull that off? What kind of a church is able to create an environment that helps the “Matthews” (which we're all like Matthew) who realize they can't do it on their own?

If we had the time, I think we could make a really long list in answer to that question but I want to focus on two characteristics that I think have been critical to our ministry over 20 years – two characteristics that are typically overlooked in a lot of churches ... and two characteristics that are not necessary but most people think they are.

**1. The first characteristic is that everyone consistently contributes their gifts and talents to the overall operation.**

It takes everyone understanding that they're part of the spiritual house that God is building and everyone finding their place in the wall (to follow the metaphor) ... because it's pretty simple: *the more people who do, the more well-rounded the ministry that a church can provide.*

I mean, if Matthew had thrown his party with only a couple people helping him, it would not have been a very good party for his guests!

And the same holds true here at NHCC. What we do here on an average week, in addition to our paid staff and what they do, requires a lot of work; about 180 volunteers investing well over 700 hours a week. And if you want to know what those hours are devoted to ... well, I'll tell you.

Red Zone Team (mowing/landscaping)

Facility Maintenance Crew

Office Volunteers

Financial Support Volunteers

Tech Support Volunteers

NEXT Volunteers

Media & Resources Team

Advisory Council

Good Sense Counselors

Small Group Leaders

Course Instructors

Communications Team

Arts Ministry - Sound Team; Lighting Team; Media & Video Team; Vocal Team; Musicians Team; Drama Team and Team Coordinators

Student Ministry - Sun. AM Team for HS and MS; Ignite Team, Revolution Team, Event Volunteers

Adventureland – Coordinators, Greeter Team, Infant Team, Toddler Team, 2s Team, 3s Team, Preschool Team, Elementary Team, PALS Team

First Impressions - Coffee Corner Team, Welcome Center Team, Ushers Team, Ambassadors Team, Gatekeepers Team, Parking Team

Special Events Planning Team

Outreach Events Planning Team

Events Team

Volunteer Breakfast Team

All of the people who volunteer their time on one or more of those teams are making it possible for us collectively to do what we do. And if you're one of those folks, I just want to say "thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you because you're making the dream of

NHCC possible.” You really are.

But we could always use more help to make the party even better. And there are still a lot of people who call NHCC “home” who *could* invest their gifts and talents but have not yet found their place in the wall. And if you’re one of those folks and you’d like someone to help you find that place, this morning put your name, email address and “help me find my place” on the communication insert in your program and drop it with an usher or at the Welcome Center.

This week, we’ll contact you and let you know the current needs we have so you can think about what you might be interested in doing, and we’ll help you get started on that.

Now, having said that, I realize that some of you are thinking “look, Rick, I get what you’re saying but honestly, where I’m at in my life, I don’t have the time or energy to invest in volunteering. And it sounds like you’re saying that’s the only way I can add value to what we’re doing here, so I feel kind of left out right now, kind of bad, actually.”

Please don’t because, while we do need lots of volunteers and could use more to make it “go” at NHCC, there are other significant ways to add value – things that even those who *do* volunteer could and should also be doing.

- For one thing, you can pray for us on a regular basis. Whenever you sit down to pray, just say, “God, there’s a whole bunch of people at our church who are trying to reach their friends. And I’ve got friends. Would you please help our church at being effective in this? Amen.” The bible says no one comes to Jesus without the work of the Holy Spirit in their life.
- Another thing you can do, you can financially support what we do by giving a percentage of your income on a regular basis. I’m not going to tell you what the percentage is. You can figure that out between you and God. Obviously, what we do here takes a lot of money. You can play as big of a part in that as you want. In fact, if you make a lot of money – and I know some of you do – that might be the main thing God wants you to do. That might be the reason God allows you to make so much money so that you can be part of supporting what we do around here. It’s not cheap to do what we do. That’s obvious.
- One more way you can add value is to simply show up regularly, be on time and be friendly and courteous. That really does matter when people bring their irreligious friends and family to church. And let me explain what I mean by that – and I know in advance this is going to offend some of you, and some of you may not come back after what I’m going to say right now, but that’s ok because you need to know this.
  - From experience I can tell you it’s not a good feeling when you bring someone and they look around and the place is half empty for the first ten minutes of the service. And I know that things happen, I get it. But for some of us, that’s not what happens. We’re just lazy. It’s not a priority to be here on time. That says something to the guy that the person behind you has been trying to get to come to church for two years and he finally shows up and sees all these people straggling in.
  - It’s also not a good feeling when you bring a friend and the people around you decide they’re going to cut out early on the final song because “well, the message today didn’t really apply to me and I’ve already heard that song. They’ve done it a thousand times. I don’t know why they keep doing it. I have something more important to do.” I know I’m being obnoxious about this and I’m obviously worked up about this. And I know some of you really do have stuff to do. I get it. You’ve got to go. That’s totally fine. But some of you ... come on. It matters for the person next to you who finally got that person here. It says something.

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Now, if I haven’t offended everyone in the building, here’s the other characteristic of a church that helps a “Matthew” lead irreligious family and friends to Jesus ...

## 2. There is a consistent level of excellence in presentation and programming.

By “presentation” I mean *what does the place look like?* How does it present itself? Is it well-kept? Clean? Modern? Functional? Or is it shoddy and run-down? Second-class? Just “good enough for church?”

By programming I mean *what goes on in that place.* Is the ministry well-done? Has it been thought out and planned in advance? Or just haphazard? People just show up and whatever happens, happens. Is it executed with passion and commitment? Or is it, again, just “good enough for church?”

The answer to those questions says something to people who show up and are not part of the church. Again, to use Matthew as an example, if he invited a bunch of people to meet Jesus and his house was dirty or the roof was leaking, what would they think? They’d think “this Jesus guy must really not be that big of a deal to Matthew.” Or if he invited people and the food was cold and the wine was warm, maybe they’d think “*we* must not be that big of a deal to Matthew.”

In addition, the consistency of excellence means something not only to people who are outsiders and guests with us. It also means something to those who take the risk to invite someone.

For example: I play a lot of golf and I’m always meeting people on the golf course. The conversation always comes up, “what do you do for a living?” And I tell people I’m a pastor and, in a lot of cases, that’s the end of the conversation. We’ll just talk about golf for the rest of the time and that’s fine. But occasionally a conversation takes a spiritual turn. Somebody will want information about our church or about what I do. It happened just a couple weeks ago. I had a conversation with a guy and he asked about our church and where it was located. He was really interested and I gave him information ... that guy is probably going to show up sometime. He will probably bring his wife and kids. When I invited that guy that day, I was taking a risk. I’m counting on our presentation (what this place looks like) and programming (what happens when they walk through the door) to be excellent.

So, to everyone who volunteers around here ... I’ve already told you how much I appreciate and love you for all you do. But I also want to encourage you (as I remind myself every week) that when you prepare to do your ministry, remember that you are not just “doing your job” – you are helping someone in this congregation you may not even know, who, this week, finally got a friend to show up. Never forget that. Never lose sight of that because it changes how you think about what you do. It changes how you look at it and how you prepare.

Now, having said that, one of the things that’s a little tricky when it comes to talking about excellence in a church context is how you define it, especially given that most all of the work is done by volunteers. For example, just to clarify on this because people ask this question all time, the only professionals presenting on our stage every week – the only people who get paid to do what they do – are me and Nathan. Everyone else, who sings or plays an instrument or runs the sound or the lights or the slides or shoots video or does drama, is a volunteer. It’s not their job.

So, what does excellence look like for them and for all the other volunteers in this church doing all these other things? Because everybody is in the same boat. What does excellence look like? Well, sometimes people define excellence as “doing the best you can with what you have.” But that’s not our answer because sometimes the best that you can do with what you have is not good enough, and you shouldn’t do it. If you can’t do it with a standard of excellence, you should not be doing it, especially in our context, especially in this kind of a church.

Secondly, it’s also not perfection. Excellence is not equivalent to perfection. We don’t expect that our singers will never miss a note. We don’t expect that the lights are always going to be perfect. We don’t expect that Adventureland check in will always run smoothly. We don’t expect the coffee to be the temperature that Starbucks says it’s supposed to be.

- Excellence, as far as we’re concerned, is based on, not what we prefer and like, but based on what people who are not church people think about our services and our presentation. Would they think “this is pretty good” or would they think “this is tacky?” If they think it’s good then that’s excellence.

- Excellence, as far as we're concerned, is based on whether or not people at NHCC can say "I feel good about inviting my friends and family to our facility; to our children's program; to our service. I feel really good because Rick is prepared; the musicians are prepared. It's not always perfect, but I feel good about this."

And I'll be honest with you. We have work to do in this area, in both our presentation and programming. We've heard some feedback over the last couple of months. We've heard feedback from people who've visited the church who've said, "you guys told us on your website that this would be excellent and it wasn't." We take that seriously. And it's painful to hear. We've had people in the congregation say, "I don't want to be nitpicky, but it doesn't sound like you were prepared." We've gotten a little off course in some areas and we're working to correct it – especially in our service programming.

But another area where we're not excellent in is our facility. Our parking lot is terrible. The backside of our facility (which now will face this incredible doctors' office) looks like crap. We're going to have to do something about it. And I'll just lay it out to you, it's going to cost money. Those of us who believe in this church and believe in the mission of what we're trying to do, we're going to have to pony up a little on this because it's not something we can afford to do.

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So, to be the kind of church that helps us to reach our non-yet-Christian friends and family it takes ...

- Everyone consistently contributing their gifts and talents to the overall operation.
- Consistently maintaining a standard of excellence in presentation and programming.

However, as I also said, there are two characteristics that are *not* required.

**3. It does *not* require an "evangelistic message" to be preached every Sunday. It *does* require that "deeper messages" be delivered with clarity and application.**

If all we did every Sunday was to talk about how to accept Christ, it wouldn't be very helpful to those who already have. So, obviously, we have to talk about other things ... including things that don't directly apply to people who are not yet Christians ... like I am today.

This message is obviously not evangelistic. It's not a topic that folks, who some of us brought with us today, would put at the top of their list of "want to know."

But it *is* clear (at least I think it is!) and they can understand it even if it doesn't yet apply. And that's a good thing because irreligious people who need to get up close and personal with Jesus also need to know something about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Sometimes we need to dive deep on those things.

So, that's why I don't hesitate to do these kinds of messages when needed.

**4. Finally, reaching our non-yet-Christian friends and family does *not* require "watered down" truth. It *does* require creating a safe place to hear it.**

One of the criticisms of churches like NHCC – and I heard this before we launched and I've heard it again and again over 20 years – is that our goal is to soft-pedal the truth so that we can "get more butts in the seats. You're all about the numbers ... you're all about the show ... you just want people to be entertained and have a good time ... you don't want to offend anyone so you present 'Christianity Light.'"

But that's simply not true.

When Matthew threw the party for Jesus, if Jesus had shown up *and had not been Himself*, Matthew would not have been happy. He wanted Jesus to “bring it” and with full-force. The only thing Matthew and those who helped him did was to create a safe place for his friends to meet Jesus and hear what he had to say. By bringing Jesus into his home and creating a party atmosphere, Matthew was removing the barriers that would keep his friends away.

And that’s our goal, too. That’s why we don’t have a dress code. That’s why we don’t have a lot of ritual. That’s why we have three services instead of one or two. That’s why we use movies and baseball and other metaphors to teach from. We’re trying to remove barriers that keep people away. We don’t want people to be offended by stupid stuff that’s not even in the Bible because the message of Jesus is already offensive enough!

And the message of Jesus, if you want me to boil it down for you: “You’re a hell-bound sinner in need of a savior – Me. I’m your only hope. So repent – change your thinking about Me – and believe.” Pretty weighty, I think. Not “Christianity Light.”

We don’t need to add to the weight of that by presenting it in a culturally offensive way. We just need to create a safe place for people to hear that dangerous message.

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Well, I hope all of that helps you understand a little more of why we are the way we are as a church. We just wanted to create an environment that helps (and not hinders) Christians as they attempt to be the light of Jesus to the world around them.

And it’s worked. It really has ... and it continues to work. Many of you are evidence of that. Many of you invited someone and they actually came and they got to hear the message of Jesus. And as I said before, there are different reactions, some of them are gone, but some of them believed and some of them became Christians. And they’re following Jesus today because you invited them and all of us worked together to create an environment where they could hear. Or, you were that person invited by someone and you heard and you believed and you became a Christian.

If that’s you, either side of that coin, I want to say “yea you! yea God! And yea NHCC!” That’s so awesome. And, I have a request for you ... as part of our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration we would love to hear the stories of people who’ve been on either side of that fence and share it on the final week of this series. We have a video camera set up in the commons and if you would stop by this weekend or next and just say a few words, like “here’s what I did” “here’s who I invited” “here’s who invited me ...” that would be so awesome.

## Communion

But, as we close, I want to invite every Christian here to participate in communion. Many times, communion is about remembering what Jesus did for us. How he died on the cross. He gave his body – which is what the bread represents. He gave his blood – which is what the juice represents. So when we take that, we remember and we’re so thankful, “thank you, Jesus, for your grace.”

But communion is also about remembering what we have in common with one another and the common mission we share with Jesus. And, today, as we receive communion, I’d like for us to focus on that, as well.

I want you to focus on the fact that Jesus was a friend of sinners. He loved hanging out with people who thought they weren’t the religious type. Let’s use this communion time to commit ourselves to being like him and to being a church where it’s possible for those who don’t know him yet to come to the party with us. Maybe think of the bread and the juice as the food that’s served at the party. If you can embrace it that way it sure would be helpful.

In just a minute, the band is going to begin playing and you’re invited to get up out of your seats and take communion. And then you’re free to leave after that. (It’s okay to leave on the final song – just this one day only☺).

So let's pray and we'll do that.

<PRAYER>

**Feature – Salt & Light (Jami Smith) Communion**

**CLOSING COMMENTS**

Endnotes