

“65”

July 3, 2022

Good morning everyone.

In just a matter of days I will finally arrive at a momentous milestone that, on the one hand, many people look forward to with great anticipation because of what it means for them personally ...

... a milestone that, on the other hand, many others approach with a little apprehension and maybe even dread.

Eleven days from now, on July 14th, I will have to get my picture taken at the DMV because my driver's license is about to expire.

Anybody look forward to doing that?

Anyone dread it?

I'll also be turning 65 on that day – another milestone which many people look forward to while others approach it with a little apprehension and maybe even dread.

For me personally, I'm not sure which of those I feel more because the whole thing seems so unreal. It feels like just yesterday I was turning 17.

But like it or not, here I am – standing at the precipice of the final third of my life (assuming God grants me another 30 years or so).

So, I've been doing a little bit of research on what to do when you turn 65 because, after all, I've never been here before and it does seem to be a pretty big deal ...

... and I came across an article which was full of good and sensible tips for soon-to-be “senior citizens” like myself.¹



12 things you MUST DO AS SOON AS you turn 65

...

... which included advice such as:

- Sign up for Medicare!
- Get a will and power of attorney!
- See your doctor!

... all of which sound about as exciting as getting my picture taken at the DMV.

But there was one idea that did sound pretty great. It was #12 on the list.

I guess they were saving the best for last.

#12 Cash in on all those perks!

Because, the article said, “65 is the age of the senior discount. From cheaper restaurant entrees to travel deals, you’ll be amazed by what companies offer in order to earn your business. If you don’t see anything listed, just ask.”

Now, *that’s* something to look forward to. Golden Corral buffet here I come!

Anyway ... several weeks ago in our planning meeting ...

- Realizing that we were coming to the end of our last series “Faith is a Verb” last Sunday ...
- And knowing that July 10th would be our final service as “North Heartland” ...

And, by the way, if you’re new to us, the reason

that's our final service as "North Heartland" is that we're in the process of merging with another church in our area, Hope Church KC which is going to happen on July 17th.

In fact, let me just give you the schedule of what's going to happen over the next month on Sunday mornings.

- July 10 (next Sunday) "End of an Era"
A service of remembering and celebrating our journey as "North Heartland."
- July 17 "A New Hope"
An out-of-this-world service launching our new combined church.
There might be a Star Wars reference hidden in that.
- July 24 Jason's choice
Whatever Jason wants to talk about.
- July 31 Rick's choice

Whatever Rick wants to talk about.

And then, after that, we'll begin a new series (actually several series) designed to help us become the church God wants us to be in this community.

Anyway, when we planned all of this a few weeks ago, the question was, "so what do we do on July 3rd since it's kind of a standalone day?"

We discussed several options and then, at one point, Shannon (one of our associate pastors) said ...

"Since you're hitting a major milestone in your life, maybe it would be a good time for you to do one of those messages where you talk about what you've learned over the years."

And I felt like God was in that suggestion so, last week (while our family was on vacation at the Lake), I spent some time each day thinking

about ...

- Some of the most important things I've learned from being follower of Jesus for many years now.
- As well as some things God has been impressing on me in recent days.

So, what I'm going to do in the time that I have today is to share some of those with you in hopes that maybe they'll be helpful to you whether you're a believer in Jesus or not.

And I know that we have more than a few folks who show up here or join us online who are *not*.

And, as always, I'm grateful that you feel comfortable enough to hang out with us and learn more about what it means to be someone who *does* believe in Him and follow Him – otherwise known as a “Christian.”

So, let's get into it.

Instrumental Principles

And I'm going to start out by sharing with you four principles – a spiritual, a relational, an emotional and a leadership principle – that have been instrumental in my life ...

... meaning that they have shaped the way I *think* about things and the way I try to *do* things, although I should be very clear that I still struggle to actually live them out.

Part of the reason for that is that I'm just a selfish, self-centered sinner like everybody else.

But part of the reason is that they are counterintuitive. In other words, they don't fit the paradigm of how we naturally think the world works or how God works.

Like this first one, which I'd have to say is the most surprising spiritual principle I know and have personally experienced.

1. God uses ordinary people doing ordinary things to accomplish extraordinary results.

And that's surprising – counterintuitive – because what most people (even people who aren't Christians) ...

What most people think is that God uses *extraordinary* people doing *extraordinary* things.

- People who already have their act together.
- People who are talented and gifted and whatever else.

Now, I don't want to minimize the importance

of character and giftedness. Those things matter, but not as much as we think they might.

You don't have to be "in ministry" on a stage somewhere to do something great for God.

One of the original followers of Jesus (the Apostle Peter) once put it like this:

You [plural, meaning "all of you who follow Jesus"] are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession.

As a result, you [all of you who follow Jesus] can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. 1 Peter 2:9 (NLT)

Amazing!

Ordinary followers of Jesus are chosen and called by God to be priests serving God.

The role of “minister” (contrary to popular opinion) is not reserved for a special class of professionals who have formalized education and training.

I’ll never forget when this truth first became clear to me.

- We were living in New Jersey many years ago and I was working at Bell Labs as a software engineer.
- Jetta was a stay-at-home mom.
- She and I had been serving for about a year as the volunteer youth directors at our church.
- We had about 35 to 40 teenagers involved at the time, and we felt like God wanted us to take them to summer camp, which is

something they'd never done before.

So, we did.

But we didn't go to a program that was already set up, because there weren't any in that area at that time ...

... which meant that if it was going to happen, we – Jetta and I and the other volunteers on our student ministry team – would have to run it ourselves.

... which also that meant that all of us would have to take vacation or work overtime to get comp time.

And it blew me away when everyone did.

We rented a small camp up in the Poconos and it was awesome. It was so awesome we actually did it for several summers after that.

But I'll never forget the closing night of that very first year.

Everyone sat around the bonfire sharing how God had spoken to them during the week, which was incredibly moving.

But what I remember most ... what had the greatest impact on me ... was standing in the dark, off to the side by myself, watching groups of kids here and there walking to their cabins so excited, so fired up about the Lord.

And it hit me: "Oh my goodness. God just did something incredible through a bunch of unpaid and unqualified ordinary people *like us*."

- A young mom
- A couple of young single guys
- An older man who was the same age as my

dad

- A couple who had teenaged sons in the group
- And me, a software geek.

And all we did, really, was to show up and give our time. We weren't professionals. We weren't supposed to be *able* to do this.

But we pulled it off. We really were the ministers.

My heart was so full of joy in that moment, I felt like it could burst!

That night the light went ON in my head and it's never gone OFF.

Even as one of the so-called "professionals" now, it is still abundantly clear in my mind ...

- That there is no exclusive class of people who are called to “do ministry.”
- That everyone who follows Jesus is meant to be in the game contributing in some way or another.
- That everyone has a position to play. That everyone is a minister.
- That every follower of Christ can serve God and people in some way that brings honor to Jesus, builds up His church, and helps others to know Him better, whether that’s ...
 - Cooking a meal
 - Changing a diaper
 - Singing in a band

- Praying for people
- Picking up trash on the highway
- Serving coffee to a friend

God uses ordinary people doing ordinary things to accomplish extraordinary results.

In fact, and this is kind of a corollary to the principle: the way you become an extraordinary *person* for God is by doing ordinary *things* for God.

Anyway ... that's the first principle.

The second is what I believe to be the single most effective principle for solving almost any relational problem.

It actually comes from one of the Apostle Paul's

letters and it kicks off a huge section in which he talks about all kinds of relationships:

- Husband and wife
- Parent and child
- Boss and employee

And here it is:

2. “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Ephesians 5:22 (NIV)

... who, even though he was God in the flesh, did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (by dying on the cross in our place as an atonement for our sins).

He submitted Himself *to* us and *for* us – for our

benefit.

And what Paul is saying is that, because *you're* so blown away by what Jesus did for *you* – and, obviously, he's writing to people who believe in and follow Jesus ...

Because you're so in awe of how Jesus submitted himself for you, that's what *you* should do for *others* ... AND, in fact, that's what you *CAN* do for others.

Now, here's why this is so effective when it come to dealing with almost any relational trouble.

In almost every relational problem, for there to be a solution, someone has to go first.

- Someone has to be the first person to say:
“I will give up my right to be right”

- Someone has to be the first person to say:
“I will listen and not demand to be heard”
- Someone has to be the first person to say:
“I will try to do it your way instead of
insisting on my own”

Someone has to take the risk of going first *in submitting* to the other person.

Otherwise, nothing changes. In fact, things usually get worse.

But when you take that risk and go first – and this has been my experience – it almost leads to a softening on the other person’s part to the point where you can now begin to talk about the issue and move towards a solution.

Now, obviously, you don’t have to be a Christian to do this. You don’t have to be a Christian to submit to someone else.

But for me, when I remember what Jesus did for me – that even though I didn't deserve it, He laid down his rights and his life for my sake – I am blown away by that.

I “revere Him” for that. And I want to be like Him because of that.

And that gives me the motivation to turn to my wife or my kids or my co-workers or my friends and to try to submit to them.

Now, I wish I could say I *always* do that, but I don't ...

... because, as I said before, I'm a selfish and stubborn sinner.

But even though that's the case, I can still say this principle has done more to improve my relationships than any other.

And I would recommend it to you as well.

Submit to one another ... and if you're a Christian, let your reverence for Jesus and how He submitted his rights and his position for your sake be your motivation.

The third principle on my list is what I would call the most insightful emotional principle I've learned.

And that is that ...

3. The issue is almost always not the issue.

When you're anxious or angry or amped up in some way – especially if it's out of character for you or out of proportion to whatever the issue is ...

Like, it's really a 2 on a scale of 10 but you're

acting like it's a 5. Your response is over the top.

Whatever it is that *appears* to be the issue is almost always *not* the issue.

And this is true not just about yourself. It's also true when you're dealing with another person who is anxious or angry or amped up.

Whatever it is that *appears* to be the issue is almost always *not* the issue.

A couple of examples.

- At one point in our history, we had a lot of staff members who were a few years either side of 30. And there always seemed to be conflict and hurt feelings and misunderstandings between them.

We spent hours and hours trying to resolve the issues, but we finally realized that the issues weren't the issue. The issue

was they wanted *validation* ... which is a fundamental driver for people in that age group.

“Do you see me?” “Do I matter?” “Do I have something to offer?” “Am I capable?”

And because they wrongly believed that validation was a zero-sum game, whenever someone else got it, that meant that they couldn't get it ... which is why there was constant conflict.

- Throughout the years, as you might expect, I've had more than a few people mad at me. And sometimes, with good reason: I'm a selfish, sinful jerk just like everyone else.

But at one point it dawned on me that more than a few people who were mad at me were also mad at God ... or their dad ... or some previous “authority figure” who

had failed them or hurt them.

And that's why their anger was over the top.

They'd never come to closure with God or their dad or the authority and I was the convenient stand in, which didn't make it any easier but at least I understood.

It's just human nature to avoid confronting stressful emotions and painful memories. We think it best to move on quickly to whatever is next, so we push them down and try to bury them.

But they don't stay buried.

Instead, whenever the emotional barn door opens up, they come out in some way even if it's not directly related to whatever causes the initial emotion.

... which is why a very wise man once wrote:

*Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from
it.*

Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)

Be careful about what you allow to dwell in the seat of your emotions because it's going to come out in one way or another.

This is why from time to time we do what we call a “service of lament” where we invite people to express to God what it is they've lost, what it is that hurts.

As we sometimes put it, “you can't leave it until you grieve it.”

And until you *do* leave it, it's going to keep coming back around and controlling your emotions and even your life.

The issue (emotionally) is almost always not the

issue. It's almost always something else or at least something deeper.

That's the third principle that has greatly impacted my life and I hope it will help you, too.

The final principle, which I would call "the most powerful leadership principle" I've learned, is that ...

Production matters ...

Leadership is not about the position. Leadership is about leading.

Leadership is about taking people somewhere. It's about getting results.

And you need to be intentional about that. You need to be direct about that with everyone you lead. There shouldn't be any mystery about that.

Production matters and it's important to say that because in a lot of organizations (church included), leadership is about something else.

But that's not the whole principle.

The whole principle is ... and this was incredibly difficult for me to learn and to live.

The whole principle is ...

Production matters ... but people and process matter more.

And the reason this is so difficult for me as a task-oriented person is that valuing people and process (meaning "how you work together") will *by design* negatively impact production.

Dealing with people's heart issues and dealing with the conflicts takes time – time that could be invested in production.

And it also takes energy – creative energy that could be invested in production.

So why do it?

Because when you don't care about people and how their work is impacting them personally, eventually they'll burn out and leave.

Because when you don't care about people and how they are working together with one another (the corporate climate, so to speak), they'll become demoralized and leave.

The Apostle Paul once wrote something that's remarkably similar.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy and

can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (NIV)

If it's all about production – getting results – even in a spiritual context, then the result will be nothing and no one.

So, as a leader, if you want to lead well, you have to give attention not only to production but also to the people and the process.

And *sometimes* you have to go even further and give a *disproportionate* amount of time and energy to the non-production side.

Sometimes you have to *stop* production or

severely *limit* it so that you can deal with the people and the process.

Now, that's a lot easier to do in a church where our ultimate Leader, Jesus, has made it clear that loving one another is more important than everything else.

But it's still frustrating.

But it's worth it because even though you don't always get it right, the result is a team that sticks together through thick and thin over the long haul while getting the job done.

Turns out that valuing people and process is the key to longevity and longevity is the key to leveraging production.

Now, those are four principles that have been instrumental in my life, but there are so many

more that I could talk about if we had the time ... such as:

- God loves us just as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us the way we are.
- You can't give away what you don't already have ...

... which is why only forgiven people forgive, loved people love and blessed people bless.

- And the most fundamental of all: Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And if you're new to church in general or investigating Christianity, I encourage you to keep hanging out with us because those are the kinds of things we talk about all the time around here.

Fixing the Mess

But I want to shift gears and talk to you about some of the things that God has been impressing on me in recent days ...

... which might seem a little redundant because most of our just-completed series “Faith Is a Verb” *was exactly about* what God has been impressing on me in recent days ...

... specifically as it concerns our merger with Hope Church KC.

As I’ve said again and again over the past several months, what we’ve done and are about to do was nowhere on my radar and when it first came up – “hey, maybe we should merge churches” – my first reaction was “that’s crazy.”

But as we learned in that series – and what God impressed on me over and over ...

When your faith is more than just “what you believe” ... when faith moves you *to action* ... sometimes you choose what seems crazy to you simply because you believe God is asking you to and, therefore, will empower you.

But I’m not going to go back into all of that today.

If you missed any of it you can check out the entire series (in video, audio, and transcript form) in the media section of our app and our website.

Instead, what I want to share with you are three thoughts centered around fixing the mess this world is in, because that is what dominates media – whether it’s printed, video or social media.

- What’s wrong?

- Why is it wrong?
- Who did it? Who's responsible?
- What can and should be done to fix it?

And the reason I think about these things – the reason they register with me so readily and the reason that I'm so acutely aware of them is that ...

The fundamental issue that Jesus and “the Gospel” (or “The good news of the Kingdom of God” as Jesus often put it) ...

The fundamental issue Christianity addresses is exactly that: *fixing the mess this world is in.*

So, I pay attention to what's going on “out there” and what's being said. Sometimes, I try *not* to pay attention because it's so often discouraging but I can't help it.

Anyway ... as I have been paying attention, I keep coming back to three thoughts that might actually be from God. Maybe they'll be helpful to you whenever *you* think about the mess the world is in.

- What's wrong?
- Why is it wrong?
- Who did it? Who's responsible?
- What can and should be done to fix it?

Here's thought number one.

1. Where you assign blame for “the mess” determines the kind of person (or group) you will become.

And, by the way, this is true not only as it pertains to how you look at the world at large

but also how you think of your own personal world ...

... how you look at the problems in your family, at your job, in your church, and wherever else you are connected with people.

Where you assign blame for “the mess” determines the kind of person (or group) you will become.

If you see the problems in the world as primarily being because of “them” ... you will become arrogant, judgmental, hypocritical.

So many times, I hear arguments from both sides – left and right – that use the same exact logic about their pet issues but then they turn around and belittle the other side when they use the same logic!

Just one example – and there are many.

And let me warn you in advance: I'm probably going to make you mad but, I promise, I'll try to make everyone else mad, too.

- Every night on Fox News, conservatives say, “illegal immigration is destroying our country, especially the people who live on the border, so we need to not let those people in. But those stupid liberals are against it.”
- Every night on MSNBC, liberals say, “having to give birth to an unwanted child will destroy the life of that woman, so she shouldn't have to bring that child or fetus into the world. But those stupid conservatives are against it.”

It's the same basic logic about different issues but no one is able to see it ... because that's what happens when you're convinced that the problems are primarily because of “them.”

At the other extreme ...

If you see the problems in the world as primarily being because of “me” (yourself) ... you will be filled with self-loathing and constant feelings of worthlessness ...

... which makes you pretty useless when it comes to being part of the solution because you can never get outside of yourself. You become a slave to your victim mentality.

So, if neither of those views are helpful, what view is?

How about this one?

If you see the problems in the world as coming from “us” ...

... meaning all of us *collectively*, meaning that all of us are contributors to the problem, that all of us are messed up, that all of us are sinners ...

If you see the problems in the world as coming from “us” you will become patient, compassionate and teachable.

James the half-brother of Jesus once wrote:

*Confess your sins to each other
and pray for each other so that
you may be healed.*

James 5:16 (NIV)

And James here is talking about physical healing, but I think it applies to emotional and relational healing as well.

Why is that? Why does healing come from confessing our sins to one another?

It's because when *everyone* puts their sins on the table ... when everyone admits they're part of the problem ... there's no need to power up over everyone else.

There's no need to justify ourselves while belittling them.

And when that dynamic goes away ...

- You can be patient with “them.”
- You can be compassionate towards them.
- And you might even become teachable – you might learn something from them.

Maybe just that they're not “stupid, horrible people who support abortion because they think it's ok to kill babies.”

They just believe it's wrong to put that burden on a woman may not have asked for it and may not be able to handle it.”

Or maybe just that they're not “stupid, horrible people who hate women and want to take away their rights” (which is silly on its face because

the majority of pro-lifers today *are* women).

They just believe it's wrong to put shift the burden of the unwanted pregnancy from the woman (and the man) to the unborn child because it costs that child its life.ⁱⁱ

And when you get to the place where people aren't any more stupid and horrible than you are (unless they're an axe murderer), healing can begin.

So that's the first thought that's been in my head lately.

Where we assign blame for "the mess" determines the kind of person we will become.

The second thought is this – and it's depressing and will probably make some of you mad.

2. When it comes to "fixing things" I see little reason to hope in our politicians at the

national level because the goal is not leadership. It's winning.

A big part of leadership is listening even to the people you don't agree with and respecting their opinions and maybe even learning from them ...

... SO THAT they will respect you enough that they might actually follow you.

But on the day when the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the Dobbs case, I listened as our President villainized and demonized the 40% of this country who identify as pro-life and believe that abortion is morally wrong.

And I was furious because he's supposed to be the leader even of the people who didn't vote for him.

But instead of challenging everyone to see how they might be part of the solution to the

problem, he alienated almost half the country!

I was so stunned I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

But I shouldn't have been stunned because Donald Trump did the same thing again and again and again when he was president. He villainized and demonized and constantly belittled people who didn't agree with his position.

And it made me just as furious. What a foolish waste of an opportunity *to lead!*

And by the way – irony of irony – and this is why I say it's about winning:

- Doesn't it seem odd that Trump was a serial adulterer ... and that sex outside of marriage is a primary cause of abortion ... and yet he was a champion of the prolife movement?

- And doesn't it seem odd that when Roe was handed down, Joe Biden was against it?

Doesn't it seem odd that, as a senator, he voted in favor of a constitutional amendment that would have overturned Roe and returned the issue of abortion to the states (which is exactly what the Dobbs decision does)?ⁱⁱⁱ

Politics – at least at the national level is about winning not about leading.

And we're the suckers – left and right – who fall for it.

But it's always been that way.

There's a fascinating story in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) about the time when Israel wanted to have a king just like all the other

nations.

And God told the prophet Samuel, “before I say yes to that you tell them all of the ways that the king – the leader they want – will use them to serve his own interests instead of theirs.”^{iv}

And that’s what’s happened and continues to happen.

Now, having said all of that – my “old man rant” ... I realize we need laws. I realize we need a government.

And, quite frankly, I really don’t care that much anymore about whether its liberal or conservative.

What I want – what I am praying to God for – is some real leaders from the president on down whose goal it is to lead people and not just to

win, to keep getting re-elected.

But even if that happens, it still won't address what I believe is the root issue.

Because, in the end, regardless of who is in power, regardless of what the law is, it always comes down to people as individuals.

Q: Why is there gun violence?

A: Too many guns in the hands of people who shouldn't have them. We should do something about that.

Q: Why is there gun violence?

A: Too many people in a mental health crisis. So, we should work on that.

But the real problem – at least as I see it from my perspective as a Christian and as a pastor ...

And this is my third and final thought ...

3. The real and root problem is that we're afraid as a culture to admit that we are lost and adrift without God in our lives.

We say it all the time around here: "Following Jesus will make your life better because He will make you better at life."

The opposite is just as true.

The less we've followed, the worse things have become. The further we've drifted from our spiritual roots, the more we've pushed God away, the worse things have become.

And things aren't going to get better until we as a culture admit that and embrace that ... why our church (and the church we are about to become) matters.

Conclusion

Well, those three thoughts sound pretty dark, so I want to end with another completely unrelated and counterintuitive positive thought that has been dominating my mind.

As I approach this milestone ...

- In spite of the negatives in our world and our culture right now
- In spite of the fact that I need to get a new picture at the DMV
- In spite of the fact that I'm turning 65 in 11 days ...

There are so many days and multiple moments in so many days ...

Where I am so grateful to God for all of my blessings ...

- For being able to see his Hand in directing my life from as early elementary school
- For the wonderful places I've gotten to live and the amazing things I've been able to do in my life. Never expected any of this!
- For my home and my family – my wife, my daughters, their husbands their kids, our extended families on both sides.

So many times, when we're all together, I look around the table and I marvel at who all these people are and that I get to be a part of them.

- For the friends I have, the people I get to work with, the people who have been influential in my life. Again, how did I get to be connected with them?
- For being born in this country. With all of its faults, it's still the greatest place in the

world with the greatest potential for good in the world.

- For where God is leading me now in this merger. For Jason, the pastor of Hope Church KC and the folks who are part of that church and all of you who have said “yes, let’s give it a shot.”
- Finally, and most importantly, for Jesus and the fact I learned about Him as a child and was invited to receive Him as my savior and follow Him as my King as a teenager in a wonderful church in Bowie, MD.

And then I was challenged and encouraged to grow in Him at wonderful churches in Texas, New Jersey and Kansas City.

There have been so many times through the years when I have wondered, “where would I be with them? Where would I be

without Him?”

So, as I approach this milestone in my life ...

**I am grateful to God for all my blessings ...
and I want to be a blessing to others.**

Because, as we say all the time around here,
“blessed people bless people.”

So, God, I pray that you would continue to show
me all the ways you have blessed me and cause
me to be grateful. And then, allow me and help
me to be a blessing to others.

I pray you would do that for all of us who know
you as our savior and our King: that we would
be blessed and be a blessing.

And for those who don't know you yet, I pray
that you would open their eyes to see your
exceedingly kind heart towards them and that
you love them just as they are.

Amen.

Let's stand together and sing and then I'll come back for a closing comment.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://seniorhealthcareteam.com/articles/12-things-you-must-do-as-you-turn-65/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2022/06/who-will-bear-the-cost-of-americas-crisis-pregnancies/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2022/06/joe-v-joe-on-roe>

^{iv} 1 Samuel 8