

North Heartland Matters
“Go”*: *Why We’re Here
October 8, 2017

PRE-SERVICE VIDEO

**Worship Songs – Fierce / Great God Who Saves
Behind the Scenes – Video**

**Video A – “Las Vegas Shootings”
Feature – “Even If”**

Let’s pray.

Lord, this morning we come to you on behalf of the victims of the evil in Las Vegas as well as the victims of so many other terrible evils that have happened in recent days.

We pray that you will strengthen their faith and trust in your goodness in spite of the evil they have suffered. We pray that it would be well with their soul.

We also pray for ourselves and this church and all churches in our nation that proclaim the name of Jesus. Help us to see the importance of what we do and how we can be part of the solution.

We ask in the name of the one who conquered evil and death and who will one day return to make all things new.

Amen.

If you've been paying attention at all this week you know that "the great debate" – that same one that follows every mass shooting – is once again in full swing. Once again, politicians and pundits are filling the airwaves and Twitter-sphere with the same points they always make whenever we're confronted with what we saw ...

- At that Las Vegas concert

- Or that Orlando nightclub
- Or the San Bernardino Christmas party
- Or the college campus in Blacksburg
- Or the Aurora movie theater
- Or the Newtown elementary school

... to name just a few.

See how many of these points you've heard before.

Video B – “7 Talking Points after Every Shooting” (2.5 mins)

- Any of those points sound familiar?
- Any you've made yourself?
- Any that give you heartburn?

Not to be outdone by the politicians and the pundits, it didn't very long for the late night talk show hosts to join in ... also saying pretty much what they always say.

Video C – “Shootings Commentary Late Night” (1.9 mins)

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 1>

As a public speaker, I have to say that I’m impressed with the rhetorical ability of these guys, especially Seth Meyer.

“Is that the best plan DC has – when there is a shooting we just pray for a miracle? ... If it’s just going to be ‘thoughts and prayers’ from here on out, the least you can do is be honest about that.”

Great line.

Missing the Main Thing

But, as much as I admire Meyer’s rhetoric, I can’t escape the fact that he – along with the other talk show hosts and the politicians and the pundits – are all focusing on and propagating a false dichotomy:

- That this is a battle primarily between those who believe in soothing victims with weak pious platitudes and those who believe in strong and decisive action.
- That this is primarily a choice between stricter gun control measures or protecting the Second Amendment rights of citizens to bear arms.
- That you're either for *solving the problem* or for *ignoring it* – just hoping and praying that it doesn't happen again.

Of course, having said that about *them* – the politicians, pundits and talk show hosts – I should also say that the same thing is true of most of us.

Most of us, as we have witnessed these mass shootings over the last 18 years (beginning with Columbine High School in 1999) ... most of us have been focused on the same false dichotomy. Based

on our political preferences, we've chosen one side or the other.

And we're wrong.

Not necessarily in our choice of side but we're wrong to focus on this particular set of choices which are presented to us again and again and again until we're convinced that "this really is the main thing."

- Are you going to settle for pious platitudes or are you going to demand political action?
- Are you for protecting your constitutional rights or are you for keeping guns away from bad people?

I'm not saying those issues aren't worth discussing. What I'm saying is that they are not even close to being the main thing.

Furthermore, you will almost never hear what the main thing is from the politicians, pundits and

late night talk show hosts. And you won't hear it from Nashville or from Hollywood. You won't hear it from *any* of those providing cultural leadership because *they themselves* (and I'm speaking collectively here; there are some individual exceptions) ... you won't hear it from *any* of those providing cultural leadership because *they themselves don't see it ...*

... which reminds me of something Jesus once said to the religious leaders of his day.

“You are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.”

Matthew 23:23 (NLT)

“Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel!”

Matthew 23:24 (NLT)

In other words, “you’re missing the main thing. And not only that, you’re leading others to miss the main thing.”

And that’s what’s going on in all the debate and discussion concerning what happened in Las Vegas. Our “guides” are missing the main thing and they’re leading us to miss it, too.

And I know some of you are thinking right now, “so, Rick, what is the main thing? You’re a preacher, so it must have something to do with God, right?”

Sort of, in a roundabout way, yes – and I’ll get to that in a bit.

But first let me say that ...

The main thing is not “what kind of *policies* should we have?”

It’s not how the best way to control guns. It’s not about how to handle security.

Those are important but they are not the main thing.

The main thing is “what kind of *people* should we have?”

And, more importantly, “what kind of person is our culture actually *producing*?”

How do people get to the point where they conclude a massacre is good idea? Is it simply mental illness? Radicalism of some sort? Or, has something happened within our cultural mindset that has opened the door to this kind of violence?

The main thing in all of this isn't the policies we have but the people we're producing. And we're missing that. To borrow the metaphor from Jesus, we're “straining at gnats and swallowing camels.”

Our Assumed Goodness

Obviously, I need to explain why I believe that to

be true ... so, here goes.

There is a foundational assumption woven into the fabric of everything we see and hear coming from our politicians, pundits and cultural icons.

The assumption is that “most people are inherently good and want to do the right thing.”

Other than the fringe element (the mentally deranged or demonically possessed), people are basically good and want to do what’s right. We’re born that way. It’s hard-wired. That’s the assumption.

One of the most vivid ways this assumption is revealed is in how we talk about the heroic actions which almost always happen smack in the middle of evil events like last Sunday night.

For instance, check out this clip from one of the pundits I particularly enjoy, Greg Gutfeld. (And please don’t hate me if you’re not a fan because,

regardless of whether they're liberal or conservative, *they all say what he says* after these kinds of events).

In any case, as we watch, see if you can catch the biblical reference he throws in ... probably *without even realizing it*.

Video D – “Humanity in Times of Tragedy” (1.7 mins)

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

Did you catch the biblical reference?

“*Samaritans*,” Gutfeld said, “still at risk from a killer raining death from above, stayed back to help the helpless.”

We’ll come back to that shortly but, again, the foundational assumption is revealed in “the powerful story” being told not only by the response to evil on this particular night but on so many other occasions as well: *that “Americans are best when faced with the worst.”*

And why is that? Because we're inherently good people just waiting for that goodness within to be called forth. Put us in the right situation and it will come out.

Now, that *sounds* reasonable. And it certainly does make the heart swell with pride to think of Americans as the most giving people on Earth. And, truth be known, statistics reveal that we actually are.

But it's not because of some inherent, inborn goodness of people.

Instead, what we're seeing when Americans display that "selfless sense of duty, heroism and compassion" in the face of evil is the cumulative effect of centuries of Christian influence on our culture – an influence that is rapidly waning but still has a good deal of momentum.

And I say that because of the manner in which

Gutfeld – who, by the way, is not a Christian: he’s an avowed agnostic ... I say that because of the manner in he describes those who risk their lives to stay back and help the helpless regardless of who they are, regardless of whether they have anything in common with them.

He calls them *Samaritans*.

That’s amazing. Even though he’s not a Christian, Gutfeld – and there are many others just like him – is clearly comfortable with and assumes everyone else knows what he means by a term and an idea which traces directly to the ministry and teaching of Jesus over 2,000 years ago!

You may remember that several months ago we took a look at that story in depth and saw how counter-cultural it was when Jesus first told it. In His day, part of being a “good person” meant caring for those who were like you. To “love your neighbor as yourself” – the second of the two greatest commandments in the most morally

upright culture on the face of the earth – meant loving “your people”, i.e. those who looked like you and thought like you.

But Jesus radically altered that understanding in His parable about a man from the region of Samaria. At great risk to his own safety, Jesus said, this man took care of a person who had been attacked and left to die (sound familiar?); a person who, in any other circumstance would have been his natural enemy because Jews and Samaritans hated each other.

And, in the process of telling that story, Jesus redefined what it meant to be a “neighbor.” To the most morally advanced culture in the world, Jesus said, “your bar for evaluating what it means to be ‘good’ is too low. To love your neighbor as yourself *really* means doing what that Samaritan did – going beyond ‘your people’ to those who are *not* your people and caring for them, too” ...

... which is what we saw on Sunday night and what

we hold in such high esteem in our culture.

Now, why did Jesus have to tell this to the most morally advanced culture in the history of the world?

Because this is not how human beings naturally behave. We're naturally selfish and self-protecting especially when it comes to those who are not "our people."

In fact, if you could examine the everyday lives of those who acted heroically last Sunday night, you would find situations where they are blatantly selfish and even prejudiced ... because that's how we *all* are, you and I included. That's what comes natural to us.

My point is this:

When people in our culture act as "good Samaritans" it is not evidence of the inherent goodness of human beings.

Instead, and this is very important:

It is a learned behavior based on a uniquely Christian teaching that Jesus introduced into the world ...

... one that has become so embedded in our culture that even non-Christians take it for granted.

The reason we aspire to this type of behavior and the reason we hold it in high regard whenever we see it is because of the cumulative effect of centuries of Christian influence on our culture – whether we recognize that influence or not. It comes from teaching of Jesus that a selfless sense of duty, heroism and compassion toward others in the face of evil is *a better way to live* than the alternative.

By the way, that teaching is why almost all of those Impact Partners we featured in last Sunday's service exist.

- Rescuing and restoring women and children who have been abducted into sexual slavery
- Feeding people in our town who don't have enough to eat
- Supporting women (and men) who are facing an unexpected pregnancy
- Providing shelter and training for high school students who are homeless

And, in case you were wondering, we raised almost \$8,000 last Sunday in our \$29.95 per person offering that goes to assist in those causes.

And if you missed out on it, you still have time to contribute. Just go to our app or website or stop by the giving kiosks in the commons and select the Impact Partner Fund.

The Way That Seems Right

Now, I've spent a lot of time pushing back against the foundational assumption concerning the

inherent goodness of humanity (which is then supposedly revealed by situations like last Sunday).

But that's really not my greatest concern.

My greatest concern is a *corresponding assumption* that believes since human goodness is inherent it will continue to be produced automatically.

... a corresponding assumption that, as a culture, we really don't need to spend a whole lot of time and effort on character formation. We don't need to worry about that because "inherent goodness" by definition kind of runs on autopilot.

Instead (because that's true), *what really needs our attention* – and again, this is coming from our politicians, pundits and cultural icons – what really needs our attention is how to keep the "fringe elements" (the mentally deranged and the demonically possessed) from wreaking havoc on everyone else with, in this case, guns ...

... which is why we focus obsessively on the *policies* we should or shouldn't have and overlook the main thing – the *people* we have and, more importantly, *the kind of person our culture is actually producing.*

The prevailing thought – and strategy – is “just leave people to themselves and get the policies right and everything will be OK” ... which is a woefully deficient and dangerous understanding of human nature.

The Bible says (and experience reveals) that

...

*There is a path before each person
that seems right but it ends in death.
Proverbs 16:25 (NLT)*

In other words, leave a person to his or her own way – without any outside positive moral influence like, for instance, the teaching of Jesus – and the result will be death whether it's literal

or figurative.

- Some will turn out to be mass murderers like the guy in Nevada. They will kill and then be killed.
- Some will turn out to be drug abusers and die from that either literally or figuratively. Their life will be over one way or another.
- Some will literally die or have their life experience dramatically curtailed because of how they mistreat their bodies.
- Others will experience the death of relationships through destructive patterns they keep repeating.
- Some will experience the death of dreams and potential because they can't control some aspect of their being – their time, their body or their finances.
- Some will experience the death of hope because of unwise choices that they constantly make.

The list could go on and on of the ways that people miss out on the life that is truly life because they follow the path that seems right to them.

And quite frankly, as the influence of Christianity wanes in our culture, this seems to be happening more and more.

- At the same time that our culture has more wealth and abundance than ever before, we have more poverty of spirit than ever before.
- At the same time as we tout our freedom to do as we please more than ever before, we experience more enslavement than ever before.
- More than ever before, more people are experiencing “death” in our culture. Maybe even some in this room right now or watching online.

... which is why so much focus on that which is *not* the main thing – policies and politics – and avoiding that which *is* the main thing – the character of the people we’re producing – is going to wind up destroying our culture and our country unless we do something about it.

So, the question is ... who is going to lead the effort to focus on the main thing?

The Way of Jesus

I think it’s safe to say that it’s not going to come from the politicians or the pundits or the cultural icons. They’re too busy straining at gnats.

Ah, that’s too probably too harsh. At this point, they don’t have many other options since our political system has been finely tuned to produce the result we’re currently getting ... at least some of which is our fault, collectively.

So, let them continue to focus on policies and

politics which, even though they aren't the main thing, are, at some level, important.

The effort to focus on the main thing – the kind of people we're producing – might come from families; from parents concerned about their children and their children's future.

Of course, the family these days is in more trouble than ever with houses divided by marital strife and divorce. So many parents are struggling with their own issues that it hinders them from focusing on character development in their kids. Sad but true.

The effort to focus on the character of people we're producing might come from schools. I know a lot of teachers who are concerned about that. But I know a lot who are also frustrated by the politics.

In fact, as I was preparing for this message, I read a story about the Columbine shooting.

Afterwards, someone observed that if a teacher had talked to one of those boys and said, “Listen, there's a way out. There really is a love out there that will never stop loving you. There’s a real God and I want to talk to you about him” – if that teacher had intervened that way, he or she would have been hauled into court.¹

What was true back then in 1999 is even more so today.

I think if focusing on the main thing is going to happen in a big way (and it needs to!), it’s going to have to come from people who know the way of Jesus and teach it to others while attempting to live it themselves.

Let me say that again: the focus on the character of people our culture is producing is going to have to come from people who know the way of Jesus and teach it to others while attempting to live it themselves

We have a name for those people by the way.

We call them “the church” – the people who know the way of Jesus and teach it to others while attempting to live it themselves.

As Bill Hybels used to say (and probably still does say), the local church is the hope of the world. And this is why. Not only do we have the message of grace and forgiveness in Christ (and we’ll talk about that next week), we have also been given the task to teaching the way of life – the way of Jesus.

And when I say “the way of Jesus” I mean the things Jesus taught about how to live – like “love your neighbor as yourself but don’t define your neighbor so narrowly that you exclude those in your path who are suffering and need your help.”

I mean things like “if someone sins against you and hurts you, go to them privately and try to work it out. If that fails, take a mediator with you.”

I mean things like “forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.”

I wonder what might have happened if just one of those mass shooters in the past 20 years or so had been taught to live that way; to deal with internal angst in that way instead of letting it fester.

When I say “the way of Jesus” I mean things like “what good is it to gain the whole world but lose your heart and soul in the process?”

I mean things like “whenever you serve the least, you’re actually serving God.”

I mean things like “seek to bring God glory in your life by living righteously and you won’t have to worry about food or clothing or money. He will provide everything you need.”

I mean things like “don’t give up too quickly on your marriage because divorce has consequences

far beyond what most people expect.”

I mean things like all the principles we talked about in our recent *How to Build Something Great* series.

You know, Jesus once made a very interesting statement – a promise, really.

He said ...

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

John 10:10 (NIV)

What an interesting contrast!

- On the one hand, there’s a way that seems right to each of us individually but it leads to death, literally or figuratively.
- And then, on the other, there’s the way that Jesus lived; a way He invites us to live that

leads to life and life to the fullest.

And people who know that way of Jesus and attempt to live by that way are also called by Jesus to teach that way to others who don't know it.

“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*
28:19-20 (NLT)

And that friends, is why we, collectively, as a church, exist. It's why we're here. It's our calling, collectively, as a church to invite people who don't know Jesus to know Him and believe in Him and then to obey what He has taught us.

(Everyone obeys someone whether it's themselves or another person. Might as well obey the one who promises life to the full!)

By the way, this “commission” to “reach and teach” is what makes us distinct from so many other organizations that are “doing good” like the ones we heard about last week. Whenever we talk about them, we always say “in our community they do good in ways that we cannot.”

But that’s not totally accurate. As a church, we *could* probably do all those things that they do. But if we did, we’d not be able to do the one thing, the main thing, the most important thing that Jesus told the church to do: “to reach people (seekers) and teach them to obey what He taught.”

So, in a way, *we* are doing what *they* cannot. And what we’re doing is indispensable.

I thought it was fascinating to hear Sonya Rice, the director of Parkville Women’s Clinic, make that exact point at the end of her interview last week. If you were here, you may remember her explaining how they serve their clients with no

judgment and no strings attached.

But, she said, it takes more than that.

Check it out.

Video E – Parkville Women’s Clinic clip” (1.0 mins)

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

“Parkville Women’s Clinic can do a lot,” she said, “but we can’t also be *the church* ... We understand that people need a church home. They need Jesus.”

She couldn’t have said it any more clearly if I’d asked her to! And I didn’t. She just gets it.

But do *we* get it? Do we – you and me – understand the unique role and opportunity we have as a church in this culture at this time at this place?

What we do together in leading people to Jesus – to believe in Him and receive Him as their savior

and to be baptized – and, then, teaching them to obey everything He taught *matters* – and more than we’ll ever know.

Of course, at this point, some might say, “now wait a minute, Rick. I’m not sure I see the urgency of the situation. After all, aren’t we still being influenced by Christianity and the teaching of Jesus – so much so that people still run through bullets to help strangers? So much so that agnostic pundits quote Jesus without even knowing it?”

The influence of Christ is still present but it is fading especially among the younger generations who have been educated and socialized in a secularized and sexualized culture. There is still momentum from our founding days but the thing about momentum is that it eventually runs down once the power source is removed.

I’m no prophet but you don’t have to be in order to see that, eventually, all the ways in which

Americans are the most giving people in the world are going to slowly disappear as the power source is removed.

So, again, we matter.

- All the stuff we teach here in this room matters.
- All the stuff we teach in Children's Ministry matters.
- What we teach in Student Ministry matters.
- All the small groups that meet each week to encourage us to live out what we've learned from Jesus matter.

There is no organization in the world that has that kind of calling, duty and privilege.

And if you're a Christian – you believe in Jesus and are trying to follow Jesus – you need to be a part of it. You need to make a commitment to it. And if not this church, find one that you can commit to.

And then ...

- Go to it
- Join it
- Love it
- Serve it
- Give to it
- Pray for it

.. and most importantly, invite family and friends who do not know Jesus to *come with you*; family and friends who need to obey Jesus' teaching to take hold of the life that is truly life.

And just so you'll know our goal at North Heartland – as it has been since day one – is to be a place where it's safe to bring people who aren't "church people." We don't do that by compromising on what Jesus teaches. We just try to do it in a way that's open, well-reasoned, excellent, culturally-relevant, and doesn't assume that people already have it all together.

That's always been at the heart of our ministry.

And I want to let you know about some special opportunities coming up to do that here this fall at NHCC.

1. After this series ends in two weeks, we're going to do a five-week series called *Maximizing Your Personality*, understanding how God has wired you up as an individual and how knowing Him can help you make the most of that.
2. Moving movie series to next summer so we can move outreach into December.

Normally we wait until after the first of the year to do that but, studies show that more non-church people are open to invitations to come to church around Christmas than at any other time of the year. We want to take advantage of that. And we're going to do

that in two ways:

- Begin a Jesus mega series in December that runs through Easter: everything you ever wanted to know about Jesus but were afraid to ask. Seriously, people – especially younger people – are incredibly interested in the person of Jesus. And I'll promise you right now, if you'll stick with us during that time, you'll know more about Jesus that you've learned in your whole life.

And the people you bring with you will, too.

- The other thing we're going to do in December is Celebration of Christmas – three nights of a fabulous show right here on this stage and Winter Wonderland all through the building for the kids, followed by Christmas Eve services on the 24th. Most excellent

times to reach out to family and friends.

Ok, as we close this message, I want to pray for our calling as a church and as Christians but I want us all to do it together. So, what we're going to do is to put the words on the screen and the part that says "Leader" I will read (or pray). And then you all chime in on the parts that say "All", OK?

OK, let's go ahead and put the first slide up.

Notice that you don't have any words. You will on the next slide, though. 😊

So, I will begin the prayer:

L: Our loving God, whose desire is that all should come to you through your Son, Jesus Christ:

L: We pray ...

ALL: Burden our hearts

L: We pray ...

ALL: Open our eyes

L: We pray ...

ALL: Give us the words

L: We pray ...

ALL: Empower our example

L: So that all may know his forgiveness
And the abundant life He brings
As we obey His teaching.

ALL. Amen

Feature – Salt & Light

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Prayer down front

2. Offering @door

3. Next week ... “Grace: Why We Need It”

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB924735982366572527>