

More Than a Building
Stop Going to Church
November 17, 2019

<PRAY>

Good morning everyone.

As Cary said,, not only are we going to baptize some folks later in the service, we're also concluding our series *More Than a Building* which is a series about the church; not just *this* church but *the* church, the movement started by Jesus of Nazareth and His followers almost 2,000 years ago.

And the reason we're talking about the church is because a lot of us need to change the way we think about the church, and radically so ... because when what we think is "off" ... when we have the wrong ideas about church, *everyone loses*.

And I don't want that for you or for me or for all of us, collectively, or for the world around us.

That's why, in the first week of this series, I told you three things you probably *don't know* that you *should know* that if you *did know* might actually change not only the way you think about church but also the way you engage with it and support it and, as Jesus did, love it.

And then, in the second week we saw that, contrary to what most people think, church isn't reserved for people who have it all together. Instead, church is for people who are deeply aware of their sin and their need for grace ... which is why, before it is anything else, church is "the grace place."

Then in week three we talked about some of

the weird stuff churches do (that no one else does) like communion and baptism and worship ... and how most people think those are religious rituals designed to get God to *do* something – like forgive us, or save us, or bless us ...

... when, in fact, their purpose is to remind us that God has already *done* something in Jesus – like forgiving us, saving us and blessing us – and they are ours simply because we believe in Him.

Then, finally, last Sunday we learned the shocking truth about ministers, which didn't have anything to do with religious professionals or scandal.

Instead, the truth which shocks most people when they first hear it is that, in the church as it was originally formed by the Apostles, there is no special class of people designated

“ministers” while everyone else is not.

Instead, every Christian is a minister. And every Christian is in the ministry.

And it’s the responsibility of those who lead in the church to equip and engage every believer to do ministry (which is anything that builds up the body of Christ – the church) in some way.

Now, the reason I’m giving an overview of everything we’ve talked about to this point is because I know some of you are new with us today ...

And I know that some of you are not Christians – you don’t believe in or follow Jesus of Nazareth – and that’s OK, we’re really glad to have you with us. Our church

was started specifically to help people who aren't Christians figure out what Christ and Christianity are all about.

So, I thought maybe it would helpful if you're new or not a Christian to let you in on what we've been talking about and also, to invite you to watch, listen to or read any of the messages in this series. You can do that by going to the media section of our website or our app. And they're also available through our podcast.

So, we've been talking about some of the ways in which a lot of us need to change the way we think about church.

But of *all* the changes we need to make, none is more radical than the one I want to talk to you about today.

The greatest change most of us need to make – and this one applies especially to those of us who *are* Christians ...

The greatest change most of us need to make is that we need to ...

STOP GOING TO CHURCH!

As a pastor ... as your pastor, if NHCC is your church – I am telling you in no uncertain terms that you need to stop going to church.

Now, in saying that, I'm obviously not encouraging everyone to get up and leave.

Instead, what I'm getting at is that a lot of us think of "church" like we think of going to the movies, or going to a Chief's game or going for a cup of coffee or going to whatever. We think "I'm going to go to this place and I'm

going to enjoy something and then I'm going to leave."

So when it comes to church we think, "I'm going to get up tomorrow morning and I'm going to go to North Heartland or go to Vineyard or go to Pleasant Valley. And I'm going to enjoy the message and the music and <whatever> and then I'm going to leave."

And, just to be clear, I hope you *do* enjoy the message and the music when you're in this room.

However, to be equally clear:

If you're a Christian, God's highest calling in your life isn't for you to go to a church. <repeat> It's way better than that.

And to understand what I say that, we need to look again at what "church" really is.

So let's rewind all the way back to the beginning, back to the first century and, in particular, to the churches that the Apostle Paul started.

Remember, Paul was the guy who once worked to destroy churches but then met Jesus and, ironically, ended up planting countless numbers of them all over the Roman Empire!

Anyway ... in the congregations that Paul started, most of the members were Gentiles – meaning they were not Jewish (like most of us).

And that was great because Jesus told his disciples to take the good news about Him to the whole world. But it also led to a nagging problem: those Gentiles sometimes felt like they were second class citizens to their Jewish

brothers and sisters.

After all ...

- The Jews were God's "chosen people"
- And they also had the Law of Moses.
- And Jesus himself was of Jewish descent.

Most importantly, they also had the Temple in Jerusalem; that sacred and holy building where Jewish people could "go" ... and where Gentiles could *not* "go" except in very limited circumstances.

So, in many of Paul's letters (which we have in the New Testament), he specifically addresses this concern.

For example, in his letter to the congregations in the region of Ephesus ...

He tells the Gentiles ...

*You are no longer foreigners
and strangers, but fellow
citizens with God's people
and also members of his
household ...*

Ephesians 2:19 (NIV)

In other words, "because of your faith in Jesus and what He did for you in his death and resurrection, you belong. Don't doubt that. You're part of God's forever family, regardless of your lineage."

That's because "God's house," Paul says, is ...

*... built on the foundation of
the apostles and prophets,
with [Messiah] Jesus himself
as the chief cornerstone.*

Ephesians 2:20 (NIV)

... which obviously means that "God's house" *isn't* a literal house. It's not some building up somewhere in Jerusalem no matter how

glorious that building might be.

Instead, Paul says, "God's house-which-isn't-a-house is centered around Jesus not Moses." (That's what he means when he says that Jesus is the chief cornerstone.)

"And the foundation of God's house-which-isn't-a-house is what Jesus taught his apostles, not what Moses taught the people of Israel."

"And in Jesus," Paul continues ...

In him the whole building [which, again, isn't a literal building] is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

Ephesians 2:21 (NIV)

Now, if you were one of those Gentile Christians hearing this letter read for the very first time, at this point you would probably be

very encouraged but you'd also be pretty confused.

"So, wait Paul. You're saying there's a house that's not a literal house ... a building that's not a literal building ... in which something is being joined together and rising to become a holy temple that's not a literal temple.

"Yes, that's what I'm saying."

"Ok, so what is it that's being joined together to create this spiritual house, this spiritual building, this spiritual temple?"

And Paul – the guy who planted more churches than anyone else at the beginning of Christianity – responds, "it's you – all of you together."

In Him ... In Jesus ...

You too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Ephesians 2:22 (NIV)

You – all of you Gentiles who believe – plus all of the Jewish believers in your congregation are God's Temple.

You – all of you together – are the building.

You – all of you together – are God's house.

God's Spirit is living in you *collectively*, working through you *collectively*, shining his light in the world, *collectively*.

And that's why, friends, if you're a Christian, God's highest calling in your life isn't for you to go to a church. It's way better than that.

Your calling is to *be* the church (along with

every other believer in your congregation).

God is building something with us and through us *collectively* that is far greater than what He can do with us individually.

And God wants the light of what we are together and do together to shine so brightly that your friends and my friends, your neighbors and my neighbors are drawn to Jesus.

Getting Personal

Now, if you've been around church for any length of time, that's probably not news to you. You've heard the same idea but maybe presented from a different angle.

And if you're like a lot of people – Christians, I'm talking about – a lot of people hear this and they think, "Well, pastor, I'm sure that's

true and I'm sure that's important. But I don't like being around people. Or I don't have the time. Or I'm not smart enough or spiritual enough."

"So I'm just going to take a pass. I'll let everyone else *be* the church and I'll settle for *going* to church. After all, since all of my sins are forgiven it's not like I'm going to go to hell or something because I'm not willing to go all in on this church thing."

And that's true.

However, when we opt out and when we take a pass, there's a huge negative implication individually and personally. And this is one reason why I say we lose when we don't change the way we think about church.¹

Let me explain.

Psalm 92 says ...

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon. Planted in the house of the Lord ...

... which, again, is not a physical building but a body of believers, a congregation ...

Planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. Psalm 92:12-13 (NIV)

Now let's talk about this for a few minutes. And let's start with the word "flourish" which isn't a word we use that often. When someone asks how we're doing we never say, "man, I'm just flourishing today. How about you?"

It's not a word we use very often but it's an awesome word because flourishing is the

word that describes the kind of life you want to have and I want to have and, in fact, the kind of life God wants us to have. It's the kind of life we were made for.

- It means thriving
- It means growing
- It means prospering
- It means being at peace emotionally and relationally and spiritually
- It means being able to bless others because you are so blessed yourself.

You and I were made to flourish ... and to flourish like a cedar tree and a palm tree!

Well, what does that mean?

I'm sure you know that cedar wood, in addition to its beauty and its fragrance, is extremely durable.

For instance, when Solomon built his Temple in Jerusalem, he made the columns, the posts, the beams, and the roof out of cedar, because he wanted it to last for centuries. Even in our time, outdoor furniture is often made out of cedar because it can withstand the elements.

As for the palm tree, in ancient times a palm branch was symbolic of triumph and victory. In fact, if you were the victor in one of the contests in the original Olympic Games, they didn't give you a gold medal. They gave you a palm branch!

That's why when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, people waved palm branches at him and laid them in his path. They were celebrating what they believed would be triumph and victory over the Romans.

So to flourish like a cedar means to be

durable, strong, and pleasing. And to flourish like a palm tree means to be triumphant and victorious.

In addition, both of those trees are evergreens which means they are *always* flourishing, *always* growing, *always* bearing fruit. There is *always* life coming from these trees.

“The righteous – people who know God – will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.”

That’s what it’s supposed to be like if you’re a Christian. That doesn’t mean it’s supposed to be easy. Storms still come. Drought still comes. But the trees continue to flourish in spite of them.

Now, here's where it gets personal.

When you think about your life right now, is *flourishing* a word that comes to mind?

For a lot of us ...

If someone were to ask, instead of saying "I'm spiritually flourishing," we might say, "well, to be honest, I'm spiritually dry."

Instead of saying "I'm thriving emotionally," we would say "I am emotionally withering."

Instead of saying, "I'm connected relationally," we would say, "I'm relationally barren."

Instead of saying, "I'm prospering financially with breathing room to be a blessing to the people and causes God loves," we would say, "financially I'm stressed, and I have to be careful about every penny."

Instead of saying, "I'm making a difference, I'm using my gifts for God's purposes," we would say, "I'm bored."

Instead of saying, "I am full of joy," we would say, "I'm still searching, reaching, longing for, hoping for that thing, that something, that relationship, that job, that whatever it is that I don't have that would fulfill what I'm missing on the inside."

If someone would ask, we would say "Yes, I go to church, but I'm not *flourishing*."

But Scripture doesn't say "those who are *going* to church will flourish." It says "those who are *planted* in the house of the Lord will flourish."

Let me say that again.

Those who are planted are those who flourish.

And *going* to church isn't the same as being *planted* in the church.

There's a real difference. And you can hear it in the way many of us talk about church.

For example, you wake up on a Sunday morning and you say, "Honey, are we going to go to church today? I'm thinking we're kind of busy, there's a lot going on, there's a game, we're kind of tired. Maybe we should go to that restaurant we like for brunch. What do you think? Do you want to go to church today?"

Listen, when you're planted, you'll never say, "are we going to go to church?" because church isn't a destination. Church is *who you are*. Attending a service or not is never really a question, because you (and the rest of us)

are the church. It's what you do.

It would be like asking your family, "You think we ought to eat today? I don't know. I'm kind of wondering about it."

It would be like asking, "Do you all want to breathe today? Are you in the mood for oxygen today? Do you think we should do that breathing thing?"

It's ludicrous. Breathing and eating are never a question. It's just what you do because of who and what you are.

And when you think of yourself as *planted* in a church instead of just going to church, church is not a destination or an event to attend.

- It's investing yourself in the work God is already doing.

- It's developing relationships with other people in the congregation, praying for them, and letting them pray for you.
- It's recognizing that God has given you gifts and abilities and financial resources and using those things to advance the mission of the church.
- It's a calling, a movement, a mission to share the light of Christ
- It's a gathering of people with a purpose.

When you're planted in a church, it's an identity you embrace. And you say with full confidence, "I am a part of the family of God. I am *planted* in the house of the Lord."

Roots and Fruits

And two really great things happen when you're planted.

1. Your roots grow deep.

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah once described those who are planted in the house of God in language very similar to what we read in Psalm 92.

He wrote:

They are like trees that are planted along the riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Jeremiah 17:8a (NLT)

Maybe right now, you are feeling some heat in your life; you are experiencing some trials.

Or maybe you would say, "I'm in a drought right now. I feel completely dried out and withered."

But when the roots grow deep, they're not bothered by heat; they are not bothered by drought. When you are *planted*, your roots reach deep into the source that is greater than any problem on the surface.

For instance, think about a redwood tree. It can grow to be 30 stories high. Its root system can go down 150 feet.

But what's most stunning about a redwood is that its root system can go *outward* 150 feet. Its roots intertwine with the roots of *other* redwood trees, and together they form an underground support system that sustains *the entire forest*.

In the same way, we when are connected and planted in the church, we are stronger, and blessed, and encouraged because, as our individual roots grow deep, they also support each other.

Listen, sometime this week you will face opposition. You will face a trial, you'll have a struggle, you'll have a setback, you will interact with a crazy person. You will face some sort of opposition, and if you face it alone, you are more vulnerable to discouragement and defeat.

But when you are planted firmly in the house of the Lord, you are part of a great forest that supports you.

Here's the second great thing about being planted:

2. You produce fruit.

Let's go back again to what Jeremiah wrote:

They are like trees planted along a riverbank with roots that reach deep into the water.

Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they never stop producing fruit.

Jeremiah 17:8 (NLT)

So what is fruit?

The Apostle Paul once wrote about this to some of the churches he had started. He called it "the fruit of the Spirit" – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. He said these are the kinds of things that begin

to show up in your life when God's Spirit is at work ... and ... and ... when you are connected with and serving other believersⁱⁱ and vice versa.

When we're all planted together ...

- We all serve one another
- We care for one another.
- We love one another.
- We use our gifts on behalf of one another.

And, as a result, we're encouraged in ways that we otherwise would not have been encouraged to keep following Jesus.

And when that happens, everyone grows to be a little more like Jesus and the fruit of the Spirit becomes a little more prevalent and obvious. And the cycle starts all over again but this time its stronger.

See, there's an exponential effect when we each grow a little and then bring that to the table in relationships with each other.

When you're planted – when church is more than a place you go – your roots grow deep and you produce fruit that makes a difference in others.

The Question

So, here's the question. Are you planted in the church or are you just going to church?
<repeat>

And obviously, if you're not a Christian, this isn't for you though you are welcome to listen in. But if you're a Christian are you planted in the church or just going to church?

Here are a few ways you can know.

- If you decide not to come to worship because you don't like the topic or the speaker that day, you're probably just going to church.
- If you attend services at Vineyard sometimes and Pleasant Valley sometimes and North Heartland sometimes (like whenever there's a movie series), you're probably just going to church.
- If you don't make any effort to get to know other people ... if you never consider serving on a ministry team ... if you give only when there is a project or a need ... you're probably just going to church.

Now, I don't say those things to make you feel bad or guilty or whatever. For some of you, that might be the best you can do right now.

And if that's your situation, that's OK. I get it.

I just want to point out the difference between going to church and being planted in a church because, again, *those who are planted are those who flourish*. Those who are planted are those who flourish.

On the other hand ...

- If you start coming to church here and you decide to go to the Intro Class to find out what the church is all about ...
- If you officially join the church and become a member ...
- If you participate in a small group ...
- If you sign on the dotted line and say "I'll serve in this ministry area, I'll even lead in this area. You can count on me" ...

- If you give a percentage of your income on a regular basis – you sign up to automate it online ...
- If you pray for the church and its pastors and its mission to reach seekers ...
- If you work through conflict when it happens – and it *will* happen because, again, church is full of sinners in need of grace from Jesus and everybody else

... if you work through misunderstandings and hurt feelings and being offended instead of gossiping or quitting or leaving without saying anything ...

If you do those kinds of things, you're planted.

And those who are planted are those who

flourish.

And I want you to flourish. *You* want you to flourish. *God* wants you to flourish.

When someone asks you how your life is, God wants you to be able to say, "I'm flourishing. I'm thriving. Life's not perfect, but my roots are deep, my faith is strong, my brothers and sisters are supporting me and praying for me. I am needed, and I am loved. I'm a part of something.

"I don't go to a building, I am the church with my brothers and sisters in Christ. I gather together with them regularly and then I go out strengthened, because I am planted in the house of the Lord."ⁱⁱⁱ

And, friends, this is so important to your flourishing that I need to say that, if you're a Christian and you can't plant yourself here at

North Heartland – you don't connect with the preaching or the music or the style or the mission or whatever, that's OK because this church is not for everybody. We've known that from the beginning.

In fact, we've *said* from the beginning – and you'll hear this in the Intro Class – that “every believer deserves to be part of a church they love and every church deserves to be filled with people who love it.”

It's just so much better all round when it works out that way.

So, if you don't love this church, we'll actually help you find one you *do* love. Come talk to me or one of the pastors about it and we'll help you. Seriously.

And not because we're trying to get rid of anyone or make anyone feel unwelcome. I wish that everyone who ever came through our doors would love us. I wish that everyone

would want to go all in on who we are and what we're doing.

It's just so important that we're connected somewhere that we can go all in ... because after all, *Christianity itself is an all-in experience.*

Baptism

Here's what I mean:

When you become a Christian, you take all that you are – all your sin, all your failures – and you put it all in. You give it all to Jesus with no reservations.

And then God takes all that Jesus is – all of his perfection and his victory over death – and he gives it all to you with no strings attached.

That's what Christianity is, at least at the very

beginning.

And that's what baptism illustrates: all that we are going into all that Jesus is.

And this morning, we're going to baptize some folks who have come to that point in their life.

- They've made the choice to put their faith and trust in Jesus alone as their savior.
- They believe that He died for them and that his death atones for all of their sins, past present and future.
- And they are choosing to get to know Him and to follow Him in the ways of God's Kingdom.

They're going all in and they're going to

illustrate that by *literally* going all in. And we get to watch and celebrate that decision with them.

But, every time we set up this baptism pool, we also know there are *others* in this room who need to make that decision.

And there are still others who have come to believe in Jesus *who have not been baptized* – at least, not of their own choosing.

Maybe they were baptized as an infant. I was baptized as an infant. That's a great thing.

But the value of *you and I* making *our own* decision to be baptized cannot be overstated. It's ...

- A "stake in the ground"
- A public profession of faith
- A reminder that you can always look

back on and say, “Yes, I did come to the point of trusting Jesus as my savior.”

So, whenever we baptize these days, we always throw open the door at this point and say “if you need to be baptized *this is your opportunity*. You, too, can be baptized this morning, right now, on the spot.”

- We’ve got the water
- We’ve got extra towels
- We even have extra clothes to change into

There is no reason why you cannot be baptized right here and right now.

And that’s the invitation: if you need to be baptized, you get up and move to the door right away during this next song. Don’t delay – we don’t have a lot of time this morning.

And when you get to the door, the people there will help you get changed. Then they'll bring you back in and we'll baptize you along with everyone else while the band plays and we all sing together.

Now, we do have one qualifier – if you're younger than high school and you haven't signed up ahead of time, we want to ask you to wait until next time when we have a baptism class. We've found it necessary to make sure one-on-one that our kids really understand what baptism is all about.

Ok, we're all going to stand and sing. And if you need to come for baptism, move now.

Here we go!

**Worship Songs – This Is Amazing Grace / Jesus
(9)**

CLOSING COMMENTS (2)

1. Next week – The Sanity Clause: how to survive and thrive FLOURISH through the holidays
2. Following week ... Christmas at the Movies!

Endnotes

ⁱ This portion of the message is based in part on Craig Groeschel's message *Stop Going to Church*. Used by permission.

ⁱⁱ Galatians 5:13-15

ⁱⁱⁱ See <https://pastorsings.com/2018/08/25/stop-going-to-church-sermon-on-psalm-9212-15/>