

# Christmas Traditions

*When Santa Claus First Came to Town*  
December 11/12, 2010

**PRELUDE – Feliz Navidad**  
**Worship Songs – Joy to the World / Angels We Have Heard**

**Video – Zat You Santa Claus**  
**Feature – Santa Claus is Comin' to Town**

Good morning everyone. It's beginning to look and feel a lot like Christmas in Kansas City ... and, so, Santa Claus really *is* comin' to town. And given that he'll be sneaking around our houses very early Christmas morning, it might not be a bad idea to find out a little more about who this guy really is.

To most people, Santa is the jolly old elf in the red suit as portrayed in *The Santa Claus*, *Elf*, *A Christmas Story*, *The Polar Express*, *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* and a host of other Christmas movies. Of course, since no one has actually seen the *real* Santa Claus (wink-wink), it's hard to argue with that tradition.

However, if you look back in history just a little, you'll see that the modern vision of Santa with flowing beard, rotund shape, fur suit, and a clay pipe is relatively new. Just a little over a century ago ...

**On January 1, 1881 Harper's Weekly published a drawing by Thomas Nast called "Merry Old Santa Claus" which set the standard by which most people think of Santa.**

Nast, however, was drawing on the imagery of a poem which was written almost 60 years before in 1823. We know it as "The Night Before Christmas." Remember how it goes?

Twass the Night Before Christmas  
And all through the house  
Not a creature was stirring  
Not even a mouse  
The stockings were hung  
By the chimney with care  
In hopes that ... what?  
*St. Nicholas soon would be there.*

St. Nicholas ... not Santa Claus.

Of course, "Santa Claus" (as I'm sure you're aware) is just a contraction of "Saint Nicholas." If you say "Saint Nicholas" really fast and slur the syllables together, you get "Santa Claus."

But the poem that gave rise to our modern image of Santa says "Saint Nicholas" ... not Santa.

**In fact, even though most people call the poem "The Night Before Christmas" it was actually titled "A Visit from St. Nicholas."**

... which, if you're the curious type, makes you wonder: why would someone write such a cute children's story about a visit from a patron saint of the Roman Catholic Church?

To answer that, we have to go back much, much further in history, back to when Santa Claus ... St. Nicholas ... *first* came to town.

Of course, back then – back in the year 270 when he was born in Patara, a city located on what is now the southern coast of Turkey, he wasn't "saint" Nicholas. He was just plain old Nicholas.<sup>i</sup>

Unfortunately, while he was still a young child, a plague struck Patara and both his father and mother died. His closest relative was an uncle who happened to be a monk so, Nicholas went to live with him in the monastery. Through that experience, Nicholas discovered the truth and grace of Jesus and, wanting to serve Him, decided that like his uncle, he, too, would become a monk when he grew up.

However, there was a slight problem. Monks are supposed to be poor, but Nicholas' parents had been very successful in business ... and had left him a fortune! So he decided to give away all of his money to help those who were needy, and especially other children in trouble. And he determined to do that in an anonymous way, in keeping with the teaching of Jesus, who once said:

*"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

*When you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.*

*But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*  
*Matthew 6:1-4 [NIV]*

The most well-known story of Nicholas giving in secret is known as "the three young maidens" and, as I tell it to you, see if any of this sounds familiar.

In the town where Nicholas lived, there was a man who had three daughters who were at the age where young women get married. Once rich, he had fallen on hard times and was now poor. Unfortunately, that meant he had no dowry to offer to a potential groom, which meant that it was likely that his daughters would eventually be sold into slavery – or worse. Realizing this, one of the girls had decided to just go ahead and sell herself so that her sisters could have the money for a dowry.

But young Nicholas heard of her plan and came up with a plan of his own. Under the cover of night, he snuck up to her house and threw a bag of gold coins through the window. Legend has it that the bag landed in a stocking hanging in front of the fireplace to dry (which is why, in the poem, "the stockings were hung by the chimney with care in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.")

In the morning, the story goes, the father discovered the gold. And not long after, his oldest daughter was married. And not long after that, Nicholas did the same for the second daughter and, soon she, too, was married.

But when he crept up to the house with a *third* bag of gold for the *third* daughter, all the windows were shut. So, tradition says that he climbed up on the roof, dropped the bag down the chimney and it landed in the girl's shoes, which were beside the hearth.

However, her father, who was very anxious to know the identity of the secret benefactor, was watching. When the bag of gold landed inside the house he chased the anonymous donor until he caught him. "Ah, Nicholas, it is you!" cried the father, "You have saved my daughters from certain disaster."

Nicholas, embarrassed, and not wishing to be known, begged the man to keep his identity secret. “You must thank God alone for providing these gifts in answer to your prayers for deliverance.” But the father could not keep quiet and the tale of Nicholas’ generosity began to spread like wildfire.

But that’s just the beginning of the story of the young man who would eventually become “saint” Nicholas. He continued to grow in his faith and, at the age of 17, he felt that God was calling him not to the monastery but to the ministry and he was ordained as a priest; he became a pastor. Not long afterwards, he was chosen to be the bishop of Myra, overseeing the work of *all* the churches and priests and pastors in that district. Little did he know then that he would soon lead those churches and pastors through one of the most difficult times in the history of Christianity.

In A.D. 303, when Nicholas was in his early 30s, the Roman Emperor Diocletian ordered that all who claimed to be Christians were to offer a sacrifice to the pagan gods of Rome. As you would expect, Nicholas and thousands of others refused. As a result, he and hundreds of ministers, bishops, pastors and key lay people were dragged off to prison while savage torture was unleashed on the other Christians all over the empire.

“A vast multitude was imprisoned in every place,” wrote an eyewitness. “The prisons--prepared for murders and robbers--were filled with bishops, priests, and deacons ... so there was no longer room for those who committed common crimes.”<sup>ii</sup>

But in spite of the persecution, Christianity continued to spread, so much so that ten years later, when Constantine became emperor of Rome, he made Christianity the official religion of the empire! The prison doors opened and out walked Bishop Nicholas and his compatriots.

Those 10 years had a dramatic effect on him. Because he himself had suffered, Nicholas’ commitment to serving those in pain and need – especially children – was higher than ever before. And he continued to give from his inheritance until it was completely gone, serving the people of Myra until his death on December 6<sup>th</sup>, A.D. 342.

### **Many other things could be said about St. Nicholas. (pictures)**

- About his life and his leadership as a pastor;
- About his influence in helping to define the doctrine of the Trinity at a critical point in the development of Christian doctrine
- About how he was recognized as a saint almost immediately upon his death;
- About how his influence was so profound that the only person represented more in medieval art is Mary the mother of Jesus, and that nearly 400 churches were dedicated in his honor *in England alone* during the late Middle Ages.<sup>iii</sup>

But the most important thing about Nicholas, at least for our purposes today, is that shortly after he died, some of the citizens of Myra decided to pick up where he left off. They began to do what he had done: *to anonymously meet the needs of the less fortunate*. And when the recipients asked who provided the gifts, their neighbors merrily replied, “Why, Saint Nicholas must have brought them!”

And that’s how a patron saint – an early fourth century pastor – became the subject of the children’s poem which has produced one of our most endearing and enduring Christmas traditions.<sup>iv</sup>

### **A Change in Perspective**

Now, the reason I’m telling you all of this is not to give you some kind of a gee-whiz history lesson. The reason I’m telling you

this is that, seven years ago when I first discovered the backstory of “jolly old St. Nicholas,” it totally changed my perspective on Christmas ... in a good way.

Let me tell you what my perspective *was*.

As a father (of three daughters) and as a husband, I thought that Christmas was about me somehow figuring out how to give my family really good gifts and a really good experience. Of course, I also thought that Christmas was about celebrating the birth of Jesus, although I have to tell you that I struggled to connect *that* celebration with the celebration around our tree on Christmas morning. But in the name of holiday spirit, I just pushed that struggle below the surface and did what I thought I was supposed to do.

But, seven years ago, I just couldn't stuff it down anymore because I couldn't get it out of my head that I was spending lots of time, money and energy trying to *do good for people that I was already doing good for all year round*. Financially, Jetta and I had reached the point where we could buy pretty much anything our family wanted or needed at any time; heck, I could buy *myself* pretty much anything at anytime. Christmas was just more of the same. Literally more.

Plus, because my kids were older and had a little money of their own, the whole gift-giving thing had degenerated (in my mind) into exchanging lists of what we wanted someone else to buy for us that we could easily buy for ourselves. Maybe I think too much, but it just seemed superfluous at best; pretentious at worst. Why didn't everyone just go buy what was on their own list?

Now, I'm not saying that my perspective was entirely accurate. That's how jaded I had become.

And then I discovered Santa Claus – *St. Nicholas* – and I realized what was missing from Christmas. The difference between St. Nick and me – the difference between St. Nick and most of us – is that ...

**Nick's generosity was primarily targeted to those who had nothing to give back to him!**

He understood that Jesus wanted to use his life and his resources to bless people who could not turn around and immediately return the favor. He understood that Jesus wanted him to be a living breathing demonstration of the grace of God – the favor that is given to those who don't deserve it and can't repay it.

**He understood Jesus was getting at when he asked:**

*“Do you think you deserve credit merely for loving those who love you? Even the sinners do that!”  
Luke 6:32 [NLT]*

*“If you do good only to those who do good to you, is that so wonderful? Even sinners do that much!”  
Luke 6:33 [NLT]*

Now, don't hear what Jesus is not saying. He's not saying that it's unimportant to love the people who love you and to be generous towards them. It *is* important. It matters. It makes a difference in their life and in your relationship with them.

*But ... there's nothing truly “special” about it because, as a father, a mother, a teenager or an adult child, a friend ... that's what you're supposed to do. That's what you ought to do. That's what pretty much everyone does who has any sense at all.*

If you want to do something really special – something God-like, Jesus said, then go beyond what everyone with half-a-brain naturally does and be loving to people *who may not even know you and therefore cannot love you in return*; be generous to people *who have very little and therefore can offer you very little in return*.

In fact, Jesus said ...

*“Love [even] your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid.” Luke 6:34 [NLT]*

And when you do that, Jesus said, something will happen to you.

**When you begin to think and act that way, Jesus said ...**

*Your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind [even] to the unthankful and to those who are wicked.  
Luke 6:35 [NLT]*

There's a literal tangible reward that will be ours in the world to come. But there's also an *intangible* reward that comes now – a personal experience of oneness with the God of the Universe *who is kind and generous to people - like us* – who are, many times, ungrateful for His blessings, do not return His love, and do not give back to Him. In spite of that, He loves and gives to us anyway the greatest gift of all – his son, Jesus, born in a manger who grew up to be our savior through the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

And when we act in the same way that He does – give in the way that He does – we experience who He is.

Now, as I said, about seven years ago through the story of St. Nicholas, this truth hit me in a way that I'd never understood before and it totally changed my perspective on Christmas. It was like God was saying, “Rick, how you do Christmas isn't bad or wrong so you *can* keep doing it like that if you wish. But if you want to really experience the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, then ...

**“Stop spending every stinking penny of your Christmas budget on your inner circle and start spending some on those who can't return the favor.”**

So, I went to Jetta and our kids and we talked about it. At first, they were a little hesitant because it was so different than anything we had ever done. But they agreed and we made just a few minor adjustments for that year because the train had already left the station on that year's Christmas, so to speak.

But the next year we got serious about it. We re-did our Christmas budget so that about half of what we used to spend on ourselves went to people less fortunate; people – some of whom we knew and some we didn't – who couldn't give us anything in return. And, through God's gracious provision, we've been able to do it that way every year since then.

Now, I don't tell you that to brag or to make you think “oh, he is *so* spiritual” because the truth is I was just jaded and desperate enough about Christmas to try something completely different ... something that God said would bring a reward both now and later ... *and I have found that He was telling the truth.*

- Best I can tell no one really misses the half of what we used to spend on ourselves because we just go buy what we *didn't* get for Christmas the next week when we take back the stuff we got that we really didn't want.
- More importantly, for me at least, the joy of “doing Christmas” – even the part that seems superfluous and a little pretentious – has returned.

So, if for you “doing Christmas” has become ho-hum instead of ho-ho-ho – I want to encourage you to try the same experiment I did. Stop spending every stinking penny of your Christmas budget on your inner circle and start spending some on people who can't return the favor and see what happens.

And if you need help in finding a way to do that, we have a great opportunity right outside these doors with our Giving Trees, which we've made a pretty big deal out of because there is such a great need in our congregation. The need is great because we have people here who are in financial difficulty and are unable to pay medical bills and or provide gifts for their kids this Christmas. They need to be taken care of ... and that's part of what it means to be a church.

But the need is also great because we have so many people in this church who already have more than "enough" and they ... *we* ... *I* ... need to *give* like St. Nick did – like God did. That's why we provide the trees.

And that's why we have what seems like such a high goal, \$15,000, but it really isn't. In fact, there's one family in our church whose income is probably in the middle range of everyone who is part of NHCC and they give almost 10% of that goal by themselves over and above what they already contribute to the church. So, 15K really isn't that much to shoot for. Honestly, in a congregation this size, we ought to be able to raise two to three times that amount *with ease* at this time of year.

And I don't say that to try and make anyone feel "guilty enough to give" because, frankly, guilt won't do it, at least not long-term. Guilt never produces real and lasting change in people. About the best it can do is to produce a begrudging compliance, which the Bible clearly says God does not want when it comes to giving.

*Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure for God loves a person who gives cheerfully.  
2 Corinthians 9:7 (NLT)*

By the way, notice in that scripture what God loves and wants: he doesn't really want giving as much as he wants *a person* who gives cheerfully. Just like so many other issues in the Christian life, it's not as much about what we do as who we are becoming. God doesn't want you and me to give as much as he wants you and me to become *the kind of persons for whom giving is a joy*.

So, how do we become that kind of person? Well, the only real and lasting changes that take place in our lives are those that start in the heart. And two things, specifically, must happen in our hearts if we're going to change.

### **1. We have to repent and believe.**

Admit that what we think about the issue is wrong (which is what repentance is) and believe what God says about it instead.

For example, when it comes to giving vs. receiving, what do most people believe? Most people (including me) tend to believe that it's better to *receive* than to give. I mean, it's just simple arithmetic:

- When you *receive*, you *gain* – you add to the pile.
- When you *give*, you *lose* – you take away from the pile.

But Jesus says we're all wrong, that the truth is just the opposite – that it's better to *give* than to receive.

However, he's not asking us to believe something stupid. It's very important that you and I understand that. He's not saying, "I know it makes no logical sense, but if you just close your eyes to reality and believe hard enough, maybe it will come true."

Not at all. Jesus says what he says because He sees something you and I don't see and we read it just a few minutes ago: *your reward from heaven will be very great*. See, Jesus isn't saying "close your eyes to reality." He's saying "open your eyes to the reality that, when you give, you're not *taking away* from your pile. You're moving it to a better pile; a pile with your name on it in the Bank of Heaven, so to speak."

*"Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in*

*and steal.” Matthew 6:20 (NLT)*

If he could put it in more contemporary terms, I think Jesus would say, “Store your treasures in The Bank of Heaven; a bank that isn’t overleveraged or too big to fail. What you put in will be there *and then some* because the interest we pay is very great.”

And if we’re ever going to become the kind of people who don’t spend “every stinking penny of our Christmas budget on our inner circle” and give some of it away instead, we have to repent of the thought that it’s better to *receive* than to give – and start believing that what Jesus says is true – that it’s really the other way around.

The second thing that has to happen at the heart level is ...

## **2. Rejoicing in what we have received.**

Let me explain what I mean by that.

As we learned this fall in the Detox and Sustain series, you cannot give what you have not already received. Loved people have the capacity to love; forgiven people have the capacity to forgive.

And the good news of the Gospel is that God understands that. That’s why we always need to receive something *from* God before we can ever achieve something *for* God.

That’s why it’s fascinating to me that right after Jesus told his disciples that their reward in Heaven would be great if they were radically generous (even to their enemies) ...

### **He said:**

*“You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.” Luke 6:36 [NLT]*

Notice, he didn’t say “you must be compassionate *in order to win* the Father’s compassion.” The assumption behind his statement was that the compassion of God was already overflowing into their lives and, therefore, it could overflow – financially – into the lives of others.

### **On another occasion, Jesus stated it even more directly:**

*“Freely you have received, freely give.” Matthew 10:8 (NIV)*

In other words, “you have received, therefore you *can* give.”

However, if we’re going to become the kind of people who *actually do* “freely give,” we have to recognize and rejoice in what we have received.

Let me give you an example. The Apostle John, one of Jesus’ best friends, exemplifies the attitude I’m talking about when ...

### **... he wrote:**

*From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another. John 1:16 (NLT)*

“I just can’t believe it,” John is saying, “I look around at everything I have and everything I’m becoming and I just see God’s hand all over it. He has blessed me in every way. The friends I have, the place I live, the church I’m part of, the work I do, the

food I eat, the pleasures I enjoy, the love and forgiveness that cascades over me – all of that is from Him. And I don't really deserve any of it, but He gives it to me anyway. How fortunate, how blessed I am!"

That's what I mean by rejoicing in what we have received.

Unfortunately, very few of us look at our financial resources that way. Very few of us look at our possessions and income and even our ability to produce it and say, "You know, that's all from God. And, just between you and me, I cannot believe He has blessed me with it because I'm just a shmuck. I'm a sinner. I'm self-centered. I'm irresponsible. But He is so gracious to me anyway."

Instead, what most of us think is "well, whatever I have received is what I've earned through hard work and wise stewardship. This is *my* income, *my* stuff and I'm going to do whatever I want with it. I'm going to spend it on *my* interests – which includes my inner circle."

And here's the logical result of that attitude:

**(slowly) If we don't rejoice in what we've received as coming from God, then we'll be afraid to be generous. We won't have the confidence that says "since God provided for me before, I know He'll do so again."**

And, quite frankly friends, it's so sad for a follower of Jesus to end up in that position because they totally miss out on one of the greatest promises of God; one of the greatest experiences of how His presence and activity becomes real in our lives.

**Paul wrote ...**

*God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. And in the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you.*

*Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. 2 Corinthians 9:10-11 (NLT)*

Paul is saying that, when we give, God gives back to us so we can give even more so He can give back to us so that ... you get the idea. And it really does work that way. I can tell you story after story. But I won't because we need to move on.

### **Reflection**

Becoming the kind of person who doesn't spend every stinking penny on ourselves and our inner circle – becoming a generous person – isn't so much a wallet issue or a discipline issue as it is a heart issue. It's not so much a finance issue as it is a faith issue. So, that's where God starts.

And because this is a heart issue, I want us to take a few minutes to give God some space to work on it. I'm going to ask the band to come and get into place. As they get ready to do a song for us, I'm going to ask you just a few questions that I think may help to gauge where your heart is.

**When you think of "giving" do you feel guilt, fear or joy?**

<pause>

**Which is better – to give (especially to those who are not able to give back) or to receive?**

<pause>



**When you think of all you have, are you more impressed with yourself or with God?**

<pause>

**Do you have confidence that God would provide what you need if you became sacrificially generous?**

<pause>

**When Christmas is over, what will your expenditures say about your heart?**

<pause>

**How might God want you to change your plans this Christmas? Next Christmas?**

Let's pray.

**Song – “Give This Christmas Away”**

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**Special announcements**

Before we leave, I want to put on my Pastor hat and talk to you for a few minutes about some things in our church that are going on right now. I wanted to do this after that message because, with what I'm going to say, we need to be sure our hearts are in the right place before we talk about it. It really is like the song we sang, if there's love in your heart you don't let it stay there. And the truth is, there is love in your heart. You are loved by the God of the universe who became a man and came to give his life for your sin and mine. We are loved and because we are loved God doesn't want that love to stay in our heart. You know, we did this whole thing on emotional sustainability and detox. And one of the things that bugged me the whole time was this is really good and God wants us to get better, but he doesn't want us to get better just for ourselves. He has a plan for us. He wants us to be used by him in this world. God never blesses us just for us.

Anyway, that's the context of what I'm about to say to you. There are two needs that I need to talk to you about.

**Need #1. I need to lay this out to you as the pastor of your church. You need to know that we are facing a significant end-of-the-year financial crunch.**

It's kind of interesting. Since the middle of October we've noticed an unusual trend. I don't think it's ever happened before. Our attendance has actually increased since the middle of October, but the giving has actually dropped. So, we're trying to figure out what's going on in that. I've checked around with some pastor friends of mine and found out it's happening in a lot of churches right now. And I'm sure that the economy and how people *feel* about the economy is part of the reason. Maybe you saw a poll by Bloomberg recently that says 51% of Americans think they're worse off than they were two years ago and only 35% of the people think we're better off. Most people now are more downbeat about the future. And, no matter what age group you're in, no matter what political party you're in, or your gender, it's just this depression, mentally, about the economy.

And on top of that, the State of Missouri reported on Friday that unemployment in November held steady, which sounds like a good thing except that steady was 9.4%. St. Louis gained some jobs, but Kansas City lost 5,500 jobs. So, things are tough economically for some of us. And if you're in that situation you need to know that my heart goes out to you. I pray that God would help you sustain financially during this time. I pray that He would soon intervene in your life and restore you through prosperity. I'm really serious about that.

But, for a lot of us ... I don't know. I drive up and down I-29 a lot and I look over at Zona Rosa, and almost every night the parking lots are packed. The restaurants are packed. And, people are buying tvs, boats, vacation houses and taking expensive trips. It seems to me, in spite of the economy, for a lot of us, there's still a lot of discretionary cash floating around. And for a lot of us, we haven't had to cut back much. I say that because that's true in my family. I haven't had a raise in three years – no big deal.

And, Jetta has had a salary freeze at school this year. But, here's the deal, we're still doing everything we want to do. Everything we did last year we're kind of doing again this year. Which is why I have a hunch that there are a lot more people who call NHCC home - people who swear up and down about how much they love this place and how much God is working in their lives - I have a hunch that there are a lot more people who could be giving regularly and substantially.

Now, we have kind of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy around here where I don't know who gives what. And I really don't want to know. But, there are people who do know – the people who count the money. They keep track so that we can do all the tax stuff at the end of the year. And, sometimes those folks will just shake their heads and say, "you know, I'm flabbergasted. I can't believe the number of people who regularly attend North Heartland who never give anything." Sometimes they get a little irritated about it. So, I try to talk them off the ledge, and I say, "that's not your call. That's not my call."

I think the reason why it's like that is that it goes back to what we talked about in the message. I think there are still a bunch of us who do not believe that it really is better to give than to receive. There are a bunch of us who don't see and rejoice in God as the one who provides everything and who will continue to provide everything if we actually did step out in faith and become generous outside our inner circle. We just don't believe that as a church by and large.

But here's the deal, we need to start believing. We need to do this because we are at a critical point financially. And if you've been paying attention over the past year or so you know we have cut about every expense possible around here. And this past year, we had several staff people who moved to different locations or moved on to different jobs. We even had to let one person go because of finances. And we've not replaced any of those positions. And even in spite of that, here's where we are right now: we've tried to maintain about a six week cash reserve to meet six weeks of expenses. We're down to five weeks right now. We're not dying, but the trend is down. So, that's why I'm saying something to you.

That's why, just this last week, I told our staff, "guys, here's the truth. I hate to say this, but if it goes from five weeks, to four weeks, to three weeks, if that's what happens, then in January, here's what we'll have to do. All of us will have to take a day off every pay period (every 2 weeks) without pay." Nobody was jumping for joy about that, but we're not in this for the money. The people who work here aren't here because they're going to get rich. You know that when you start working here.

That's where we are. I just wanted to tell you that, not for sympathy, because I know a lot of people are in this situation. This is the reality for a lot of people right now. But, I don't believe it's reality for our church. I think we have a bunch of folks here who need to get serious about their faith and trusting God with their money. I think we have a bunch of folks in this congregation who just need to say, "I am in on this North Heartland deal. I love this church and I'm in. And I'm going to show that I'm in by, maybe before the end of the year, writing an extra check. I'm going to help you with the shortfall now." And then more importantly, after the first of the year, put it in the budget and say, "I'm going to give a certain amount every week or every month," or however you do it.

I know that would be a big step of faith for a lot of people here. But that's how God wants us to live – by faith.

I also know for a lot of us, and I hear this quite a bit, people are saying, "I made this commitment to give, but I keep forgetting." Or, you miss a week because you're out of town, or you come to church and you don't have your checkbook. For a lot of us, giving is totally random depending on the balance in our checkbook. I think a lot of us give in a totally random way, and the reality is, the church suffers. It does. More importantly, you suffer when you do that because, *you miss out on God's work in your life.*

So, to help out with this discipline issue, we've added something new to The City.

### **“Online giving” via The City**

Now, I'm sure some of you are thinking, “isn't it kind of odd that you're trying to raise all this money for the Giving Trees out here, and at the same time, you've got this big hole over here in the operating expenses.” No, it's not odd because, here's the deal, the people who are already part of this congregation, in those people, God has already provided more than enough financial resources to do all of that stuff, and then some, if we would just trust Him and do what He says in this area of giving in a disciplined manner.

Okay, that's the first thing I want to tell you. I hope you hear it in the spirit in which it's intended. I'm not trying to demand or guilt you. You just need to know the deal and maybe see this as a growth opportunity in your own life.

The second thing I want to tell you about - in light of everything I just said about where we are financially, where the economy is and how people feel about it - I have every reason not to tell you. In fact, as I was preparing this week on how I was going to present this and say this, I was actually gripped by fear, and that almost never happens when I think about what I'm going to say on the weekend. I was kind of discouraged because I thought, “there is no way people are going to buy this. I shouldn't even say this,” and I tried to get out of it. I had this tug of war with God and it was like, no, you *need* to say this because, this is what we think (not just me - the Leadership Team and the Advisory Council). We think God is telling us to do this. We think God is telling us to move this wall, next year, in 2011. I don't know all the details of how that works or what it's going to look like, so, I don't have any answers on that. But the point is, we need 200 to 300 more seats in this auditorium. And in case you're wondering, this is the announcement about the future of North Heartland that I've been telling you about for the past couple of weeks.

See, the deal is, we need to grow to about 1,000 to 1,200 people as a congregation on a weekly basis, and we just cannot do it in this room. Right now, we have about 725 people (average) who show up here on a weekend. We've determined it's been that way for the past three or four years. And we've finally figured out that the main reason why that's the most we're ever going to have is because at the 11am, the primetime service, we have 300 seats set up, and because of the way people sit together, culturally, about 70% is full. And when new people come in on a morning like this, even though there are seats up here, they're going, “there's no room for me.” So, when people come in and they have a hard time finding a seat this week, they'll struggle, but then the next week when the weather is bad or when something else happens they'll go, “man, I had a hard time finding a seat in church last week.” So, what they do is, they just won't come. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about because that's how you do it. So, even if we cram more chairs in or eliminated rows, we still can't make space to accommodate 1,000 to 1,200 people. We need to move this wall.

Now, you may be thinking, “what's this deal about 1,000 or 1,200 people?” Well, maybe you remember last year I had a revelation. God spoke to me and said, “Rick, you've allowed the church to lose focus on the mission - what I put you here to do.” The one thing that has to happen in this church, maybe not every church, but in this church, is that people in the local community who think church is boring and irrelevant, people in the local community who don't think Christ has anything to do with their life, they need to be coming to North Heartland and finding Christ and following Christ. And, if that's not happening, then you need to go out of business, because, that's what we were put here to do.”

So, over the last year we said we would refocus on some things. We're going to do services different on weekends. Some of you have noticed that. And we saw the result of that a couple of weeks ago when we did our baptism - we baptized 14 adults. It's been a long time since we've seen that kind of response.

As that was going on this fall, we felt like we were out of space and it was like God said, “when you first moved into this building, I made it clear to you that you were going to grow to 1,000-1,200 people.” It takes about 1,000 to 1,200 people to do the other thing that we are to do that we've forgotten that we're to do. We did some of it in the beginning, but we've forgotten

over the last couple of years – to plant other churches like us, locally.

The reason why we need new churches is that new churches are the most effective way to reach people who are not going to church. It's really interesting that a person who is not a church person has a much higher chance of trying a new church that's meeting in a school than coming to North Heartland. So, if we are serious about reaching the local community, we have to start new churches.

So, we need to grow to about 1,000 to 1,200 people. And every couple of years we'll invite a hundred people who want to go on a mission for God to go out and start a church in this community. We'll send some staff people with them and send \$100K or whatever it takes to get them started. That is what happened when we started 16 years ago. This is the vision God gave us as a church. And this fall, He said, "get back to what I told you to do." So, that's what we're going to do next year.

The deal is, over the next 18-24 months, we want to see 400 more adults and kids who are not part of this church right now, come to Christ, come to North Heartland, and then we'll start planting churches out of here every couple of years.

And like I said, I'll give you more details on this after the first part of next year. We'll have informational meetings if you want to know what we're thinking.

The one thing I need to make clear to you right now is that, in doing this, we are not going to add to our long-term debt. In fact, we don't *have* to add to our long-term debt. In 18 months we can raise, from our congregation, over and above what we are already giving, the amount of money it will take to accomplish this project. We've already had some estimates on it, and we know that we can do it *if people will listen to God and trust God to do what He says*.

So, this is where we are going next year. And I've got to tell you that it does scare the heck out of me because, it doesn't make sense from a purely human standpoint. But, neither does the idea that it's better to give than to receive. And yet it is. It's the most sensible thing a follower of Christ can do. God doesn't always work in a way that we think makes sense.

Anyway, my hope for you and for me is that we will grow this next year even more in our trust of God through our generosity. I'm excited about this. I think the best days of North Heartland are immediately ahead of us. And I think in the next couple of years you're going to get to be involved in some of the most amazing things that God is going to do. I hope you will come with us. I hope you will go on the journey, okay?

I think I've talked long enough, and I think the Children's people are about to be really upset. Go get your kids from Adventureland.

God bless you and have a great week!

#### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/Brix?pageID=37>

<sup>ii</sup> Eusebius, Church History, VIII, 6, 9

<sup>iii</sup> From Christianity Today

<sup>iv</sup> From [www.theologic.com/oflweb/xmas/stnick1.htm](http://www.theologic.com/oflweb/xmas/stnick1.htm)