

“20”  
*Standing By the Door*  
October 5, 2014

**PRELUDE – Remind Me Who I Am**  
**Songs – Remind Me / Beautiful Things**

**Drama – “Maybe Someday”**  
**Feature – “Leave a Light On”**

Good morning everyone.

As I’ve thought this week about what I should say to you on this 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary Sunday, it’s been a real challenge to know where to begin and where to end. Both my head and my heart have been flooded by so many thoughts and memories and emotions from all the things that have happened – good and not-so-good – over the past two decades. If we had the time, and you would allow me, I could talk to you for hours about the history of NHCC!

But the one thing that stands out as I think about our anniversary is the miracle that took place on *this particular Sunday morning* 20 years ago when I and a group of 35 men and women who had worked so hard in anticipation of that day were huddled together in the commons of New Mark Middle School, praying that the people we had personally invited (and at least a few of the folks in the 30K households that had received our “Grand Opening” mailer) would show up for our first service.

I’ll never forget standing by the front door of the school 15 minutes before the service was to begin, looking out at the street, hoping that some of the cars going by would stop and turn into the parking lot ... and worrying about what I would say to our little core group if none of them did. And I’ll never forget the feeling of being blown away as car after car after car made that turn and 300 or so first-time guests walked through the doors to our Grand Opening. It was one of the most amazing moments of my whole life.

And *at that particular moment in time*, the thought of what NHCC might eventually become *20 years later* was incomprehensible. On that first Sunday (and, in fact, for the first several years), all we could think about was survival.

- Would people keep showing up after the first week?
- Would they come to love God and this church enough to eventually step up and give financially so we would have enough money to pay the staff and the bills?
- Would they volunteer to lead and serve in the various ministries that would define our church?
- Would those of us charged with leading them be able to do what was required of us?

Obviously – since we’re still here – the answer to every single one of those questions turned out to be *yes*. We have survived.

But we’ve gone far beyond that. Through the grace of God and the commitment of people who call NHCC “home” over the past 20 years ...

- We’ve impacted, in one way or another, thousands of people in the Northland.
- Many of them have come to believe in and receive Jesus as their savior. Close to 700 have been baptized as a sign of their faith.
- And many of them have seen their lives transformed ...

- As the grace and truth of Jesus began to work in them, on them and through them;
- As they've experienced what it's like to belong to and be accepted in a loving and gracious family of faith that cares about them;
- And as they've invested in the work of God's Kingdom through our ministry.
- In addition, we've planted and assisted other churches which have impacted even more people – thousands more – in similar ways from here in our city to the Gulf Coast to St. Louis to St. Joe and beyond.
- And we've given support to other agencies and ministries in our community.

We've done more than survive for 20 years. We've thrived.

That's not to say that it's been easy. Starting a church and then *leading* a church has been far more challenging, far more humbling and, quite honestly, far more painful than I could have ever imagined.

But I wouldn't trade it for the world. I am so thankful that I have gotten to invest the best and most productive 20 years of my life in this adventure called North Heartland. I am so thankful that I have gotten to see and experience firsthand what God can do through a bunch of ordinary people who simply say "yes, Lord. Even though I don't feel qualified enough or mature enough or worthy enough, I will do what You ask of me."

And I am so thankful for all the people over the years that have done that; people who have come alongside and, in one way or another, gotten into the game with me.

- The pastors and leaders of Clay-Platte Baptist Association who in 1993 took a chance and allowed an immature, insensitive and arrogant youth pastor to attempt a risky and expensive strategy that had never before been attempted in this area.
- I'm thankful for all the men and women who have served on our ministry staff from the beginning until now (including those with whom we parted company in less-than-ideal ways).
- I'm thankful for everyone who has ever volunteered to make our ministry go: from Adventureland to Student Ministry workers ... to the people on stage with me each week ... to the people out front ... to the people behind the scenes who do things like make sure our building functions or our grounds look as best they can or who make sure that our finances are in order and handled with integrity.
- I'm thankful for all the people who have ever given a single dollar to the cause.
- I'm thankful for all of those who have given more dollars than they could have ever imagined – crazy amounts; unreasonable (from a human standpoint) amounts.
- I'm thankful for everyone who has ever said a kind word to me or to someone else about the ministry of NHCC.
- For everyone who has prayed that God would help us and resource us and use us in His service.
- For everyone who has ever taken the risk of inviting someone to come and check out what we're doing with the hopes that they would meet Jesus.
- And I am thankful for my wife and three daughters who graciously put up with a husband and a father who is also a pastor – and the sacrifices that go along with that.

But as thankful as I am for all of those people ... and all of what I've gotten to see and experience ... and all of the ways that being pastor of this church has grown and developed me ... what I am *most* thankful for is that, for the past 20 years, *our fundamental reason for being here has not changed.*

That's not to say that there haven't been times where we lost sight of that reason and wandered away from it. But whenever that's happened, God has drawn us back to us and reminded us that we have a unique calling; a unique mission here in our community.

### **About "Lost People"**

In fact, earlier this week, I was reading some of the articles that appeared in the local newspapers in the weeks prior to our launch. I'd been interviewed by several reporters who wanted to know why we were starting NHCC in a city that already had hundreds of churches. And I was struck by how *current* my answers were. In other words, the things that I said *then* about our reason for existence were the exact same things that I – and many of you who call NHCC “home” – would say *today*.

And many of you *do* understand our reason for existence – our unique mission. You've been here long enough, heard me talk about it enough and invested enough into it that you “get it.” So what I'm going to talk about in the rest of this message is not going to be news to you and I don't expect that you'll have some great “aha” moment today.

Instead, what I hope will happen is that you will experience a great and profound appreciation that you get to be part of what God has uniquely called this church to be. As I said in the very first message of this series (which you can check out online if you were not here), I want you (if this is your church) to be able to say “Yea God for creating NHCC ... and lucky me that I get to be a part of it!”

Of course, some of you are here today and this is *not* your church. You've come to celebrate our anniversary with us *or ... or ...* you're kind of like the guy in the drama. You've felt a sense of emptiness in your life, or you've messed up your life, or you've simply been wondering about “the meaning of life” and you have come here in hopes that maybe – just maybe – the Church has some realistic answers. This might be your very first time here or maybe you've been hiding out in the shadows for a while but you are here because you're seeking “something” even though you're not quite sure what it is.

For you this morning, I hope that you will be *moved* by discovering just how God feels about people who are where you are. In fact, you might be surprised to know that the Bible has quite a lot to say about that.

So, I want to tell you two stories that illustrate it. The first is found in the New Testament – the writings about Jesus and those who came to know Him and follow Him. The second is found in the Old Testament – the books of the Bible that were written before Jesus came.

In the Gospel of Luke (in the NT), we read that a group of well-meaning, upstanding, responsible “church people” once came to Jesus. And they said (in essence – I'm paraphrasing here):

“Jesus, we've been watching you and listening to you for a couple years now. We've seen you do some amazing things and we've heard you talk about your vision of God's Kingdom; how we need to change our thinking because it's here and now as much as it is far and in the future. And even though your ministry and your message are different from what we're used to, it does make some sense to us.”

“But there's one thing we just don't get. We've thought about it. We've debated it. We've even prayed about it. But we don't understand why ... you feel the need ... to hang out with people who are clearly outside of the faith. They're not part of us. In fact, a lot of them are out-and-out *sinners* – tax collectors and prostitutes and other religious rejects. We don't understand why a leader like you, with your giftedness and influence, would risk association with such spiritual riff-raff. You don't really need *them* to carry out your ministry.

“Oh, and just so you'll know, some of our members are pretty upset about this and they're probably going to withdraw their support if you continue down this road. In fact, it could get a little ugly. We're just sayin'.”

And the Bible says that Jesus answered these church people – who were called Pharisees – with three parables – three allegories that were designed make a point in a very vivid way.

### **The first one went like this:**

*“If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it?”*

And everyone listening knew the answer. “Of course he will!”

*And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’*

And everyone listening knew “that’s exactly what would happen.”

But to make sure that these religious “church people” understood that He was speaking allegorically about God and lost people (and not literal shepherds and lost sheep), Jesus added:

*“In the same way ...*

Meaning “in the same way that a shepherd would rejoice more over finding a lost sheep than he would over the ones who hadn’t wandered off ...”

*... there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!”* Luke 15:1-7 (NLT)

Luke goes on to say that, to hammer home his point, Jesus followed the parable of the lost and found sheep with a parable about a lost and found coin and then a parable about lost and found son (which most of know as “The Prodigal Son”).

And *both of those parables* had the same punch line as the first: the great joy God has over one single lost man or woman who changes the way they think about Him and turns to Him for grace and mercy instead of running *from* Him out of fear of rejection and condemnation.

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Now, the point of this whole exercise was that the Pharisees and teachers of the law and, in fact, everyone who thinks of themselves as being among the morally-upright, spiritually-attuned, and biblically-knowledgeable, i.e. “church people” – like most of us sitting here this morning ... the point of Jesus’ teaching was that we might understand that *God loves people who are “lost”* – people who feel an emptiness or who have messed up their lives in some way or people who are searching for “the meaning of life” ... Jesus wants us to understand that God loves and cares for *them* as much as He does for *us*.

### **God loves and cares for “lost people” as much as he does “found people.”**

In fact, He is willing to go to great lengths to connect with them, which is why Jesus came into the world in the first place. It’s why He treated tax collectors and prostitutes and other sinners the way He did. It’s also why he allowed Himself to be crucified on a Roman cross.

### **As the Apostle Paul once wrote:**

*God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us because we were so deserving of it. We lived such morally pure lives, we were such good citizens, that God had no choice but to love us.*

No, that’s not what it says. It says ...

*God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.* Romans 5:8 (NLT)

Even *when people are lost* and even *when they are against Him*, God loves and cares about them as much as He does those who have been found.

## About “Found People”

Now, at this point some of you are probably thinking “Ok, Rick, I get what you’re saying about lost people. I understand that. And I have a good idea who those people are in my life. Or, I realize *that’s me*. That’s where I am right now. I’m lost. I’m a sinner.”

“But I’m kind of confused by what you mean by *found people*. In Jesus’ parables, it sounds like those are the people who have it all together – like the Pharisees and the religious people. But if a person is *found*, doesn’t that mean that at one point they also had to be *lost*?”

Yes, it does.

But, unfortunately, what happens to found people is that *they sometimes forget they, too, were once lost* ... which brings me to the second story I want to tell you ... from the sixth and seventh chapters of the Old Testament book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings.

A very long time ago in the days of the biblical nation of Israel, things weren’t going very well. There was a drought so the economy was down. The borders were defenseless and armies from neighboring countries would frequently raid cities and villages.

In one particular instance, the king of Syria decided to lay siege to one of the cities of Samaria. And it was so effective at cutting off the food supply that the Bible says that ...

*... a donkey's head sold for fifty dollars and a pint of dove's dung [i.e., bird poop] brought three dollars!*

Things were so bad that people were reduced to eating those things and they were willing to pay an exorbitant price to do so. But it was even worse than that. The Bible says that people were so desperate for food that they were cannibalizing their own children.

Now, in the middle of all of this hardship there was a little group of guys who, difficult as it might be to comprehend, *had it even worse than everyone else*. They were *lepers* who, because of their disease and its contagious nature, had to live outside of the city separated from everyone else. So, they were *really* desperate.

In fact, they were so desperate that the Bible says they put their heads together and came up with a last-ditch plan for survival.

*"Why sit here until we die?" they asked each other. "We will starve if we stay here and we will starve if we go back into the city; so we might as well go out and surrender to the Syrian army. If they let us live, so much the better; but if they kill us, we would have died anyway."*

You see their logic? In essence, they’re saying, “what have we got to lose? We can either die here or we can die there. Who knows? Maybe we’ll luck out and catch the Syrians in a good mood.”

*So that evening they went out to the camp of the Syrians ...*

*... with hands raised high over their heads, ready to beg for mercy.*

But as they approached the camp something seemed a little bit odd. There was no noise. No commanders barking orders, no chatter or reveling of soldiers. They could see that everything was still set up, but no one was there!

Now, at the time, they had no idea why or what had happened. Later, they discovered that, at some point during the previous night, God had miraculously driven the army away. Apparently, He had gotten sick of them oppressing His people, so He played a little mind game with them. The Bible says that ...

*The Lord had made the whole Syrian army hear [what seemed to be] the clatter of speeding chariots and a loud galloping of horses and the sounds of a great army approaching.*

*“The king of Israel has hired the Hittites and Egyptians to attack us,” they cried out. So they panicked and fled into the night, abandoning their tents, horses, donkeys, and everything else.*

So, imagine the scene: four exhausted, hungry, desperate lepers completely shocked to be standing in the middle of *the stockpile of the Syrian army* without the Syrian army. If you were in their sandals, what would you do?

The Bible says that ...

*When the lepers arrived at the edge of the camp they went into one tent after another, eating, drinking wine, and carrying out silver and gold and clothing and hiding it.*

This went on for quite some time until they had eaten their fill and dramatically increased their net worth. And I imagine that, at some point, the four of them sat down together and began to talk about their incredibly good fortune to have stumbled upon such a treasure.

- “Just think – only hours ago, we were dead men.”
- “Yeah, back in the city there was nothing for us.”
- “Boy, that place was so bad off, wasn’t it?”
- “Yeah, those poor people back there.”

And then a hush fell over the group as they remembered the plight of “those poor people back there” – people who were eating bird poop and donkey heads and even their own children.

### **And their hearts were filled with compassion and ...**

*Finally they said to each other, “This isn’t right. This is wonderful news, and we aren’t sharing it with anyone!”*

Then they began to debate. “Should we go back now? Or wait until morning?”

*“If we wait until morning,” they decided, “some terrible calamity will certainly fall upon us.”*

“This is obviously a God-thing and He might not be happy if we keep it to ourselves. After all, there’s nothing special about us. We were just in the right place at the right time.”

*“Come on, let’s go back and tell the people at the palace.”*

*So they went back to the city and told the watchmen what had happened ... Then the watchmen shouted the news to those in the palace ... and the people of Samaria rushed out and plundered the camp of the Syrians.* 2  
*Kings 7:3-10a,11,16TLB*

And just like that, the famine was over and thousands of people were saved from certain death.

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And I love that story because it illustrates so clearly what God *always wants those who find the stockpile to do*. And by stockpile, I don’t mean food or wine or riches or clothing.

- I mean the grace and truth of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness and new life He offers when we believe in what he did on the cross and in his resurrection and ask Him to save us.

- I mean the little communities of faith – churches like North Heartland – that teach us and encourage us as we grow in our faith.

Many of us in this room have discovered those things. For some reason, known only to God himself, we've been led to the stockpile. And like those lepers in the story, there's nothing special about us. We were just in the right place at the right time.

In fact, to continue the analogy, our disease was far worse than the curse of leprosy. It was the curse of sin. And without divine intervention on our behalf, the Bible tells us that sin was going to have an effect on us far worse than leprosy had on those who suffered from it in that day and time.

- It was going to separate us not from other people but from God.
- And it was going to leave us dead not physically but spiritually and eternally.

But we have been saved from that fate by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And just as God wanted those lepers to share the stockpile with a city full of condemned to death men, women and children so, too, he wants us to share what we have found with those around us.

As the Apostle Paul once put it ...

*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them.*

*And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. We are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back, come back to God!"* 2 Corinthians 5:19-20 (NLT)

"We've found the stockpile" Paul was saying, "and it just wouldn't be right if we kept it all to ourselves."

But it's so easy to forget that.

- It's so easy to focus on our good fortune and forget that there's a whole city under siege, spiritually speaking, and things are really bad back there.
- It's so easy for Christians to get locked into the "holy huddle" and forget that there are people walking next to us everyday who are suffering from sin – that they are lost and dying on the inside and they need what we have – what God has so graciously allowed us to find.
- It's so easy to lose sight of the fact that, as Jesus demonstrated over and over, lost people matter to God and they ought to matter to those of us who have been found.

As I said earlier, what often happens to "found people" is that *we sometimes forget we, too, were once lost* and in need of a savior ... which is why from the very beginning we have said that North Heartland is here first and foremost for the people who are not yet here ... for the people outside of the faith, outside of the church who ...

- Feel a sense of emptiness in their lives
- Or who've messed up their lives
- Or who are simply wondering about "the meaning of life"

### **"The Door" & Response**

That doesn't mean we don't care about Christians and helping Christians grow. It does mean that when we think about our ministry

as a church ... well, I've explained that in detail in the first three messages of this series so I won't go back into all of that.

Instead, let me help you visualize it.

<Rick move to door>

Just before we started NHCC, I came across a poem that, for me, captured it so well. It's called *I Stand By the Door* and it was written many years ago by Samuel Moor Shoemaker, the pastor who started AA. Shoemaker understood that most people who were addicted to alcohol we're really searching for something else – God. And, so he devoted his life to helping them find God as he had found God and he wrote this poem to explain why.

Here's how it goes ...

I stand by the door. I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out.

The “door” is the most important door in the world – it is the door through which people walk when they find God. There's no use my going way inside and staying there when so many are still outside and they, as much as I, crave to know where the door is.

All that many ever find is only the wall where a door ought to be. They creep along the wall like blind men, with outstretched, groping hands, feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door, yet they never find it . . . so I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world is for people to find that door – the door to God. The most important thing anyone can *do* is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands, and put it on the latch – the latch that only clicks and opens to the person's own touch.

Men die outside that door, as starving beggars die on cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter - die for want of what is within their grasp. They live on the other side of it because they have not found it ... and opened it, and walked in, and found Him . . . So I stand by the door.

There is another reason why I stand there. Some people get part way in and become afraid, for God is so very great, and asks of us our all. Somebody must be by the door to tell them that they are spoiled for the old life - they have seen too much of the new! “Once taste God, and nothing but God will do any more.” Somebody must be watching for the frightened who seek to sneak out just where they came in, to tell them how much better it is inside. So for them, too, I stand by the door.

It is a vast, roomy house, this house where God is. I admire the people who go way in ... who inhabit those inner rooms, and know the depth and heights of God and call outside to the rest of us how wonderful it is. *But I wish they would not forget how it was before they got in.* Then they would be able to help the people who have not yet even found the door. Or the people who want to run away again from God. You can go in too deeply, and stay in too long and forget the people outside the door.

So, as for me, I shall take my old accustomed place. Near enough to God to hear him and know He is there, but not so far from people as not to hear them and remember they are there, too.

Where? Outside the door – thousands of them; millions of them. But – more important for me – one of them, two of them, ten of them whose hands *I* am intended to put on the latch. For those I shall stand by the door and wait for those who seek it. I would rather be a doorkeeper. So I stand by the door.<sup>1</sup>



Friends, if you want to know what North Heartland is all about ... we're a door-keeper church. And we will continue to take our old accustomed place ...

**Near enough to God to hear him and know He is there, but not so far from people as not to hear them and remember they are there, too.**

And as we close this morning, I want to give everyone who calls NHCC "home" an opportunity to affirm that vision (and even those who aren't part of NHCC are welcome to participate as well). This is an opportunity to say, "I believe in this vision. I believe in NHCC being a door-keeper church" or "I believe in being a doorkeeper myself (if this isn't your church)."

Here's what we're going to do. In your program this morning, you'll find a sheet of paper. And on that paper, I'd like for you to write the names of family or friends or co-workers or whoever you know who is still outside the door to God ... or maybe even, in the words of Shoemaker, someone who is barely inside and thinks it's better outside. I want you to write down those names.

In just a minute, the band is going to do a song and when they begin, I want to invite you to bring your piece of paper to the front and lay it down on the stage. I know that's a long trip for those of you all the way up but you'll have plenty of time to do it and get back to your seat (and I would like you to go back to your seat because there are few things you need to know before we're finished this morning).

What we're going to do this week is to take all the papers we get today and fold them over and tack them on to the back of this door where no one can see them. And then we're going to take this door and hang it on the wall outside of this auditorium and put the words of the Door Poem next to it.

And whenever we come in or go out of this place, we will see that door and be reminded that ...

- As much as we love God and He loves us
- As much as we are growing in Christ and enjoying the stockpile of people and blessings He has given to us in Christ ...

There are real people on the other side of the door who don't have those things.

- People we know and love and care about
- People that God knows and loves and cares about.
- People for whom he has given us the task of being a light in the darkness not just as individuals but collectively as a church.

And my hope and my prayer as we embark on the next 20 years is that we may become more effective at that and more like Jesus in that respect.

Alright, now we'll have just a minute of silence while we take out our paper and write down names that God brings to mind. And then come on down.

**Feature – "Home"**  
(Door response)

Bring it up ... put it down ... and then please have a seat for some closing comments.

**CLOSING COMMENTS – Rick & Shannon**

1. About baptism this afternoon ... see me ...

Baptism today – we have clothing.

2. Last week I talked about the Excellence Challenge (goal of raising \$165K by Christmas to increase the level of excellence of our facility) info coming in your mailbox *this week* – and you didn't get that last week because we got a bit sidetracked and swamped with the NHCC golf tourney and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. So, *this week* you will be getting details in the mailbox about the Excellence Challenge. So be watching for that.
3. Offering at the door.
4. Next Sunday – Pieter Van Waarde
5. Shannon details on picnic

### **Postlude video (prelude )**

Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See [www.aabibliography.com/dickbhtml/article10.html](http://www.aabibliography.com/dickbhtml/article10.html)