

COVID CHURCH
Made for More
September 20, 2020

Good morning everyone. Whether you're onsite or watching online, it's great to have you with us.

As Shannon said, today we're continuing in our series "COVID Church" ... and last Sunday I began by explaining that this series is the result of a burden that I think God put on my heart in the middle of August ...

... which is that ...

- With the *drain* ... and the *distraction* ... and the *discouragement* of constantly having to deal with this monster we know as "the coronavirus" ...

- And the impact that it's having on us individually and collectively, personally and professionally, mentally and emotionally ...
- ... and all the changes that we've had to make just to do the simplest things like shopping or birthday parties or going to school or even being part of a church ...

The burden I have ... the concern I have ... is that we have been so sucked down into the weeds of that swamp that it's easy to lose sight why we do what we do as a church; to forget why any of this matters in the first place.

Now, obviously, if you're not a Christian and/or this isn't your church, *my* concern probably isn't *your* concern. And I get that.

But I think it's helpful for you to know about

this concern because, if you're here, you're probably *considering* the possibility of becoming a Christian and/or *considering* the possibility of becoming part of this church.

On the other hand, if you *are* a Christian and North Heartland *is* your church, as I said last Sunday, of all people, you and I cannot lose our sense of vision because there is too much at stake in the world these days.

With all the stress and all the strife, more and more people are (as the song put it) aware that "something's missing" ... which means that the world needs the church and the message of Jesus more than ever before.

Review

So, last Sunday, we looked at the story of one of the very first followers of Jesus of Nazareth, a guy by the name of *Levi* (who eventually

changed his name to *Matthew* and, more than likely, is behind the writing of the story of Jesus that bears his name in the New Testament: *the Gospel According to Matthew*).

And not to brag or anything but, it was probably one of the best messages I've done in terms of describing ...

- The heartbeat of our church ...
- The compelling burden that, from what I can tell, makes us unique as far as churches go ...
- The vision that has driven us since we began on October 2nd, 1994.

And my point was that ...

- 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 any other crazy thing that might happen ...

The heart of North Heartland will still be to do what Matthew did for his distant-from-God friends and their families:

To create an *environment* and an *experience* where we can bring people to the party and have them meet Jesus.

However we have to do it going forward, that's what we're doing because that's our vision and that's our calling.

And we remain committed to it.

And if you weren't here last week or didn't watch online, I strongly encourage you to go to the media section of our app or website and watch, listen to or read the transcript of the message.

It will help you understand ...

- Why we're here
- And why we do what we do
- And *don't* do what we *don't* do ... that a lot of other churches *do do*.

But today I want to take it a step further.

Yes, Jesus was willing to hang out with tax collectors like Matthew and other "notorious sinners" (which is how the religious leaders of

Jesus' day labeled them).

And, yes, Jesus was willing to go to parties like Matthew's party so that Matthew's friends and their families could get to meet Him.

But what was the point? What was the purpose? What was the end result that Jesus had in mind?

And the reason that matters is that it defines for us as a church what *our* point and *our* purpose and *our* end result ought to be.

Great Expectations

So, let me ask you a question.

What is your greatest expectation when it comes to your relationship with God?

I mean, assuming that you are a Christian –

that you believe that Jesus of Nazareth was God in the flesh and that he lived, died, rose from the dead, and then somehow crossed over into the dimension that we call "Heaven" ...

Assuming you are a Christian, what is your greatest expectation?

I think if we did a little survey here this morning, we'd probably discover that ...

- Some of us hold a very high expectation that God will provide for our physical needs.
- For some, our greatest expectation is that God will protect us and keep us safe from harm.
- For others, it's that God will give us peace in trying circumstances.

- Still others would expect God to be an affirming and encouraging presence in our lives.

And there's nothing wrong with any of those expectations because the Bible affirms that God is a provider; that God is a protector; that God does give peace and God does encourage.

Furthermore, if we did a survey, I suspect that we'd probably also discover that for many of us – again assuming we're Christians ...

I suspect we'd discover that our greatest expectation is to be one day welcomed into Heaven not because of any good deeds we've done, but because of our faith in Jesus.

And again, that's a reasonable expectation because that's what the Bible tells us about

how salvation works.

As the Apostle Paul – the guy who is more responsible for the spread of the good news about Jesus than anyone else in the first century ...

... once wrote:

He [God] saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy ...

Titus 3:4 (NLT)

Because of his grace [expressed in Jesus] he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.

Titus 3:7 (NLT)

So, for the most part, when it comes to our relationship with God, I think most of us are not too far off concerning the set of

expectations that we're holding.

Having said *that* ... I also have a hunch that, if we were to do a survey, for most of us there would be one *huge* expectation missing from our list.

And, I say it's "huge" because when you read the New Testament (which contains the words and works of Jesus and of those who first followed in His footsteps) ...

When you read the New Testament, there is one expectation of what ought to result from a personal relationship with God; one expectation of what ought to result from the salvation offered by Jesus ... that is *by far THE greatest of all expectations* that a Christian should have.

It overshadows every other legitimate expectation.

In fact, this one expectation is so fundamental to being a Christian that if it doesn't happen, then something is desperately wrong with our faith.

Know what it is?

It's *transformation*. Transformation.

Let me put it this way.

The great *expectation* of a Christian's *salvation* is their *transformation*.

The great expectation of a Christian's salvation is their transformation.

Kind of has a catchy sound to it, doesn't it?

Let's all say it together out loud, OK? Here we go ...

“The great expectation of a Christian’s salvation is their transformation.”

The great expectation of a Christian’s salvation is their transformation.

But what does that mean?

Part of what it means is that one day Jesus is going to return and, in an instant – in the twinkling of an eye – give us new bodies that don’t get sick, don’t wear out and don’t die.

And we’re going to get to live forever in those bodies on this earth which will *also* be transformed when the curse of sin and death (and things like coronavirus) are removed and God’s intention for His creation – including us – will be fully realized.

If you’re a Christian, you’ll get to experience that. You’ll get to experience the same kind of

physical transformation that Jesus himself experience when He rose from the dead.

And it's going to be awesome. And it's something to look forward to with great hope and anticipation.

But that's what's coming *later*.

In the here and now of our everyday life, "transformation" means that we will become substantially different – and *better* – people than we were five years ago and 10 years ago, 20 years ago and even 50 years ago.

For those who are Christians, the great expectation is that a positive *metamorphosis* will take place – first in our hearts and then in our actions – because of our faith in Jesus.

Or as we sometimes say around here.

**Knowing Jesus will make your life better
because He will make you better at life.**

Being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus means you become a better person with a better life because you're better at life.

That's the expectation which, as I said, is communicated by every writer in the document we call the New Testament.

Just as one "for instance," listen to what Paul wrote to one group of Christians living in the first-century region of Colossae.

He told them ...

*This same Good News that
came to you is going out all
over the world.*

In other words, the story of Jesus and who He is and what He's done is spreading. People everywhere are hearing about Him.

And something amazing is happening.

It [meaning the good news] is bearing fruit everywhere by changing lives ... just as it changed your lives ...
Colossians 1:6 (NLT)

People everywhere aren't just *hearing* the story of Jesus and being moved by it, Paul is saying. It's better than that. It's changing their lives!

They're becoming better people because knowing Jesus, following Jesus, trusting Jesus is making them better at life.

The great expectation of a Christian's salvation is their transformation.

Of course, a good question at this point might be ... “what exactly do you mean by ‘better people who are better at life’?”

Well, again, there are so many descriptions of that in the writings of the original leaders of the movement Jesus started that we’d run out of time if we tried to look at all of them, but let me give you just one example.

In one of his letters, the Apostle Paul, wrote that ...

God’s goal for Christians is to ...

... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Ephesians 4:13b (NIV)

... which is an incredible thought.

I mean, just try to imagine *that*: you and me

somehow going from the people we are today to people who reflect in our everyday life “the whole measure ... of the fullness ... of Jesus!”

- Everything that Jesus was and is – the fullness of His thinking and living and impact.
- And you and me at some point measuring up to all of that in who we are and how we live.

Pretty lofty goal wouldn't you say?

But it *is* the goal!

In other words, whatever Jesus thought did should become the normative pattern of life for anyone who follows Him, so that over *time* ...

- They more and more *think* like He

thought.

- They more and more *live* like He lived.
- And they more and more *impact* the world like He impacted the world.

Now, just to be clear – especially if you’re a person who isn’t that familiar with Jesus and His life, being more like Jesus doesn’t mean becoming some other-worldly super-saint who goes around spouting Bible verses in King James English!

Instead, it’s about becoming a person who is more and more characterized by ...

- *Love* instead of self-centeredness and self-protection
- *Joy* instead of dissatisfaction and discouragement

- *Peace* instead of anxiety
- *Patience* instead of irritation and demandingness
- *Kindness* instead of meanness and judgmentalism
- *Goodness* instead of moral compromise and impurity
- *Faithfulness* (being “full of faith”) instead of fear
- *Gentleness* instead of pride and bullying
- And *self-control* instead of overindulgence and recklessness ...

All of these qualities – and more – are what it means for the “good news” to bear fruit in the

life of a Christian.

These are the attitudes and actions that will become more and more characteristic of our lives if we're followers of Jesus.

Now, obviously, this kind of change doesn't happen overnight. And there will be setbacks along the way.

But, if there is no discernable progress in these areas over time, then, as I said earlier, something is desperately wrong with our faith.

Actually, I didn't say that. The half-brother of Jesus, the Apostle James, is the one who said it.

He wrote:

You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one

God. Good for you!

You have excellent theology!

But remember ...

*Even the demons believe this,
and they tremble in terror.*

Satan and his minions have excellent theology, too.

So ...

*How foolish! Can't you see
that faith without good deeds
is useless? James 2:19-20
(NLT)*

If what you believe about Jesus isn't changing your life, James is telling us, there's a problem somewhere because the great expectation of a Christian's salvation is their transformation.

Great Confusion

Now, here's a question to ponder:

If change (or transformation or metamorphosis or whatever you want to call it) is such a big deal, why is it that so many Christians don't hold it as their highest expectation?

Well, there are lots of reasons, but I think maybe the most significant goes back to what James was saying.

We think that the Christian life is primarily about “*believing the right things* so we can get into Heaven when we die.”

And, part of the reason for *that*, to be completely honest, is the way that many of us heard the gospel presented.

What many of us heard was that one day we

would face a scene not too unlike something out of the classic movie, *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*.

If you haven't seen it ... it's a satire on the legend of King Arthur's quest for the cup that Jesus used at The Last Supper, known as the Holy Grail.

At one point in the movie, Arthur and his knights come to "the bridge of death" that spans "the gorge of eternal peril."

Check out what they have to do in order to get across.

Let's watch.

How many other churches would play a scene from *Monty Python*?

Just sayin'.

But my point is that what many of us heard when the gospel was presented to us went something like this:

“One day, you as the lowly sinner you are will stand before a holy, righteous and perfect God. It’s going to happen one minute after you die or, if you live until Jesus returns, it will happen then.

“But you will stand before God Almighty and He is going to ask you, ‘why should I let you into my Heaven?’”

Now, the intention of that question is good.

It’s meant to drive us to think about what makes us acceptable to God and to hammer home what Paul wrote to Titus: *that it’s not our attempt to do enough righteous things but our faith in what Jesus did for us in His mercy and*

grace on the cross.

But, the problem, as John Ortberg wrote in his book, *The Life You Always Wanted*, is that “Jesus never said, ‘Now, I’m going to tell you what you need to say in order to get into heaven when you die.’ I’m going to give you the right answer that allows you to cross the bridge into paradise.”

Instead, he writes, “the gospel writers make it clear that Jesus’ good news was that we no longer have to live in the guilt, failure, and impotence of our own strength.

“The good news is that the transforming presence and power of God is available through Christ, right here, right now.”

In Real Life

The question is ... how does that happen?

Well, it would be very easy to over-spiritualize this and miss the point, so I'm going to phrase it in a very non-religious way that applies to *any* kind of change a person might want to make.

- For instance, if you want to lose weight this would apply.
- If you want to change your career-field this would apply.
- If you want to go from speaking English all the time to speaking Spanish all the time this would apply.
- And if you want to be more loving and less self-centered and self-protective ...
- And more joyous instead of dissatisfied and discourage ...

- And so on and so forth, this would apply.

Here's the answer:

“Transformation happens when we consistently and fully engage in *environments* and *experiences* that foster change.”

Actually, you could say that in reverse as well.

Get in the right environment; fully engage in it; do that over and over ... and you will change.

For instance, if you want to get in shape, what's the right environment?

The gym.

Can you just show up and look at the equipment?

Nope. You have to throw yourself into it – fully engage in the experience.

Can you do that just once and hope to get in shape?

Nope. You have to do it over and over.

You want to change the language you speak?
What's the right environment?

A language class, maybe, or even better, a foreign country.

Can you just fly over that country?

Nope – you've got to hang out with the people who speak the language. Fully engage with them.

Can you do that for a week and hope to be fluent in a new language?

Nope. You have to do it for week after week after week after week after week.

Does this make sense? Nod your head and let me know you're still awake!

Now, how does this apply to the kind of transformation that we've been talking about?

The exact same way: *it happens when we consistently and fully engage in environments and experiences that are conducive to it.*

In fact, Jesus Himself once said almost the same exact thing:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit [which is

similar to how Paul phrased it, right?].

For apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5 (NLT)

What’s the transformational environment here?

It’s Jesus himself. “I am the vine” he said.

Can we just give Him a passing nod?

Nope. We’ve got to be fully engaged with Him in the same way that a branch is fully engaged with the trunk of the tree.

Can we do that every now and then?

Nope. We have to “remain in him” he says.

Now, that may sound a little bit like “holy fairy dust” given that Jesus isn’t physically present

with us.

So, how do we do it? How do we “remain in Jesus” in such a way that our lives produce the fruit of transformation?

Well, obviously, there is a very personal and private component to it.

In other words, there has to be a time in your schedule where you, on a regular basis, sit and talk to God and listen to God through the scripture ...

- Where you read about what Jesus said and did.
- Where you read about what the Apostles said and did.
- Where you read what those who came before Jesus said and did.

And then you apply what you read to your own life. And you do this over and over and over.

However, as important as that is, it's not enough.

In fact, not only is it not enough, it's not even *the primary environment and experience* which God uses to foster transformation ... which is surprising to a lot of Christians.

That environment and experience – the primary way that God has designed transformation to take place ... is the church.

And by that, I don't mean the church building. I don't mean our facility.

By "church" I mean the environments and experiences created by *the people* who make

up the church.

And this is so counter-intuitive to so many Christians these days because so many Christians see their involvement and engagement with the church as being an add-on to their faith. So many Christians see it as being optional.

Engaging with “church” is something you squeeze into your schedule ...

- If you’re not out of town ...
- Or if you don’t have “a better option” ...
- Or you’re not too tired ...
- Or you’re not too busy ...
- Or you’re not too <whatever>.

But it's not optional. And it's not an add-on ...

... which is why Paul once wrote ...

These are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.

*Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.
Ephesians 4:11-12 (NLT)*

But it's not just *their* responsibility.

Paul continues:

He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and

*full of love. Ephesians 4:16
(NLT)*

It's an incredible plan and an incredible vision.

- All of us who know Jesus ...
- Working together to create environments and experiences ...
- That help all of us to remain in Jesus ...
- So that we can be transformed from who we are naturally to who we are meant to be – to the “the whole measure ... of the fullness ... of Jesus!”

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

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

You were made to be more than you are right now.

You were meant to be a better man or a better woman;

You were meant to be a better spouse, a better friend, a better student.

You were made to love more than you do

To give more than you do

To work harder than you do

To laugh more than you do

To worship more than you do

You were made to be more creative, more hopeful, more focused, more courageous, and more patient.

Every good thing you can think of ... every good thing that reflects the whole measure of the fullness of Jesus ... that's what you were made for.

And we ... collectively, as a church – from the pastors and ministry leaders to every single person who says “North Heartland is my church” – can help you begin moving from where you are to where you want to be as a person.

Because you know, and I know, and we all know that something is missing in us. We’re not who we were made to be and who we want to be.

And we need help.

I mean, if you could do it by yourself, you’d already be *doing it* by yourself.

But you’re not. And neither am I.

At NHCC

Now, as to how our church – North Heartland helps people become more like Jesus ...

There are four environments and experiences that we work together to provide. Some of these require pastors and teachers and ministry leaders to make them happen; but all of them require all of us to work together to make them happen.

And I'm not going to spend a lot of time on these because they're not super-complex, plus you can learn more about them today in the *Intro to NHCC* class that happens from 12:30 to 3:30 this afternoon down in the café.

And if this isn't your church and you want to know more about what we're trying to do you should definitely go to that class.

But here are the four things we invite people to do and try to make it possible for people to

on a regular basis.

Ready?

#1. Connect with God by coming to services or watching online.

Now, again, this isn't meant to minimize the idea of spending time alone with God on a regular basis. If you want to grow and change, you have to do that. But you cannot get what happens here anywhere else. And you need it.

#2. Join a small group ...

... because you can't grow spiritually unless you're connected relationally.

I mean, we heard Gus earlier describe how that happens for him and for his wife in their small group. I can say the same thing about my small group.

Last Wednesday we met at the food truck event. And I have to tell you that experience of just sitting with some friends was so helpful to me because, for some reason – maybe the aftermath of my own COVID experience – I was just down, dooby dooby do down down that day.

To be completely honest, I didn't even want to go. But I have learned through the years that when I don't want to go, that's the time I need most to go. And without fail, I leave that environment and experience encouraged.

Now, obviously, with the coronavirus, the way we do small groups has had to change. Some of us are not comfortable with an in-person experience which is why we're also offering virtual small groups these days.

And if you're not part of a group right now, I

strongly suggest you take Nic up on his offer to stop by and visit with him and Marci after this service.

If you don't want to do that, you can also go to the "sign me up" tab on our website or app and check out the "last chance" small groups. It's only a 12-week commitment and what they have planned is really cool and really helpful.

The third thing we invite people to do is to ...

#3. Develop your potential by increasing your knowledge and learning new skills through various core and special interest classes we offer.

One of those is the Intro Class I mentioned earlier. But we constantly offer classes on many other topics which facilitate personal growth and development.

Finally ... we invite and help people to ...

#4. Impact the world around them.

And I'll have more to say about that one next week.

So, what we offer as a church sounds pretty simple, doesn't it?

- Connect with God
- Join a small group
- Develop your potential
- Impact your world

But what it will do for you is profound.

Now, it should also be said that there are other experiences that produce growth and change in our lives that *don't* happen in those environments.

For example, *suffering* – going through trials and tribulations in life – is a huge component.

But suffering by itself doesn't necessarily lead to positive transformation.

It's only when suffering is experienced in the context of the Body of Christ – when we're connecting with God in worship and teaching, when we're part of a small group, for example ...

It's only when suffering is experience in the context of the church and the people of the church that it helps us to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

You just can't do this on your own.

Conclusion

So, if you're a follower of Jesus ...

- Are you really being transformed?
- Are you really becoming less like you and more like Him in your attitudes? In your words? In your actions?

The great expectation of your "salvation" is your transformation.

If that's not happening, I invite you and encourage you to work on ...

- Connecting with Him personally and privately but also in worship and in teaching.
- Becoming part of a small group of Jesus-followers who will regularly encourage you and challenge you.

I encourage you to put some effort into ...

- Developing your potential as a Christian by learning and developing new skills.
- And making an intentional effort to positively impact your world in some way.

You were made for more.

That's why Jesus came. And that's why this church – and every church that exists – is here.

Let's pray.

Endnotes