

More Than A Building
Gettin' Weird
November 3, 2019

Good morning everyone.

Today we're continuing in our series *More Than a Building* which is a series about the church. And when I say "the church" I'm not talking about *this* church – North Heartland. Instead, I'm talking about *the* church – the capital "C" Church; the movement that Jesus of Nazareth began (which obviously includes *this* church).

And the reason we're talking about the church is because a lot of us need to change the way we think about it, and radically so.

So, two weeks ago, in the first week of this series, I told you three things you probably

don't know that you *should know* that if you *did know* might actually change not only the way you think about church but also the way you engage with it and support it and, as Jesus did, love it.

And then, last week we saw that, contrary to what most people think, church isn't reserved for perfect people who have it all together; who have only what might be called "respectable sins."

Instead, church is for out and out sinners: people who are deeply aware of the depth of their sin and their need for grace ... which is why the church is, above all else, "the grace place."

- When a church truly is a place of grace, we preach the "truth" not just so we can point out what people are *not* doing that they *should* be doing (and vice versa),

but so we can point to Jesus – the One who provides grace for all of our sin and failure.

- When a church is a place of grace, people who are not Christians or people who have been away from God and away from church for a long time are actually invited to participate in the life of the church in ways that might be surprising.
- When a church is a place of grace, those of us who *are* Christians are constantly amazed that we – sinners that we are – get to be a part of it.

And if you're new with us or missed either of those messages, I strongly encourage you to watch, listen to or read them. They're available in the media section of our app and website and also on our podcast.

Defining Weird

Now, if you *are* new with us and especially if you're not a Christian, you picked a great day to be here because today, as Caroline said, we're going to talk about why churches – including this one – do some weird things.

In addition, we're even going to invite you to participate with us in a couple of weird things because, again, this is "the grace place."

Now, before you freak out and head for the door, you should know that by "weird" I *don't* mean crazy ... or scary ... or obnoxious. I'm not talking about pew jumping or snake handling or picketing abortion clinics ... which *are* crazy, scary and obnoxious things to do.

By *weird* I mean "common Christian practices

which, because they don't happen anywhere else other than church, seem strange to the uninitiated." <repeat>

And, by the way, churches and Christians aren't the only organizations and people who do things that seem strange to the uninitiated.

For example, this afternoon over off of I-70 just east of 435 ...

Well, just watch.

This afternoon at Arrowhead Stadium when the Chiefs beat the Vikings, 80K people are going to be doing *that*.

And if you're a Chiefs' fan – if you're among the initiated to "Chiefs Kingdom" – that doesn't seem strange at all to you. But if you're *not* a fan, the Tomahawk Chop might seem to be more than just bizarre to you; it might also seem disrespectful and offensive

to Native Americans.

Whether that's true or not isn't my point. I'm just saying that churches and Christians aren't the only organizations and people who do things that seem weird to people who are not "insiders."

So, what kind of weird things are we talking about?

I'm sure if we had enough time, we could list off many things churches do but, today, we're going to focus on just three: the big ones that are common to almost all churches, including this one.

1. We've already seen an illustration of the first one in our drama, which is communion.

I mean, where else do people do <whatever it is> with a piece of bread and a cup of juice or wine?

2. Another weird thing that churches do is baptism.

And what makes it even weirder is all the different ways churches do it – sprinkling, dunking, pouring – and to whom they do it.

3. And the final one, for today at least, is worship.

Where else do people gather together every week to *literally* sing someone's praises? I know of no other setting in our culture where that happens.

And, again, there are other things churches do that are kind of weird – they don't happen anywhere else – such as ...

- Forming groups of eight-to-twelve people who regularly meet together to support one another, pray for one another and encourage one another to

keep trusting God and following Jesus.

- And a lot of congregations are constantly inviting people and serving people who would not think of themselves as “church people.”
- And every congregation that I know of is almost 100% financially supported by the uncompelled generosity of the people who are part of it. (Other nonprofits are supported by voluntary donations, too, but they’re typically supported by people who are *not* part of them).

And the list could go on but, in the interest of time, we’re going to focus on the practices of communion, baptism and worship.

A Common Misunderstanding

And we're going to look at each one individually but, before we do, I want to point out a common misunderstanding that connects them to one another – and not in a good way.

And this misunderstanding is not a minor thing because it completely drains each of these practices of their power. And by *power* I don't mean something "mystical" or "supernatural" – a hidden force that makes things happen that otherwise wouldn't happen.

By *power* I mean the ability of communion, baptism and worship to impact our hearts and minds; their ability to change the way we see *everything*: God, ourselves and the world around us.

And we'll talk about that shortly but here it is.

The misunderstanding most people have (including many who have been Christians for a long time) is that ...

Communion, baptism, and worship are things we do to get God to do what we think God *should* do. <repeat>

- “If I take communion – especially if I make myself *worthy enough* to take communion ...
- “If I get baptized – or, for a parent, *if I have my kid baptized* ...
- “If I worship God with all my heart and all my soul – just really get into it ...

“If I do those things then God will do ... *something*. I’m not really sure what it is but, I want to make sure I have everything covered. I want to make sure I’m good with God. So I’m going to do those things.”

By the way, did you know that there's a biblical phrase that describes a time where people *had* to do certain things to get God to do things in return?

The phrase is “old covenant” which refers to the agreement between God and the nation of Israel, also called the Law of Moses.

Under the Law of Moses the way it worked was “if we do good then God will bless us. If we do bad, then God will curse us.”

But you and I are not under the Law of Moses; we're not under the Old Covenant because ...

- a) we're not Jewish and
- b) the purpose of that agreement has been fulfilled by Jesus so it is no longer needed.

Instead, we get to be part of a new covenant or agreement; the one which Jesus came to

establish with the whole world.

... which means that as much as we might think of communion, baptism and even worship as religious rituals that “get God to do something” that’s not what they are.

At least, that’s not what they are intended to be.

Communion

So let’s talk about communion.

And let’s begin by saying that the only reason any church ever does communion is because Jesus told his very first followers to do so and they did. But the only reason they did was because they saw Jesus crucified and then saw him alive again three days later and then hung out with him for another six weeks until He returned to heaven.

Had that not happened, we wouldn't even know about communion let alone actually do it.

So, here's what happened to create the practice of communion.

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks ...

... he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

1 Corinthians 11:23-24 (NIV)

Now, if you're a Christian you've heard this story more times than you can remember, but I doubt you've ever thought about how crazy this must've sounded on that night.

After all, Jesus and the Twelve were gathered for the Passover meal which was for remembering Moses and how God had delivered Israel from Egypt many centuries before. But on this particular night and at this point in the meal, it almost sounded like Jesus was making it all about remembering *him*.

And then it got even crazier.

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 1 Corinthians 11:25 (NIV)

Jesus was making it all about Him. He was not only changing the meaning of Passover, He was announcing the *end* of Passover as they knew it and signaling the inauguration of that new covenant I just mentioned.

And this covenant was not between God and

a particular nation, as was the case with Israel. This was the big one. The final one. The everlasting one. This was - and is - a covenant between God and the whole human race.¹

And under this new covenant ...

- And there is no requirement to live a perfect life in order to get into God's good graces. Jesus already did that for us.
- There is no requirement to make atonement for our sins - to somehow work off our debt to God for letting Him down. Jesus already did that, too, on the cross.
- The only requirement is to believe in Him and what He did.

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10: 9 (NIV)

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2: 8-9 (NIV)

So with that as background ... what is communion?

It's actually pretty simple.

In the same way that the Passover meal reminded Jewish men and women of what happened in Egypt – which marked the

beginning of the Old Covenant ...

Communion is a reminder of what happened on the cross (which marked the beginning of the New Covenant) ... not a ritual to get God to do something.

Unfortunately, over the years, the simplicity of Jesus' request has become obscured as layer upon layer of interpretation and qualification has been added.

For example, instead of a simple way to memorialize what Jesus did for us, communion eventually became something we have to do in order to get more of God's grace – which, first of all is “old covenant” thinking not new.

More importantly, by definition it's actually impossible.

If grace is “favor you don't deserve and cannot earn” what could you possibly do to get more of

it?

If there was something you had to do then it wouldn't be grace because you'd be earning it.

On top of this confusion, at some point in church history, theologians began to interpret a statement Jesus made after his miraculous feeding of 5,000 men plus women and children as having something to do with communion.

Here's the statement:

"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." John 6:53 (NIV)

And because Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, said that the bread was his body and the cup was the new covenant in his

blood, the inference was drawn that He was also saying in this statement that the bread and wine literally become his body and blood whenever we eat and drink it.

But if you read what happens before Jesus makes that statement, it's quite clear he's not being literal nor is he saying anything about communion because it hadn't even been instituted at that point.

One more way in which communion became far more complex than Jesus ever intended is that, at some point, church leaders began to define who could and couldn't participate.

And there's a very current example of that. If you've been paying attention to the news lately, I'm sure you've heard that Joe Biden was recently refused communion because his support of abortion rights goes against the teaching of the Catholic Church of which

he is a member.

Now, to be clear some Protestant denominations and churches have similar standards. Some will refuse communion to people who are not believers. Some will even refuse it to anyone who is not a member of that particular congregation.

At North Heartland, we don't think those limitations are necessary. Instead, we practice the widest and most liberal version of what's called *open communion*. Anyone – Christian or not – is welcome to come and partake and remember what Jesus did ...

... for two reasons:

1. Judas obviously was not a believer and not only was he present at the Passover meal, Jesus made a point to include him and serve him.

2. One of the main criticisms of Jesus by the religious establishment was that he ate with “tax collectors and prostitutes and other notorious sinners” – so much so that he was labeled the “Friend of Sinners.”

It’s hard to imagine him excluding those folks from a meal that symbolized what he was doing for them on the cross, even if they didn’t fully understand it or believe it.

Of course, someone might wonder, “OK, but what about that verse where Paul actually warns some people *not* to take communion because they were living in an unworthy manner?”

Specifically ...

Whoever eats the bread or

drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.
1 Corinthians 11:27 (NIV)

Don't want to do that.

Therefore ...

Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 1 Corinthians 11:28 (NIV)

For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. 1 Corinthians 11:29 (NIV)

That sounds very scary but, if you read the entire context of what Paul is saying, he's not telling people "you better be living 'a worthy life' before you take communion."

He's not even saying "you better do deep some soul searching and ask God to forgive your sins before you come forward."

The issue for Paul – the issue that was bringing God's judgment – is the hypocritical way people in that congregation were acting. But they weren't hypocritical because they were still *sinning*. That's just part of life as a follower of Jesus. You're still going to sin.

They were hypocrites because of how they were treating the Body of Christ – one another.

People who were of the "right" race or who had money or who were able to do the really flashy spiritual stuff (like speaking in tongues) were looking down on and even mistreating others in the congregation who didn't have or weren't able to do those things.

And that was crazy because *they* were coming to the table of unconditional acceptance in Christ while, at the same time, *not* unconditionally accepting their brothers and sisters in Christ!

And that was hypocritical. It was unworthy behavior from people who people who had received grace upon grace!

And that's what Paul was warning them about.

So, bottom line ...

We don't do communion to get God to do something (like infuse our souls with grace or to forgive whatever sins we've committed since our last communion). We do it to remind ourselves that God has already done something.

And given that this is what communion is about and since we've spent so much time

talking about it, we thought it might be a good idea to pause at this point and do just it.

So, in just a minute, if you're a Christian, you're invited to come forward and remember the body and blood of the Lord that has made your salvation possible.

And if you're not a Christian you're welcome to do that, too, though it seems a little contradictory given the meaning of communion. Maybe you do it as a way of asking Jesus to reveal Himself to you.

And if you're thinking, "I'm not good enough for this; I've sinned a lot lately" you *definitely* should come and be reminded that it's not about how good you are but how good Jesus is. And invite the Holy Spirit to guide and direct your life so you are more of the person

you were meant to be.

Finally, along the lines of what Paul wrote ... if you're mad at someone in this church or disrespecting someone in this church and you're not willing to take the steps to try and work it out, you probably shouldn't come. Instead, you should ask God to soften your heart and empower you to move towards reconciliation.

Ok, so here we go. The table is open. Come and remember and rejoice in what has been freely given to you because of Jesus.

Lord Jesus thank you for the reminder that you have done everything we need so that we can have a relationship with the Father. May the Holy Spirit guide us and empower us in the days ahead.

Amen.

Baptism

Ok, let's talk briefly about the second weird thing that churches do, which is *baptism*. As misunderstood as communion can sometimes be, I think baptism might be even more so.

And let's begin by saying that the only reason any church ever does baptism is because Jesus told his very first followers to do so and they did. But the only reason they did was because they saw Jesus crucified and then saw him alive again three days later and then hung out with him for another six weeks until He returned to heaven.

Had that not happened, we wouldn't even know about baptism let alone actually do it.

So, here's how the practice of baptism for churches began.

Before He left this earth to return to his Father, one of the witnesses tells us that Jesus gathered everyone together and said ...

"Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Matthew 28:19 (NLT)

"Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you." *Matthew 28:20 (NLT)*

Now, just like the communion deal was pretty simple, that command is also pretty simple and straightforward.

“Go tell people about me,” Jesus was saying. “Tell them what I’ve done – the story of My life and death and resurrection. And teach *them* what I’ve taught *you* about how to live.”

“And when they come to believe in Me and what I’ve done, and they want to learn how to live My way” (which is what a disciple is – a learner), “you are to immerse them” (which is what the word “baptize” literally means in the original Greek language). “You are to dunk them under the water” ...

... in the same way that Jesus himself was dunked under the water of the Jordan River by John the Baptist.

And that’s exactly what they did. They went all over the world preaching the good news about Jesus. And whenever people believed and wanted to become part of one of those little cohorts that followed in the Way of Jesus

(called "church"), they were baptized.

And that's what you see over and over in the historical account written up by Luke and preserved for us in what we call the Book of Acts.

**Preaching, believing, baptizing, becoming part of the Body of Christ (the church).
<repeat>**

Now, if you look at that sequence and you remember that salvation comes by grace through faith – i.e., through *believing* – it's clear that baptism can't cause salvation and nor can it be a condition for salvation because baptism is meant to come after salvation.

So what is baptism?

Baptism is an *illustration* and an *initiation*.

It's an illustration of two things. First of all, it paints a picture of what happened to Jesus:

- He was alive
- Then He was dead and buried
- Then He was raised again on the third day.

And it visualizes what has happened to the person being baptized.

- This is the original "them" before Jesus.
- This is that "them" being put "in Christ" and washed clean of all their sins (past, present and future) because they have believed in and received Him.
- And this is now the new "them" – one who is raised to new life and belongs to God's family, the church, the body of Christ.

It's their initiation.

But, again, over the years, the simplicity of Jesus' instruction has become obscured as layer upon layer of interpretation and qualification has been added to the point where, today, baptism has lost its true meaning.

For instance, most people have been taught or heard that baptism is something you do to your babies so that they won't have sin on their soul and, therefore, not go to heaven if, God forbid, they were to die.

But that idea is nowhere to be found in the teaching of Jesus or of those who initially followed him.

In, fact, they all taught exactly the *opposite*; that what counts is not what happens to our

bodies when we are babies (like when Jewish males were circumcised) but what happens in our hearts when we hear the Good News. Will we believe it? Or will we turn our backs on it?

Point being that ...

Baptism isn't a religious ritual we do (or have done to our kids) so that God will do something. Baptism is – like communion – a reminder that God has already done something.

And it's a very *personal* reminder because, after you become a Christian – after you hear the Gospel and believe – you are going to have times in your life where you doubt whether or not you really did that. You're going to doubt whether or not you really did come to the point where you trusted Jesus as your savior.

But if you followed the order we talked about

a few minutes ago – preaching, believing, baptizing and becoming part of the Body of Christ – you’ll have an answer to those doubts. Your baptism will remind you that ...

- You really do belong to Jesus
- You really have been forgiven of all your sins
- And you really have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to become the person you were meant to be.

Now, there’s a lot more that could be said about this weird practice of baptism but I think I’ve covered the high points.

So, let me wrap up this section by saying that ...

- This is why, here at North Heartland, we

do baptism several times a year.

We know that there are always people who are coming to understand for the first time who Jesus is and what He has done, and then believing in Him. And we want to give them the opportunity to do what Jesus said.

- It's why we dunk people instead of sprinkling them or pouring them; though in certain situations we will do those methods of baptism.
- It's also why we don't baptize babies and young children but, instead, have an annual parent-child blessing. Babies and younger children can't understand the gospel and believe.

Now, having said all of that ... two weeks from today, we're going to baptize right here on

this stage.

On Thursday of that week, we're going to set up our baptismal pool and set the water temp to right at 85 degrees so it's nice and warm.

And then, on that Sunday, Ladell and/or one of our other pastors will get into the water and whoever wants to be baptized will get in with him or them – one at a time, or sometimes we do two for married couples – and get dunked.

And if you want to be a part of that, if you've come to believe in Jesus and have never been baptized (or if you were baptized as a baby), we'd love to have you participate.

There's info in the program, on our app and website, and also at the information center.

Of course, I should also add that one of the things I've noticed over the years as a pastor

is how many people say something like, “well, if I don’t *have to be* baptized in order to be saved – if it’s just an illustration and an initiation – then I’m going to pass.

“After all, I was baptized as a baby. And I would look stupid because everybody knows grown-ups don’t get baptized.”

And I understand that logic. And I especially understand that being baptized as an adult goes against the grain of our culture, both religious and secular.

But here’s a thought:

Could the fact that baptism is not required for salvation be a measure of how real our faith is?

If we’re not willing to do the very first thing Jesus asks of his followers, how much do we really trust him? How real is our faith? Do we really understand who He is and what He has

done for us?

Congregational Worship

Well, we've talked about two weird things that churches do – communion and baptism.

Now, let's talk very briefly about worship. And it's going to be brief because, in just a few minutes, we're going to actually do it.

So, why does every church at some point in every service, invite people to stand and praise God in song?

Well, unlike communion and baptism, it's not because Jesus told us to do it. It's because worship is just what people do.

We're all built with an inborn desire to worship something or someone.

Don't believe me? Should I show you that Tomahawk Chop video again?

What people are doing when they do the chop – putting aside the issue of whether its disrespectful or offensive ... what people are doing is basking in the reflected glory of the team. They're attempting to wrap themselves in its identity.

And as far as it goes, that's OK. A professional football team is a fairly benign organization.

But because we're suckers for reflected glory – we're created for it – it's very easy for us to wind up worshipping and giving our lives to people and things that are not benign; things that are destructive to us.

That's why God has graciously said, from the very beginning, "worship Me. Praise Me.

Bask in my glory" which only makes sense because God is the ultimate Good and the ultimate Glory.

And that's why we do it.

We worship not to get God to do something. We worship because God *is* something and God has already done something wonderful for us in Christ.

And He invites all of us ...

- To give Him our whole heart
- To build our lives on the foundation of his love
- And then to stand in that love.

And, as weird as it might be, in the next few minutes we're going sing about those things and worship Him because that's the kind of God he is.

And if you don't feel comfortable doing that or singing, it's OK. You can just listen. But please don't take this as a cue to leave early so you don't disturb the people around you who want to engage.

Ok, let's stand together and sing.

Worship – Whole Heart, Build My Life, Stand in Your Love (13)

CLOSING COMMENTS (2)

1. I'm glad you were here today and I hope you'll be here next week for ... *Ministers: The Shocking Truth*. Few people understand it. Fewer can handle it.

Seriously, one of the greatest misunderstandings in all of Christianity has to do with ministry and ministers. And it has tremendously bad consequences for both individual

Christians and entire churches.

2. And now it's time for that weird thing where the uncompelled generosity of the congregation makes the existence and work of the congregation possible: the offering.

3. See you next Sunday.

Endnotes

ⁱ Stanley, Andy. *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (p. 85). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.