

COVID Church
Some Things Never Change
September 13, 2020

Good morning everyone.

There's no question that you and I are living in one of the most unique and challenging times of our lives.

- Not only is there unrest and strife and division over whatever level of racial injustice might exist in this country ...
- And not only is there an impending national election with all of the usual name-calling and mudslinging and outright lying by everyone involved ...

There's a monster known as COVID-19.

- And while it's possible to ignore *the justice issues* if you choose
- And it's possible to opt out of *the election* and all the commotion surrounding it ...

It is *not* possible to do either with the coronavirus.

That's because every single one of us has been affected by it in some way.

- From the way we work
- To the way we shop
- To the way we socialize
- To how we educate our children
- To how we travel
- And even to how we "do church" ...

... COVID-19 has had, is having and will continue to have for the foreseeable future a

moment-by-moment impact on how we live.

And the net effect is that ...

- Almost all of us are feeling – at some level – frustrated and maybe even angry.
- Some of us are fearful of what might happen to us or to the vulnerable people around us.
- Some of us are suspicious of the motives of government officials and what the “experts” are saying.

And whether it's because of the virus itself or all the upheaval it's caused, many of us are feeling isolated and alone and disconnected – like we're trapped on a deserted island.

In fact, that is exactly how I've felt over the

past two weeks as I have slowly recovered from my own battle with the coronavirus.

As most of you know, Jetta and I both came down with it at the exact same time – two weeks ago. Fortunately for her, she was back to normal within a week.

For me, it hasn't gone nearly as well.

After a couple of days of cough and fever, everything seemed to clear up and I thought it was over.

But then I felt like a train hit me. All day Friday, Saturday and Sunday, I was totally exhausted. I had no energy whatsoever.

Then, by Monday afternoon and throughout the day Tuesday, my energy returned, and I felt close to normal again.

That night, however, I woke up at 4am with a fever and chills and my entire body *just hurt* ... which meant I couldn't play in the annual North Heartland golf tourney the next day.

So, as I laid on the couch all day Wednesday, not only did I feel physically miserable, I felt emotionally miserable. I mean, for *me* not to play in our church golf tournament? *That just doesn't happen.*

To top it all off, in the middle of all my whining, I felt like the Lord said, "you know, Rick, you have this COVID CHURCH series beginning this Sunday, so it's a good thing for you to experience this."

And as much as I didn't like that idea, I had to agree. After all, it was Jesus talking, right?

So, I'm here, my friends, to testify firsthand that COVID sucks.

In every way.

- Whether you're trying to avoid getting it and possibly passing it on to someone else ...
- Or you currently have it and are having to deal with the crazy symptoms (including guilt and shame like "you must have done something wrong to have caught it").
- Or you've had it and you don't want people to *know* you had it and have them avoid you even though you're no longer contagious (a worry that Jetta and I both have experienced) ...

However you look at it, wherever you are with it, everything about COVID-19 sucks.

And it's been going on for so long now and so many things have changed because of it, that it's just worn us all down.

In fact, as I was preparing for this message, I came across a funny video which illustrates what's happened to most of us attitude-wise since this thing started.

See how many things in this clip describe where you were at the beginning of all this and where you are now.

Here we go.

So true, isn't it?

By the way, Trey Kennedy is a local comedian, and you can check out his other equally funny videos on Youtube, Instagram and Twitter.¹

Anyway, my point is that so many things have changed because of COVID-19. And it's draining and distracting and discouraging even if you've not had the disease.

And as "sucky" as that is for all of us as individuals, I have to tell you that as a Christian and as a pastor I am greatly concerned about what's happening to the church in all of this.

And when I say "the church" I mean "the church" in general – all the churches out there in the world which collectively are THE CHURCH ...

But, more importantly, I mean *our church* – North Heartland – in particular.

And my concern isn't so much that we can't figure out how to adapt to this new normal.

Obviously, we *have* adapted.

- Half of our people regularly “attend” services these days through our live stream.

And while we still have some occasional glitches (which we think we’ve figured out), the level of quality especially in the sound is night and day better from where we began.

In fact, because of COVID, Jetta and I watched from home last Sunday and what we saw and heard was outstanding.

- Many of our small groups that are not comfortable meeting in homes or in a room here at the building have found alternative ways to connect, including getting together at the food truck event

like the one happening this Wednesday evening.

- We're in the process of starting new virtual small groups that meet online only.
- Soon, most of our core classes like our *Intro to NHCC* and our *Volunteering at NHCC* class will also be available online.
- We've recently hired a full-time communications manager to help us keep everyone who is part of NHCC informed and aware and connected as much as possible.
- We've figured out how to do the masking and physical distancing thing onsite on Sunday mornings.

- We've even replaced the bread and juice communion with the individualized peel-a-meal communion containers. (And I know, they're terrible. But they work).

So, we're figuring out how to do COVID CHURCH. And we'll continue to figure it out.

In fact, if you have any ideas, feel free to pass them along. We're always open to suggestions and constructive feedback.

So, that's not my concern.

Instead, my concern is that the mental and emotional drain ... and the distraction ... and the discouragement ... of dealing with the coronavirus might inadvertently cause us to forget why we even do church in the first place.

Let me say that again.

The drain and the distraction and the discouragement of dealing with the coronavirus might inadvertently cause us to forget why we even “do church” in the first place.

And to be totally honest with you, I am as concerned about this for *myself* – and our pastors and our ministry directors and managers – as I am for any of you.

Because with all the mental and emotional drain and distraction and discouragement of dealing with the coronavirus individually and collectively, personally and professionally – to say nothing of all the additional tensions in our culture right now that are sapping everyone’s energy ...

It’s very easy for me – and for you – to get sucked down into the weeds and forget why we do what we do; to forget why any of this

matters in the first place.

And I don't say that to be critical. I mean, it's understandable. As I said at the beginning, we are living in one of the most unique and challenging times of our lives.

Nevertheless, we of all people we cannot lose our sense of vision because there is simply too much at stake in the world these days. More and more people are castaways, sending out an SOS (so to speak).

And as this began to weigh on my heart several weeks ago and I put together this series, COVID CHURCH, it occurred to me that the best way to guard against losing our vision might be to remind ourselves of what has *not* changed and will *not* change regarding our church.

And I know that not everyone here or

watching online is a Christian and not everyone would say that North Heartland is your church. So, whether or not we remain focused on our vision really isn't your concern or responsibility.

That said, I do think that what I'm going to say today might be worth your time because it will help you better understand the heart of what we're about and why we even exist in the first place.

The Setup

And I think the best way to explain that is with a story of something that happened in the earliest days of Jesus' ministry.

Now, if you're not all that familiar with who he was, it would be helpful to understand that Jesus was not only Jewish but also a rabbi who lived in the northern part of Israel during

the time of the Roman occupation in the first century.

As Ladell explained to us a couple of weeks ago, it was a highly charged political and religious environment because of the factions that existed based on how one viewed the Romans.

For example, the Zealots ...

... were basically an alt-right terrorist organization who believed that the presence of the Romans defiled their land. And, so, they needed to be forcibly removed.

In their thinking, it wasn't enough to ignore the Romans. You had to be anti-Roman.

The Pharisees ...

... were also politically and religiously conservative, but they felt that the best plan

was to create a culture of such purity and holiness that God would be pleased enough with them to intervene and literally establish the Kingdom of God.

So, instead of trying to remove the Romans, they created barriers that would exclude other Jews who weren't holy and pure ... like they were.

The Sadducees ...

... were the more moderate and maybe even liberal group. They didn't believe the scripture was meant to be taken as literally as the other groups, so they were much more pragmatic. Their idea was to not do anything to anger the Romans so that their religious institutions would at least continue to survive.

And as Jesus began his ministry – traveling throughout the land – he chose not to identify

with or support any of these factions, much to their consternation.

In fact, he offered a completely different perspective on how to live in the world and change the world; an idea captured by a very simple statement that He repeated over and over wherever He went.

*"The time has come," he said.
"The kingdom of God has
come near. Repent and
believe the good news!"
Mark 1:15 (NIV)*

In other words, "the Good News is that the rule and reign of God in this world – the kind of life you want for yourself and for everyone else – is as near and now as it is far and future.

"And you can experience it and be part of it if you will change your thinking about the

rightness of *your* way and, instead, believe and follow *My* way” ... which is it what it means to repent.

And the rest of Jesus’ ministry was spent demonstrating and explaining what His way was like.

And then, in His death and resurrection, making it possible for people to become citizens of the Kingdom regardless of whether they were Zealots, Pharisees, Sadducees or nothing at all – even a hated Roman.

But that’s not the story I want to tell you. That’s just part of the set up.

So, Jesus comes into this environment which, in many ways is a lot like ours, and He looks around and he sees ...

- People who don’t fit into any of those

movements ...

- Or people who belong to those movements and have become disillusioned by them ...

And He begins to invite them to come and follow Him and be his disciples.

For instance, one day he's walking by the Lake of Galilee and he sees Simon (who he later named "Peter") and his brother Andrew, and then James and his brother John – all four of them fishermen who were too busy fishing to be part of any political movement – and he says to all four of them "Follow Me."

And then, a few days later, in the same area, by the same lake ...

*As he walked along, he saw
Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at*

the tax collector's booth.

Because that's what Levi did – he was a tax collector.

*"Follow me," Jesus told him,
and Levi got up and followed
him.*

Mark 2:13-14 (NIV)

Now, on the surface that scene sounds almost magical, as if ...

- Jesus walked up to Levi
- And kind of leaned in real close
- And gave him the "Divine Eye" (or whatever you would call it)
- And it just drew Levi in.

... so much so that he got up like he was in a

trance and started following Jesus.

But I don't think that's what happened at all because right before Mark tells us about this incident, he writes that Jesus would regularly preach at that lake, and that large crowds would gather to hear him.

And wherever large crowds would gather, tax collectors would also gather and set up shop. That way they didn't have to hunt people down to pay their taxes!

And I think what happened was that Levi repeatedly heard Jesus preaching and teaching, and he was intrigued by what he was hearing.

And I think that one day, as Jesus was leaving the lake, he walked by Levi's booth and made it personal.

“Levi,” I think Jesus might have said. “What I’m saying to all these people is for you, too. So, you are welcome to come and follow Me.”

And Levi did.

But that’s not the story I want to tell you. That’s still part of the set up.

Levi’s Friends

What happens *next* is the story I want to tell you ...

... because it’s through *this* story that, many years ago, God spoke to me about the need for a church like North Heartland.

And whenever I need to be reminded of why we do what we do – whenever I need to have my vision restored, this is the story I go back to. This is the story that pierces my heart.

And I hope, if this is your church (or you're thinking about making it your church), it will do the same for you.

Now, as to what happens next after Jesus calls Levi to follow Him, Luke – another first-century writer who also wrote a record of the ministry of Jesus ...

Luke tells us that ...

*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)*

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 5:30 (NIV)*

... which is not surprising because, remember, they thought that God's Kingdom would come only when all the sinners were expunged from Israel and what Jesus was doing wasn't helping!

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)

Now, if you've been around church – at least, this church – you've heard that statement before. You're aware that Jesus was called the Friend of Sinners and what a wonderful thing that is for all of us.

But that's not the part of the story that I want to focus on.

What I want to focus on is what comes *after* Jesus says to Levi (who, by the way, later changes his name to Matthew and very likely writes his own version of Jesus' story which we know as the Gospel of Matthew) ...

What I want to focus on is ...

- What happens *after* Jesus says to him, "Follow me" and he does ...
- And *before* Matthew throws that big party for all of his friends where Jesus is the guest of honor.

I want to focus on what happens *in between* those two events.

Of course, the problem with that is that neither Mark nor Luke tell us what happens!

- There's nothing about how much time elapsed between Jesus' invitation and Matthew's party.
- There's also nothing about Matthew's thought process – how he even came up with the idea of a party.
- And there's nothing about all the work that it took behind the scenes to pull off the party (and it would have taken a lot of work).

But it's not hard to *imagine* what happened, especially when you understand that, as a tax collector, Matthew worked for the Roman government ... which meant that *everyone* considered him to be a traitor to his race, to his country and to his religion.

I mean, if there was ever anyone who was an outcast *in every way* it would have been

Matthew and his family.

But something completely unexpected had happened to him. Jesus had come into his life. And now Matthew – along with the other disciples – was 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 huge party but, logically, I think there had to be at least 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 life was changing for the better because of his decision to follow Jesus.

And I think when he got to that point, I think it occurred to him:

“This is all really great for *me* and *my* family ... but what about all my tax-collecting buddies and *their* families?”

“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 all this to them. I’m a numbers guy, not a word guy.”

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 teaches at the lake because most people hate them like they hate me.

“And they certainly won’t go to the synagogue when Jesus is teaching there” (which he often did) ...

“They won’t go there,” Matthew thought, “because people like them – and like me – aren’t welcome. According to the Pharisees, we’re *unclean*.”

And I imagine that Matthew pondered all of this for a few days and then it finally came to him.

“I’ve got it!” he said to himself.

“I’m going to create an *environment* where all my friends (and their friends) will feel safe.

“I’m going to create an *experience* that feels like it was designed with them in mind (because it will be).

“I’m going to throw a huge party with Jesus as the guest of honor and just let Jesus be Jesus.

“I’m going to get all my friends around Him and let him do His thing; let Him hang out with everyone and speak to them in ways they’ll understand.”

“And maybe, just maybe, some of them will want to follow Him, too.”

And then, I can imagine Matthew going to Jesus and the other disciples and pitching the idea to them.

“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. And if you want to say no, I totally get it. But here’s the deal: *would you help me reach my irreligious friends and their families?*”

“Would you help me do something that gives them the opportunity to know what I know and to experience what I’m experiencing because this is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. And I don’t want to keep it to myself.”

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

And Jesus – who never could resist a good party (which is why the Pharisees called him

“a drunkard and a glutton”) ...

Jesus says yes.

And then 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.

Matthew invited all of his friends who all of their lives believed that if they ever showed up in church, the walls would fall down.

And they came.

And Jesus and the rest of the disciples hung out with them.

And it blew everyone’s mind, especially the Pharisees who stood outside and held their

noses.

What Won't Change

And that's the story I wanted you to hear maybe for the first time or maybe for the 50th time because that's the story that God used to prompt me and a core group of 35 adults and a dozen or so kids to start this church way back in 1994.

That's the story that pierced my heart because I realized *"this is what I need because I have friends who aren't church people. I have friends who believe that if they ever showed up in a church, the walls would fall down."*

"And I wish that there was a church that was serious about intentionally creating an environment ...

- Where those friends and their families (and their friends and their families!) could show up and feel safe ...
- Where they could show up and not feel singled out or intimidated because they don't already know everything there is to know about God and the Bible;
- Where they could show up and not have to pretend that they have it all together."

"And I wish that there was a church that was serious about creating an *experience* that feels like it was designed with them in mind.

And that doesn't mean watering down the truth or compromising the gospel. After all, if Matthew threw that party and Jesus wasn't "full-on Jesus" to those people, he would not have been happy.

I'm sure his party was quite entertaining, but I guarantee it wasn't just about entertainment. It was serious business.

"And a church could do the same kind of thing."

- "It could be intentional about doing music that people actually like and maybe have even heard before.
- "And the preacher could assume that skeptics and seekers as well as believers were in the room or watching online. And he or she could address their concerns while also teaching believers the Way of Jesus. It's a lot more work but it can be done. Every week."
- "And the volunteers and staff who work to create that environment and experience could all be committed to a

level of excellence that not only honors God but also wows the people who show up.”

And I remember thinking and wishing there was a church like that that I could join and be part of because finding Jesus – actually, *being found by Jesus* – and following Jesus is the greatest thing that has ever happened to me.

And I want everyone else to experience that, too. It breaks my heart that people I know and care about don't.

And in the same way that it must have shocked Matthew when Jesus came up to him that day and said, “hey, this is for you, too. Come and follow me ...”

... I was just as shocked when God said to me, “Rick, stop wishing for a church like that

and go do it.”

“Because you’re not the only one who feels this way. I have many followers who long for the same thing and I’m going to send them to you. And they’re going to help you.

“And together you’re going to *build* that kind of a church. And you’re going to *be* that kind of a church.”

And here’s my point:

Even if we have to change *the way we do things*, *the why* will not change.

- Regardless of what happens with the coronavirus going forward
- Regardless of what happens in the upcoming election

- Regardless of what happens with regard to racial justice or BLM ...
- Regardless of what happens in anything else ...

The heart of North Heartland will still be to create an environment and an experience where we can bring people to the party and have them meet Jesus.

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying.

- I'm not saying that helping followers of Jesus grow and mature in their faith isn't important and doesn't matter to us.

It does – greatly – and we'll actually talk about it next week.

- And I'm not saying that we don't care about what's going on socially and

politically right now and that some of us shouldn't be involved.

If you've been coming to NHCC and you have that impression, you haven't been paying attention for the past – oh, I don't know – year.

We care about all of those things and more. But they are not the reason why God put us here because many other churches do those kinds of things far better than we can.

What we do best is throw a party not just for people who need to meet Jesus ... but for people *who know and love and care about people who need to meet Jesus.*

That's our vision. That's our calling. And remain committed to it however it might look going forward.

Conclusion

Now, with that in mind, let me ask you, if you're a Christian and this is your church – and if you're not a Christian this isn't something you need to think about although you're certainly welcome to do so.

But if you're a Christian and this is your church ...

- Who do you know, who do you love and who do you care about who needs to meet Jesus?

Just let their names and faces fill your mind.

- What would it take for you to take a step of faith right now and invite some of them to our weekly party – whether that means showing up in the room or

engaging with us online?

Just think about that for a second.

Would you pray with me?

Lord, thank you that you have given us a church that's committed to creating the kind of environment and experience where we can bring our friends and family who need to meet you.

But Lord, the truth about us is that we're drained and distracted and discouraged by so many of the things that we see going on in our world right now. We're sick of COVID. We're sick of the tension and strife in our culture.

And the truth is that we've been sucked down into the weeds by all of it – by our frustrations

and our fears. And we're in danger of losing sight of the great opportunity we have to be a light that points people to Jesus.

So, Lord, lift our heads and life our hearts.

- Give us eyes to see what you see.
- Give us a renewed sense of your love for people around us who don't know you.
- And give us the courage of Matthew that we might be part of the great rescue plan you have for this world.

And I ask those things in the name of Jesus who, through his life, death and resurrection, makes all of this possible.

Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Trey's video is here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCp2gZ-BMIw>. I trimmed it
for length in this message.