

This Is Us
Lessons Learned
July 1, 2018

Worship Songs – Rejoice / Resurrecting / T&G
Video – “Communion”
Feature – What a Beautiful Name / Communion

Good morning everyone. It’s great to be back with you after all these weeks!

This is the final week of our series “This Is Us” in which we’ve had the wonderful opportunity to hear from our leadership team (Ladell, Shannon, Kitti and Mica) and our ministry directors (Julie, Kingsley and Clay) as well as our Arts Leaders (Nathan and Maggie) and several of our vocalists how God has been working in their lives.

And when I say “we have had the opportunity” I really do mean *we* because, even though I was off, I listened to all the messages (which are always made available on our website, app and podcast shortly after each service).

And I to have to say that, as I listened to each Sunday’s service, I was once again blown away not only by the depth of the men and women who God has brought to lead and guide this church but also their vulnerability and their transparency. What we have here at NHCC – *who* we have here at NHCC – is pretty special and, to be totally transparent myself, what I missed most while I was off ... was *them*.

I really love these people and I love getting to work with them.

Of course, I love *you all*, too. And I love what we get to do together as well ... and I’ll say more about that a little bit later in this message.

But, as I said, today is the conclusion of “This Is Us” which means that it’s *my turn* to share a little of what God has been doing in my life; specifically, some of the lessons I’ve learned during my sabbatical.

Before I do that I should probably explain (for anyone who might be new to NHCC) that one of the things we do to help maintain the emotional and spiritual health of our pastors and ministry staff is to give a six-week break after every six years of service. That’s in addition to regular vacation time and other paid time off within that year.

And the purpose of that – of the sabbatical – is to do literally what the word “Sabbath” means: to rest from our labors, to be refreshed and renewed *so that ...* we can continue those labors.

People aren’t made to just keep doing and doing and doing, producing and producing and producing. If we do that, if we live that way, we eventually burn out ... which is why, I think, more than a few of us are a mess this morning.

- We never get off the treadmill.

- We never draw the line that says “enough.”
- There’s always one more thing or two more or ten more that we *have* to do.

And believe me, I “get” that there are seasons of life and circumstances that are demanding where you have no choice but to ramp up. But, at some point, you either stand down or you break down. Let me say that again: you either stand down or you break down.

... which is why, I think, when God gave the People of Israel the Ten Commandments, this was included:¹

“Six days you shall labor and do all your work but on the seventh, well, that’s a Sabbath and you’re not going to do that. Instead, you shall rest. That day is special. It’s to be holy – set apart from all the others” (which is what “holy” means).

Now, you and I live in a culture that has totally obliterated that idea. And I say “obliterated” because it didn’t use to be that way. Used to be that our culture and commerce would basically shut down one day a week – on Sunday.

But not anymore.

So for us to implement this every week as individuals is a real challenge. Nevertheless, the principle still holds. *We’re simply better in every way when we rest from our labors on a regular basis.*

And that’s where our sabbatical policy comes from.

My Time Away

So, let me tell you about my time away.

First of all, I took several trips: three within the state and one to Utah, which is a place I’d never been to other than a one-day business trip to Salt Lake City when I worked for Bell Labs in 1985.

Anyway ... here in Missouri ...

One of our trips was to Springfield to hang out with our oldest, Marilyn, and her husband, Tim, and their kids Bria, Adrienne and Corbin.

Two trips were to Hannibal where our youngest, Janelle, and her husband, Ben, and their son, Eli, live.

The first of those was to welcome our newest grandchild, a beautiful little girl named Jetta Jean Strother (in honor of her two grandmothers).

What was really cool about that was they chose not to know ahead of time if it was a boy or girl, so when they announced the name, it was very emotional and moving and honoring.

About 10 days later, we went back to Hannibal again, this time with Marilyn and her family ...

... as well as our middle daughter, Katie, who lives in Roeland Park ...

... for a four-day staycation. (Janelle wasn't up to traveling to the Lake as we normally do).

That was a great time, too.

We went to the beach at Mark Twain Lake and did lots of other fun activities.

Of course, we took a grandparents/grandkids picture which Eli just loved.

And we sat outside a lot since it was nice and cool. And, of course, "Momma J" (which is what the grandkids call Jetta) did her magic.

In addition to the trips, I also invested a lot of energy in working on our house both inside and out. I could bore you with the details of that but I won't ... other than to say that I was reminded once again that:

- If Jesus was a carpenter
- And Jesus never sinned
- Then Jesus truly was the Son of God.

And *once again* I was reminded how very grateful I am that that God has not called me to work with my hands and once again reminded of how in awe I am of those of you who can do those kinds of things. May your tribe increase!

In addition to all of that ...

- I spent time helping my dad prepare for my sister Debbie (who currently lives in NJ) to move here in two weeks (which is a huge deal and an answer to prayer).

Actually, I should say that I helped Jetta help my dad because she was the visionary and actually did a lot more of the work than I.

- I also worked on several "geek projects" such as putting up a really cool weather station in our back yard. (I got .12 in the pop-up storm yesterday afternoon plus .19 overnight, in case you were wondering).
- I worked out a lot.
- I took a lot of naps.
- I played golf a lot (shocker, I know).
- I beat Jetta at marbles – a lot – whenever we sat on our lovely back porch in the evenings.
- And, of course, I also went to church somewhere every Sunday. I'll say more about that in a bit.

I should probably add that there were several things I had planned to do that I decided *not* to do.

- For instance, I keep saying that "one of these days I'm going to write a book" and my plan going in was, "Well I'll just work on that during my break."

But every time I even *thought about* sitting down in front of the computer, it felt too much like the work I do every week. And being that the goal of Sabbath is to *cease* from our labors – not take them up in a different form – I didn't do it.

- I also thought I was going to do a bit of a deep dive into some theological issues that interest me but, instead, I found myself listening to and observing other pastors speak and studying how they go about preparing to do that each week. I'll say more about that in a bit, too.

But, at this point, I'm sure that some of you are thinking, "hmmm ... sounds like Rick was living ... 'the retired life.' I wonder if that's where this is going."

Three Lessons

Let me assure you that it's not ... which brings me to the first of three "lessons learned" – three things I discovered while on my sabbatical that might be of interest to you and hopefully helpful in some way.

Lesson #1. I'm not sure "retirement" is a good thing.

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

- I'm not saying retirement is a bad thing.
- And I'm not slamming anyone who is retired or who is looking forward to being retired. (I live with one of those people).

I'm just saying that having so much time off led me to question "what is the ultimate purpose of a human being?" in a way that I didn't when I was working 40+ hours a week.

Is the "win" – the ultimate goal – to get to a point of financial independence that allows us to "cease from our labors" so we can do projects around the house? Or travel? Or hang out with the kids and grandkids?

Again, I'm not saying any of that's *bad*. I'm just not sure it's *enough*.

Here's why.

I mentioned earlier that I made four trips but I only told you about three of them.

The other trip was to Utah, which was one of the most amazing places I've ever seen.

I've always been a big fan of Colorado but, I don't know – Utah, especially that trek from north of Las Vegas up to Salt Lake City by way of St. George, Hurricane, Zion National Park and the Wasatch Mountains – is pretty hard to beat.

I don't know if all of Utah is this way or if it was just the area I traveled, but nature seems so *overwhelmingly powerful* there in a way that we don't typically perceive it here because "here" is relatively flat and we have so many trees you just don't see very much.

But there?

The way the road is cut through Zion puts you right up against these massive rock formations so that, by the time you get through it, you feel very, very small and, quite frankly, a little intimidated.

And the Wasatch Mountains are breathtakingly beautiful. They're amazing. But I wouldn't want to spend the night on one of them.

In fact, one of the recurring thoughts I had during that trip was that “for as beautiful as it is, nature is really a pretty dangerous and deadly place. It really does have the power to dominate us.”

And yet ... and this is the other recurring thought I had ... we, as human beings, have been given dominion over *it*. We *uniquely*, of all creatures, have been given the power to shape it, which is part of what it means to be created in the image of God; as those who reflect the nature of God. Animals don't have the same nature and, therefore, ability.

Genesis chapter one describes it like this:

God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

And here's what He told them to do:

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue [have dominion over] it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Genesis 1:27-28(NIV)

Chapter two gives a bit more detail on that commission and adds one more dimension.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it ... The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Genesis 2:15,18 (NIV)

So, really, if you boil it all down, the fundamental purpose of human beings is two-fold:

Do work that makes the world better. And don't go it alone.

Shape nature (in a good way) by *working* in “the garden.” Take things as they are and make them even more “fruitful” and productive. Help the world to flourish.

And don't do that by yourself because, at some level, we all require interaction with others.

These are the two fundamental callings of humans and, therefore, the two fundamental *needs* of humans. We *need* to be doing something to make the world better and we also *need* to be in relationships. Remove either one (or both) of those and you will eventually be unfulfilled in your life.

And that's why I'm not convinced retirement is a good thing, at least, in the way we view it in our culture.

Without some level of commitment to a task that makes the world a better place and without a circle of people who

encourage us in that task, we're falling short of what we're designed to be as those created to reflect the nature of God (who is both productive and relational).

And that's never a good thing in the long run.

Of course, all of that leads to the obvious question: what does it look like for *each of us* to make the world a better place? How can we do that? What kind of work and effort is involved?

That's a question that takes a lot of prayer and discernment and discussion with people who know us well but, I think a really good place to start is with the idea of "holy discontent."

We learned about that in the first week of this series when Ladell interviewed Julie, Kingsley and Clay. "Holy discontent" is when you look at the world around you and you think "somebody ought to do something about that issue or that problem; somebody ought to work that garden and make it better because God wants it better"...

AND ... (and this part's really important) you feel so strongly about it that *you* are motivated to be part of the solution. *You* are willing to invest your time and your talent and your energy into solving the problem so that people and nature and will flourish.

That's holy discontent.

- It's why Julie works hard to see that kids and families are equipped to love God and people.
- It's why Kingsley invests time and energy into helping people discern God's truth and not be deceived.
- It's why Clay is building a student ministry where kids have adults who personally know them and invest in them so they know what it means to follow Jesus.

Now, those three are obviously young ministry leaders but a "holy discontent" isn't necessarily something that turns into something churchy or spiritual.

- It might be you simply meet a need that helps someone.
- It might be that you start a business that provides a service and jobs in the community.
- It might mean that you write software so that your company can produce widgets that make life better.

Point being: if you're a follower of Jesus who understands that *we* are to be servants like *He* is a servant then, no matter what your age or spiritual gifting, you should be able to see a need and fill it in some way ... and that fulfills the calling we all have as human beings.

Now, having said all of that, I should probably add that the operative word in "holy discontent" is *holy* because there's no shortage of plain old discontent these days. A whole lot of people are unhappy with the way things are and demanding that something be done.

But when *God* is leading you – when there is a *holy* discontent – here’s how it will manifest itself according to James, the brother of Jesus.

The wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. James 3:17 (NLT)

If you’re a Christian and whatever you feel compelled to do doesn’t come out in that spirit and attitude, you probably shouldn’t call it *holy* discontent.

Now, I’ve kind of chased a rabbit here – at least it seems that way – because I’m supposed to be telling you about the lessons I learned while I was away.

But it wasn’t until I listened to that message that I was able to connect the dots on what seemed to be random experiences and impressions over the past two months. And when I was able to do that ...

Lesson #2. I was also able to identify the holy discontent that is driving me these days ...

... and, I suspect, will *continue* to drive me (and by default, this church) until the time comes when either I or the Advisory Council feels like someone else ought to do this job.

So, here it is:

When I look at the world and I see ...

- All the destructive behavior
- All the anger and frustration
- All the arrogance and selfishness
- And all the damaged people and relationships because of those things ...

... it really bothers me because *that’s not how it’s supposed to be*. That’s not God’s intention for anyone in this world.

And I think – no, I *know* – that if people just *knew* about Jesus of Nazareth: who He was, what He came to do, what He taught and modeled ... if people just *understood* Him and *followed* His way, things would be so much better for everyone.

As Pastor Andy Stanley puts it “following Jesus will make your life better and make you better at life.” Even if you don’t believe that Jesus is the divine Son of God, that’s totally true.

We’ve just seen a perfect example of that in the news recently (and I’ll just tell you in advance that what I’m going to say in the next few minutes is probably going to make everyone mad, so get ready to be offended).

You heard about that Red Hen Restaurant in Virginia where the owner discovered that Sarah Huckabee Sanders was having dinner with her family? She asked them to leave because she felt like she needed to “stand up for her principles.”

What happened next? All the conservatives got crazy mad and upset over how Sanders was treated (except, interestingly enough, Sanders) and the flame wars began. They actually had to close down the restaurant.

Of course, it wasn't too long ago that a very similar decision was made by a cake shop owner in Colorado who refused to bake a cake for the wedding of a gay couple. They felt like they needed to “stand up for their principles” too.

What happened next? All the liberals got crazy mad and upset over how the gay couple was treated. The flame wars began and then the shop was shut down and its owners fined for discrimination (a decision which was recently overturned by the Supreme Court).

Question: Is this the kind of world we want to live in? Where liberal restaurant owners shun conservatives who then retaliate verbally and even physically? Where conservative *Christian* owners shun liberals who then retaliate verbally and even legally?

I don't ... because that cycle of offense and retaliation never ends. Eventually it becomes a flywheel and it spins on its own momentum, which is pretty close to where we are as a nation.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

As I thought about both of those incidents, I wondered what Jesus would have done if *He* was the owner of the restaurant; if *He* was the owner of the cake shop ...

Jesus, who once said ...

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”
Luke 6:27 (NIV)

If Jesus was in those situations, I think He would have said to Sanders, “you know, I really don't care for everything your boss is doing these days” but then served her and her family the finest food and wine at the best seats in the house.

And I think He would have said to that gay couple, “you know, what you are doing is not the Father's will for your life” but then baked the finest wedding cake He had ever made.

I'm pretty sure about both of those situations because that's the kind of thing Jesus' friends said He did all the time. They said and wrote that He was gracious and generous to those of whom everyone said “they ought to be shunned” (or worse).

And then they said and wrote that He taught *them to do the same* because living *that way* will make your life better than the *other way* and will make you better at life.

And I'm quite certain that if both of those situations had been handled Jesus' way, life going forward *would have been* better for everyone involved and they all would have become better at life.

Point is ... I look at the angry mess our culture is becoming and it tears me up because I know there is a better way and I

want people to know it and I want them to know the One from whom it comes.

And that's why I feel *compelled* to continue investing my time and whatever talent I have into about making sure we who are Christians keep the main thing the main thing ...

... that we don't get lost in the weeds; that we don't strain at gnats and swallow camels (as Jesus put it); that we keep the focus on knowing Jesus and following Him.

Specifically, and these are just a few examples that I've been thinking about in recent days ...

- Is it more important for Christians to take a stand for our principles or to love and do good to those who hate us and our principles?
- Is it more important for us to vote for Christian principles or to *live* according to Christian principles?

Here's one that's more personal to me as a pastor ...

- Is it a pastor's job to teach the Bible? Or is it to teach *people* the Bible? Or is it to teach people how to actually *do* what Jesus said?

After all, those *were* His marching orders. "Go into all the world and teach them to obey."

- Does our faith ultimately rest on the accuracy of the stories in the Bible – for example, a literal six day creation? Does it rest on how we feel about our current circumstances – whether we believe God is "showing up for us"? Or, does it rest (as Mica talked about last week) on a person – Jesus – and what happened to him; the fact that He died and rose and is coming back again?

What we choose to focus on in all of those situations gets communicated not just to the world but to our kids and grandkids who watch us and listen to us and think, "oh, so that's what it is to be a Christian" which is why this matters so much. The next generation is at stake so we'd better get this right. *I'd better get this right.*

"Keep the main thing the main thing. Keep the focus on Jesus and what He said and what He did in his life, His death and His resurrection. Everything else – every biblical, theological, political and ethical issue – is secondary to that."

That's my plan for addressing my holy discontent.

And I hope you and pray that if you're a believer in Jesus you have at least some passion around that and that at some level you'll join me in it ... which brings me to the final "lesson learned" (which I will share very briefly because time is short).

As I said earlier, every Sunday while I was off, we were in church somewhere and we got to experience various kinds of services and preaching.

- At one church, the pastor preached for over an hour. (Don't worry, I'm not going to start doing that).
- At another, we went verse-by-verse through a chapter from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah (won't do that either).
- At one church, everyone stood and held hands on the final song (we might ... no we won't do that either).
- At another church, the pastor (Rusty Savage, my friend who also spoke here while I was gone) pronounced a blessing when he dismissed everyone (which we *will* start doing even today).

In every one of those experiences, there were some things I really liked and some things I really didn't. And it was very difficult not to be judgmental and compare everything to NHCC because, after all, this is the perfect church.

And as I wrestled with that, I realized once again – and I hope this will be helpful for you because you have the same issue here at NHCC that we had as we visited these other churches: there are some things we do that you really like and things that you don't and it's hard not to be critical and judgmental.

And I know you really don't want to be that way because I didn't want to be that way. So here's what I realized that might be helpful for you.

3. I was reminded that “going to church” is about Thee, We, then Me (and in that order).

As Christians, we go to church first and foremost to honor and worship Jesus – that's the “Thee” part of that statement. We make it a priority to show up because that's what He asks us to do. It's called a worship *service* because we are serving Him by attending.

And I understand that's not always possible but being “off” for seven Sundays – *I get it*: sometimes it's really tempting to just sleep in because, you know, “I was up late last night, I worked hard outside yesterday, besides I don't think I'm going to get anything from that preacher or that music leader.”

I ... I ... I ... I – did you hear that?

But “going to church” is not first and foremost about “I” (or me). It's about Thee, Jesus. It's about gathering together with others who want to honor and worship Him and *learn* from Him.

In every service (even those where I didn't particularly care for the preaching), I kept having this thought: “where else does a Christian (or even a non-Christian) get this kind of encouragement to humility, to service, to consider our ways, to think deeply about how we live, to trust in God instead of ourselves?”

There is nowhere else. There's nothing else like giving an hour to the worship of God with others who are doing the same thing ... which brings me to the final thing I want to say.

At some point in each service, I looked around at people as they were singing or taking communion or listening to the sermon or holding hands on the final song and I realized that *there really is strength in numbers*.

There is something about “the we” that is incredibly encouraging to “the me” because ...

- There are times in each of our lives when things aren’t going well and it’s hard
- Or times when we’re just lazy and rebellious
- Times where, if it was up to each of us alone, we might throw in the towel.
- Times when I might be shaken in my trust of God.

And in those moments, I need you all, collectively, just *to show up* and worship Him and remind me that it’s not all about me or even up to me and that though *I* might be shaken, *we* – the Body of Christ, the church – will not be.

Feature – We Won’t Be Shaken

1. Fireworks – still need help, you can see details of what we need via our website or app, especially Wed PM in tearing it all down.
2. Offering @Door
3. Stand to let me say a blessing over you.

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you
May the Lord lead you to flourish;
by fulfilling the purpose for which He has made you
And, if you’re a Christian, by keeping the main thing the main thing

Endnotes

ⁱ Exodus 20:9,11