

Mystery Sunday
Follow Me!
October 16, 2011

Good morning everyone ... and welcome to *Mystery Sunday*. And if today is your first time with us, let me be clear that I'm not talking about a new flavor of ice cream at Baskin-Robbins! "Mystery Sunday" is how I've been referring to today's service over the past few weeks. We've kept today's topic and activity a mystery; we've intentionally *not* revealed what is going to happen (or, at least, what we *hope* is going to happen) because ... well ... I'll tell you in a little bit. Hang in there a little bit longer.

However, I *will* say that one of the things that has amazed me over the years of being the pastor of this church is how, whenever we plan a day like today – when there is something different and maybe even a little

more challenging than what we normally do – whenever we plan a service like we have planned for today, something almost always happens during the week before it that hammers home the importance of what we’re planning to do. And it happened again this week.

Wednesday evening I received a phone call from a guy who was part of this congregation in the early days of NHCC. When he first came to us in the early ‘90s, he wasn’t a Christian. He wasn’t a believer. But eventually, after hearing the gospel and experiencing the friendship and the love of people in this church, he made the decision to accept Christ and to become His follower. And because of his decision, *his parents* – who had also started coming to this church with him – also made that decision. All three of them accepted Jesus as their savior and we baptized them in Smithville Lake. It was a

great day.

Anyway ... on Wednesday evening, I received a phone call from this guy letting me know that his dad – who was only 69 years old – had just died. He'd been sick for a while and it was expected but it kind of ended quickly so there was a lot of shock and sadness. But he wanted me to know that it happened, but he also wanted to know if I would do his dad's funeral because, in spite of the fact that they had moved on to another church soon after we moved into this building, in his father's heart, NHCC was still "his church." And I said yes; I would love to do that and I would be honored to serve you and your family in that way.

So, yesterday afternoon, I stood up at the front of the chapel in the funeral home and explained to the people there the hope that Dale had; the hope that every believer in

Christ has. And as I was leaving the cemetery, it hit me: the awesome significance of what we're going to do this morning and what I'm going to talk to you about because one day *you, too*, are going to pass from this earth. One day, *you, too*, are going to stand before a righteous and holy God who is going to ask you to give an account for how you have lived your life.

And I'm not saying that to try and scare anyone – although, truth be known, we probably should occasionally ponder our mortality with fear and trembling. I'm just telling you what happened so that you will know that, once again, God has in a set of circumstances a little out of the ordinary, confirmed that what we're doing this morning is really, really important and that no one is here this morning by accident. We're all here this morning by divine appointment because, God, through this silly

little “Mystery Sunday” idea, has something not-so-silly to say to us.

Let me tell you a story that will help you understand what it is I think He is trying to say. It’s recorded in the 8th chapter of Mark’s Gospel.

First & Foremost

As the chapter begins, Jesus has been traveling all over the land of Palestine. He’s been feeding thousands of people, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, teaching the people in a way that the religious leaders never could. He’s been doing great things and a lot of people are following Him.

But in verse 31 of Mark chapter 8, Jesus shifts the focus of His teaching and, in fact, he shifts the focus of His entire ministry and starts talking about what He really came to

do.

Mark writes ...

*He then [after all the great things he'd been doing] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.
Mark 8:31 (NIV)*

That's not what the guys wanted to hear. They wanted to hear that Jesus was going to stage an "Occupy Jerusalem" rally in protest against the Romans who had been oppressing them. They wanted to hear that He was going to lead a great military conquest that would usher in the Kingdom of God and put Israel at the top of the heap of all the nations on the earth.

But Jesus, for the very first time, is making it clear that his primary purpose on this earth isn't political or nationalistic. It isn't free fish 'n' chips for the multitudes or other physical needs getting met in miraculous ways. And it's not emotional health or economic recovery (two things we've spent quite a bit of time talking about in recent days). Even though Jesus said and did things that could be applied in all of those areas, and that's great, none of those things were his primary reason for coming to earth. Instead, *his primary purpose was to "suffer and be rejected" – to give His life on the cross and take it back up again three days later so that the whole world might be saved through Him.*

Now, what's interesting is that Mark says that ...

He spoke plainly about this,

and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Mark 8:32 (NIV)

To rebuke someone means to correct them strongly. Peter didn't like what Jesus was so clearly saying and so he started to argue with him. "Jesus, you're making a big mistake. We're just now on a roll. People are coming. Don't change course now!"

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Mark 8:33 (NIV)

In other words, "Peter, in this life there's God's way and there's man's way. We've got to do this God's way. Do not lose sight of that. Do not lose your focus."

And that's really the purpose behind what we're doing this morning. I want to make absolutely sure that we're keeping the correct focus on our faith. I want to make absolutely sure that we all understand that this "church thing," this "Christianity thing" first and foremost is about Jesus and what he came to do on the cross and in His resurrection.

And yesterday, doing that funeral confirmed for me again just how important it is that we all understand that; that the fundamental message of Christianity is not so many of these auxiliary things that we think it is. It's not about trying to be good enough to get into Heaven so that when we stand before God we can weigh our good deeds and our bad deeds and we can be on the top end of the scale when we compare to other people. It's not about trying to placate God by

keeping the rules. The fundamental message of Christianity is what the band sang a few minutes ago:

Hallelujah, what a Savior ... the way,
the truth and the life ... stood in my
place, taking my shame upon his
shoulders!ⁱⁱ

Jesus took *your* place and mine on the cross so that you and I could be saved from our sin. (Because, friends, we cannot save ourselves from our sin no matter how big or how small it is!) And then he rose from the dead to begin the undoing of the curse that had been placed on the whole cosmos by sin so that one day when he returns it could all be renewed, restored and regenerated, including every single person throughout history who has believed in him.

And I hope, I hope, I hope that if you never

understood anything else I've ever said or understand anything else I will ever say, that you will understand that. It's that important.

But beyond even that ... beyond understanding ... I hope, I hope, I hope you will *respond* because the fundamental message of Jesus is not something just to be understood. The message of Jesus is something to which we must respond.

After that incident in which Jesus rebuked Peter ...

Mark writes that Jesus ...

Then called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Mark 8:34 (NIV)

“It’s not enough to agree with me,” Jesus is saying. “It’s not enough to confess the facts that, yes, you are a sinner, and, yes, I am the savior. You have to *respond*. You’ve got to deny yourself. You have to deny your way of thinking, your way of how it all ought to work, and accept mine. You have to become my follower.”

Now, unfortunately, in this culture we do not understand very well the idea of following Jesus. For a lot of people, following Jesus is kind of like following Justin Bieber or Bill Gates or Lady Gaga or whoever on *Twitter*. You know how it works, if you follow someone on *Twitter* it means that, every so often, they push you an update, which then are going to get buried in a stream of maybe hundreds of other updates (depending on how many you follow), and you might look at those updates occasionally or you might not. But, in either case, you’re

certainly not going to do *anything* about those updates that come to you.

And when a lot of people say "I'm a follower of Jesus," what they mean is "Okay, I've clicked the button. Jesus, I'll listen to what You have to say, but I'm going to pick and choose *which parts* of what You have to say that I want to pay attention to. If it *works for me*, I'll do it. Or if I *feel like it*, I'll do it."

But, friends, Jesus is not to be "clicked on" and followed; He's to be worshipped, He's to be revered, He's to be respected, He's to be honored, He's to be obeyed. *And the very first thing that Jesus tells us to do when we become his follower – when we understand the message and we believe and we're ready to respond – the very first thing he says is to be baptized. He says to be baptized.*

Moments before Jesus returned to Heaven,
He gave his followers this command:

*“Go and make disciples of all
the nations, baptizing them in
the name of the Father and
the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Teach these new disciples to
obey all the commands I
have given you.”
Matthew 18:19-20 (NIV)*

Jesus is saying to us, “After you place your faith in me, I want you to let the world know you belong to Me by being baptized.”

Now, as you can see, this morning we have our little pool of water set up here in the front. And the reason we have a pool for baptism is because we take a very literal view of baptism. When we baptize here at NHCC, we dunk people. We put them under the water because the original word for baptize is *baptizo* which means to dunk, dip,

or submerge. That's not to diminish other tradition that sprinkles or pours, it's just how we – and many, many other churches – interpret that scripture.

Of course a side benefit of doing it this way – when you dunk people – is also that it visualizes that Jesus was dead, and buried and raised again on the third day. And it also visualizes that we are dead in our sins – there is nothing we can do to save ourselves – but, God, through Christ and what he did on the cross and his resurrection, has raised us again to new life and forgiveness of sins.

Watered-Down Baptism

But, unfortunately (again) in this culture, just like we've emptied a lot of the meaning out of what it means to follow Jesus, we've also emptied the meaning of baptism and we've made it a whole lot less important to *us* than

it is to Jesus. There are a lot of people in this culture – maybe even in this room – who say, “I *understand* the message of Jesus. I want to follow Jesus; I am following Jesus,” but they have never taken *the very first step He told us to take* – which is to be baptized!

Why is that? I guess you could say that we've “watered down” the meaning of baptism (pun intended). And we water down the meaning in several ways.

1. Some of us make baptism, and some churches do this, they make it about the denomination or about the church tradition rather than a biblical command. But baptism is not about joining a church.

Sometimes people will think, “I don't know if I want to be baptized here at NHCC. I don't know if I want to be a member yet.”

Well you know what? We're not sure if we want you as a member yet either, so we're on the same page! Here's the deal, if you want to be a member here, you don't get baptized. You go to Church 101 - you find out our vision, our values, what we're here for, and what we're trying to do (the class is happening this afternoon). And, baptism, although it does mean we belong to the family of God, it's not the same thing as church membership.

2. Another way we water down the meaning of baptism is to make it about our parents' decision when we were children, rather than our own initiative.

A lot of people in this culture were baptized as infants. I was. But for a lot of us, when we read the clear teaching of Jesus in the Bible, where people *first* believe *then* they are baptized as a sign of

that belief (27 times it happens that way in the book of Acts, cover to cover! People believe and then they're baptized), when we read that what we think is, "oh, that doesn't really apply to me because I was baptized when I was a baby." And we tell ourselves that, "Well, if I do what is so clear in the scripture then my parents (or my grandparents) are going to be really insulted. It will hurt their feelings."

Well, here's the deal, when my parents took me to the Catholic church when I was however big and said, "We want to baptize or christen this little boy Richard Andrew McGinniss, Jr." they were dedicating me to the Lord, and their hope, and the hope of the Catholic church, was that one day I would decide to follow Jesus for myself. And when I got baptized of my own choice at age 15, that was the ultimate full-circle fulfillment of that hope

because I was saying, "This is now *my* faith. *I'm* owning this." And I wonder if maybe some of us ought to think of it that way as well.

3. I think another way we water down the meaning of baptism is by making it optional.

We say "well, I'm not going to argue with you, baptism is a good thing to do. It's obviously a good spiritual experience. I've seen people baptized - it's amazing for them. But, let's just be clear, we all know that baptism is not what saves us, so it's kind of optional."

And it is true that baptism does not save you. Nothing you do will save you. Baptism is about identifying with Jesus. But this thought is one of those "ways of men" that Jesus was rebuking Peter about. This is

one of those things where Jesus says, "It might sound like it's unimportant to you, but it's important to Me that you do this if you claim to be My follower." See, what's important to God, even in baptism, has got to be important to us.

4. I think one more way that some of us water down the meaning of baptism is by telling ourselves "I have to be worthy."

We say, "I'd love to be baptized, but the truth is, I have to get my life together first because I have this thing, I have this issue, and once I clean that up and get my act together, then I'll be ready to get baptized." But if you were already worthy, you wouldn't need Jesus to save you and that's what the waters of baptism are all about! It's saying, "I can't save myself. I am screwed up. I'm a mess, I'm dirty and I've got to come to Jesus just as I am and

say, 'take this mess and do what you can.'" And that's what baptism symbolizes – not about being worthy.

“Here Is Water”

Now, at this point, I'm sure that some of you are wondering ... "why is he telling us all of this? And what does all of this have to do with this Mystery Sunday thing?"

Well ... let me tell you another story (it's very short.) In the Book of Acts chapter 8 there's this guy traveling in a chariot down the road from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. He's a high-ranking official in the Ethiopian government, but he is also very interested in spiritual things. He has a copy of the scroll of Isaiah, and in those days the common people did not have scrolls of the book of Isaiah. So, this guy is very wealthy, and he has invested a

lot in trying to find out “is there a God? What’s this deal? Maybe the Jewish people have an answer.” So, he has this scroll and he’s traveling down this road in this chariot, and he’s reading this thing aloud. He’s trying understand it.

At the same time, the Book of Acts tells us that there’s a Christian guy named Philip who is traveling down the same road and the Holy Spirit says to him, “Hey, look, at the next stop sign (I don’t know if they had stop signs in those days or not) what I want you to do is when that chariot comes to a stop, I want you to go over to that chariot and help that guy.” And the Bible says Philip does it. He goes over to this guy and says, “I know this might be crazy, but I just had this impression from God that maybe I’m supposed to help you with something.” And he realizes the guy is reading the scroll of Isaiah, and he’s blown away that this guy

has a scroll, and he asks, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

The guy says, "I have no idea, but I want to know. Can you help me?"

Philip says "yeah, I can help you," and the guy says, "come on up here in the chariot and we'll ride together."

Verse 35 says

Philip began with that very passage of Scripture (that the guy was reading from Isaiah) and told him the good news about Jesus. Acts 8:35 (NIV)

He explains that fundamental purpose, that fundamental message about Jesus that I explained to you earlier.

And verse 36 says ...

As they rode along, they came to some water, and this [high-ranking, rich, well-to-do official] said, "Look! There's some water!" Acts 8:36 (NIV)

And, look, friends, right here in front of this auditorium there's some water!

And, then, this high-ranking Ethiopian official asks the question that I want to put in front of you this morning. He asks the question that is the reason for everything I have said so far this morning. He asks the question that explains why we have this pool set up this morning.

He asks ...

"What prevents me from being baptized?"

"I understand, based on what you're telling

me Philip, what Jesus came to do. I believe He did it. And I want to follow him. And here's water. So, why can't we do the deal, right now, right this minute? What prevents me from being baptized?"

Apparently, the answer was “nothing” because the Bible says that ...

He commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the official, and Philip baptized him. Acts 8:38 (ESV)

And now you know what *Mystery Sunday* is all about. This morning, after weeks of planning and prayer, it is my privilege to be able to offer to you one of the greatest opportunities I think you'll ever have in your life. This morning, I want to offer you – if you've not yet been baptized by your own decision – I want to offer you the chance to

be baptized right here, right now, this morning, as part of this service. That's what *Mystery Sunday* is all about.

And I know that some of you who have been baptized might be thinking right now this is kind of a let down, "Oh, man, so this is the mystery? Well, I guess that kind of leaves me out because I've already been baptized." No, no, no, here's the deal, this doesn't leave you out because I'm inviting you right now to silently pray over the next few minutes for the many people around you who have never taken this step, that they will say "yes" like you once did.

And just so you'll know (I'll come clean on this) ... the reason we kept this a mystery is because sometimes the greatest opportunities of your life come when you're not expecting them. Sometimes the greatest decisions spiritually are made when God

speaks, it's clear, and we say "yes" on the spot without a whole bunch of excuses or delay. "Follow Me," Jesus said to Peter and his fishing buddies, "Follow Me," and at once, the Bible says, they left their nets and changed the world (beginning with themselves).

And that's what's going to happen this morning. You didn't expect it when you came in this morning. You didn't plan on this. But this morning, God is calling some of you to follow Jesus and to begin with baptism. And, even though it's crazy, "we never do this kind of stuff at North Heartland," even though it's crazy, you're going to do it – you really are – because after all, here is water. What prevents you from being baptized?

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa Rick! Hold it right there, buddy! What *prevents me* from being

baptized this morning? Let me give you about 10 reasons.”

1. I didn't come dressed for baptism. I love Jesus but I'm not walking out of here soaking wet this morning!
2. And I didn't bring clothes to change into.
3. And my hair's going to get wet.
4. And I don't have a towel.
5. My makeup will run.
6. My deodorant will wear off.
7. Where am I going to put all my stuff? Purse, phone, wallet?
8. If I do decide to get crazy and get baptized, I want my family to see it and they are not all here.
9. And, I don't know what I'm going to do or where I'm going to go, it's kind of confusing, you guys are weird how you do stuff.
10. But, I got you Rick - here's the

trump, here's the trump card - I have not yet attended the baptism class, so therefore, I cannot be baptized this morning.

And, I've got to tell you that those are very good points. They really are. So, let me see what I can do about those. Shannon, are you here? Would you come up here?

And while Shannon is making her way, let me take a crack at number 10 on the list. Just to be clear, in the baptism classes we have here at NHCC, we teach pretty much what I'm teaching right here this morning, so you're covered, you're good. And, just so you'll know, the book of Acts tells us that on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came and the message of Christ was first proclaimed, 3,000 people on the spot accepted Jesus and were baptized right then. So, this isn't some weird new thing

we're doing it. We're actually mimicking the very first church service that was ever had in the Christian faith. And, that's what people did: "all right, you believe? you want to follow Jesus? You want to accept the message? Great! Be baptized!"

Now, as for the other things that might prevent you from being baptized, Shannon, we're going to explain to our friends what we've done to remove every possible barrier to as many people as possible, saying "yes" this morning.

Let's talk about ...

1. clothing <shannon explains>

And we have a picture of where people will change, right? (picture)

2. Hair <shannon explains>

3. towels <shannon explains>

4. makeup < >
5. deodorant < >
6. Let's talk about where people will put their stuff. Cell phones, wallets, etc. < >
7. Let's talk about how people will know where to go and what to do. < >
8. And if people are here without their families and want them to see ...

<shannon explain video>

Ok, one more thing ... can you explain this picture (feminine products)?

Ok, can we thank Shannon? <applause>

Friends, I think you can see that we have tried to think of everything that might prevent you from saying "yes." We've tried to remove every obstacle we can, because it matters, *it matters*, that you do what Jesus told you to do.

But there are two obstacles that we cannot remove. Only you can handle these.

1. The first is that maybe you just don't have enough information at this point in your spiritual journey to make this decision. Maybe you're new to Christianity, new to the church, and you're going, "I'm tracking with what you're saying, Rick, but I'm just not there, ready to buy into this Jesus thing."

And if that's where you are with what happens this morning, you just relax. This is not for you. Your time will come. There will be other opportunities to be baptized.

2. The other obstacle – this is for people, many of us, who have been Christians for a long time – the other obstacle is

our own heart, because we've grown apathetic towards what God is saying in our lives. Or, maybe we're too proud – we've got this image going on that "I've got it all together and I'm not going to submit to Jesus because then people are going to know that even though I've got it all together on the outside I'm just a sinner like the next guy or gal and I'm not sure I want to admit that to everyone publicly." See, for some of us, it's our own *heart* that's the primary obstacle.

And if that's where you are, I say what I did not to condemn you, because you know we're not like that in this church; we're not condemning. The reason I'm telling you this is, what you need to do with this is what we always do with our sin – we confess it to God, we say, "This is the truth about me. I don't want to be

this way." And then we rejoice that Jesus has already paid for that sin on the cross and forgiven that sin. And then we say, "Okay, God, that's me. Thank you for your forgiveness. Now, would you soften my heart so I can respond." Maybe you can do that today. Maybe you can respond. If not, maybe some other time. But, the heart, for a lot of us, is the obstacle.

The Invitation

But, if you want to respond today ... there's nothing to stop you. We have water, we have volunteers to help you, we have a church that wants to support you. We even have a band that's going to come and get into place because we have a huge celebration that's going to happen here as people are baptized.

And in just a minute, they're going to do a

song that I think expresses the kind of desire that we've been talking about – a desire to say “yes” to Jesus. And while that song is playing, that's when you get up and move to the door. And when you get to the door, the people there will help you get ready and they'll bring you back in and we'll baptize you along with everyone else who responds while the band plays and we all sing together.

Now, I do need to say this – in this moment we're not going to baptize anyone younger than Middle School in this service. We've found it necessary to make sure one-on-one that our children especially understand what baptism is, so, parents, this is not your cue to go fetch your kids out of Adventureland because you've always wanted them to be baptized and now is the time. That's not what this is. If you have elementary kids or younger, please don't bring them up here.

This is for grownups. This is for people who maybe this morning have said, "I'm in on this Jesus deal. I want to follow him. I believe in him." Or, maybe like people in the last service, a guy who said, "I've been a follower of Jesus for 30 years and I've never been baptized." And he was baptized this morning. It was amazing, along with scores of other people.

So, this is it. This is your opportunity. If you feel a tug in your heart right now to say yes, let me assure you: *that is the Holy Spirit of God calling you.* It's not emotional manipulation, it's the presence of God drawing you and calling you. God has had this date on His calendar since before you were born, and you are here today because He wants you here today, so do not miss this opportunity. As the scripture says, "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart."

So in this moment, when the band starts, move. Don't look around to see who else is moving, "Am I going to be the only weirdo who does this this morning?" I guarantee you that you're not. I guarantee you, based on what happened in the first service. But, *even if you are, follow Jesus!* Not people. Take responsibility for you. Take responsibility for you because we've got water ... and nothing prevents you from being baptized.

Let's pray.

Jesus, we give you this moment. Holy Spirit, we give you this time. I pray that people would have freedom to respond, to say, "Thank you God that You love me so much that You gave Jesus for me, and I can repond in this way." We ask that in Jesus name, Amen.

Here we go. Music. Movement.

Feature – Welcome Home

Time for people to respond

OPTIONAL Transition – Beach Balls / Music on CD (5 min)

Rick will explain this before it happens IF
NECESSARY

Baptism / Worship Set

<Rick intro group one>

I Will Follow

<Rick intro group two>

Great God Who Saves

<Rick intro group three OR closing>

Jesus Paid It All

CLOSING COMMENTS (Rick)

Guess what Elizabeth, in the first service, there were 38 people who got in the water, and you are the 39th in this service. So, guess what, you guys win! You win! If my math is right, that's 77 people who followed Christ in baptism today. Awesome! And, thank you so much for hanging in there. It's 12:17, I know it's late. I appreciate you doing that. We'll try not to go to 12:17 every Sunday.

But, one thing I want to tell you before you leave - this week, if you're on the North Heartland mailing list, you're going to get this little "owner's manual" in the mail. You need to take a look at it because it's going to tell you what we're doing over the next five weeks as a church, in our weekend services. And, it will tell you what we're doing as a church for the next two years. So, we're going to kick into high gear next week. We're going to accelerate, and I want you to be a part of that as well because God is doing

some great stuff here. Resonate? A Great day! This will be a day that we look back on and say, "Do you remember when we did ..."
Thanks for coming today! Bye.

ⁱ Many thanks to Steven Furtick & Elevation Church, Matthews, NC, for the idea of "spontaneous baptism" and also the transcript of the message which I have modified for our purposes.

ⁱⁱ Laura Story, *What a Savior*