

“20”
God Wants YOU!
September 14, 2014

PRELUDE – God’s Not Dead
Worship – The Saving One / Finding Who We Are

“My Own Little World”
Drama – The Call of the Wild

Good morning everyone.

As Nathan said, today we are beginning a brand new series and I have to tell you that I have been looking forward to it with great anticipation ... but also with a little bit of apprehension.

- *Anticipation* because I love talking about “the church” in general and what God has done in and through this church in specific.
- *Apprehension* because this topic is not necessarily one of the most “user-friendly” or “user-oriented” – at least, not on the surface. You have to have some level of interest already to be excited about it and, quite frankly, these days not very many people are interested in “church” – at least, not as it is typically perceived.

So, I feel a bit more pressure than I usually do to make this message (and the entire series) “interesting” and “relevant.” But I’m going to give it my best shot.

Over the next four weeks, my goal is to challenge and encourage you to raise the level at which you personally value the idea and the institution of “church” in general and North Heartland in particular. By the end of this series, I hope that you will say with conviction, “Wow, lucky me! I get to be part of this thing. There is a role that I can play in making it go. And whatever it takes for me to do that, it’s totally worth it.”

That’s my goal ... which, by the way, *is exactly what my goal was 20 years ago* when I began to invite people to help in launching this church.

For those of you who are new to us, you may not be aware that NHCC hasn’t been around forever. We’ve only been “open to the public” (so to speak) since October 2nd of 1994. But before then – before we had our first public service – at the beginning of 1994, I invested many hours in recruiting a specific kind of person to help me. I called them *mission-driven Christians*.

Whenever I went to local area churches to talk about what I was hoping to do or whenever I met with people one-on-one to see if they were interested, I actually had a “wanted” poster that I would give out.

It said “Wanted! Mission-driven Christians to form the leadership and spiritual core of a new church designed to connect with unchurched people in the Northland.”

So, what's a mission-driven Christian?

I'll explain. And I'll begin with the word "Christian."

"Christian" Defined

And I'm going to spend a little bit of time on this – actually, more than I had planned to when I first thought about doing this message – for two reasons.

1. There's just a lot of confusion these days over what it means to be a Christian. So many people throw that word around without knowing what it really means.
2. I had an unusually strong impression when I was working on this message (and I think it was from the Lord) that I should be very clear about this part because more than a few of *you* don't know what it means. Some of you came in here today thinking you are a Christian but, really, you're not. And I want you to be clear on this because, if the Bible is correct, your eternity depends on it.

So, here's what I mean when I say the word "Christian."

First of all, I mean people who agree with God that they are indeed sinners who fall short of the perfection and glory for which He has created them. A Christian is one who freely admits that they do not live up to God's standards (and even their own) 100% of the time like they should.

By the way, that's very different from what most people think that Christians believe about themselves. Most people think that Christians see themselves as *better than everyone else*; that *they* think they have reached a high level of moral uprightness while *everyone else* is just way off.

In truth, it's just the opposite. A real Christian freely admits their sinfulness.

Or as the Apostle John once put it:

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:8
(NIV)*

By definition, you simply cannot be a Christian if you won't admit, or until you admit, you're a sinner just like everyone else.

But being a Christian means more than just admitting sin. After all, lots of people, if they are honest with themselves, will admit they're sinners. A Christian is a person who, when they realize they are a sinner, turns to God *instead of away from God* or turns to God *instead of themselves* for the solution to their sin problem. Instead of trying to atone (or make up for) for their sins through their own efforts (in hopes that God might give them a pass if they try hard enough), they *believe in* and *receive* the atonement that God has already provided.

Specifically, they believe that God became a flesh and blood human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago. And they believe that Jesus of Nazareth lived a life of sinless perfection – he did not fall short – and then

died on a Roman cross to pay for their sin.

As the Apostle Paul wrote:

Jesus gave his life for our sins, just as God our Father planned, in order to rescue us from this evil world in which we live. Galatians 1:4 (NLT)

And, in another place he wrote:

God made the one (Jesus) who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we would become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NET)

And a Christian believes that. A Christian believes that, on the cross, God exchanged the perfect record of Jesus for the sinful record of their own life ... which practically means that *He* received the punishment for *their* sin while *they* received the reward for *His* righteousness.

By the way, that's how God is able to satisfy both the demands of justice (the rightful insistence that "someone ought to pay") and the desire for reconciliation (the longing to show grace and mercy to those who have no other hope). It's quite ingenious on God's part.

In addition to believing that Jesus died for them, a Christian also believes that on the third day following his death, Jesus was physically raised to life in a new kind of flesh and blood that will never get sick or die; a body that can somehow transcend the line between the physical world that we see and the supernatural world that we do not; a body like the one they themselves will receive for all eternity when Jesus returns to take his rightful place as King over this world.

Now, just so you're aware, I've just described for you the core beliefs of Christianity: what Christians believe about themselves and about Jesus.

However, being a Christian is more than knowing and believing a set of facts about Jesus. A Christian is a person who *personally receives Jesus* for who He is (God in the flesh) and what He has done for them.

And *that* is a very important distinction. As the Apostle John once said:

He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. John 1:10-11 (NLT)

But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. John 1:10-13 (NIV)

Now, all of that together – everything I just said – is what it means, at its most basic, to be a Christian. So, let me summarize.

A Christian is a person who has come to a point in their life where ...

- They admit that they are a sinner. They fall short of God's perfection.
- They believe that God has provided salvation and forgiveness and atonement in Jesus of Nazareth.
- And they receive Him. They say "yes" to Him. They say "yes, Jesus, I believe in you and I receive you as my savior, personally. Be part of my life. Save me from my sin and teach me a better way to live."

And I know that's very, very basic for a lot of you but, as I said, when I was writing this message, I had a strong impression that I needed to spell it out in this kind of detail because, again, there are some here today who don't understand it.

- There are some here today who think being a Christian means trying to be better than everyone else so that God will accept you.
- There are some here today who think being a Christian (especially if you've really messed up) means cleaning up your act, doing your best from here on out, and hoping it's good enough.

But, as I hope you can see from everything I just said, those things are just not true. A Christian is not one who hopes *they* are good enough; he or she is one who believes that *Jesus* is good enough and that *his death on their behalf* is good enough. And before you even think about or try to apply anything else I say this morning, you need to understand that and apply *that* to your life.

So, for those of you who need to, and who are ready to, embrace that understanding and apply it to your life, what I'm going to do right now for you is this: I'm going to pray a simple prayer of confession and acceptance. And what I want you to do is pray along in your mind with me. If it was just you and me together, I would ask you to pray out loud but I won't ask that here so as to not put you on the spot. Whether it's out loud or in your head really doesn't matter. It's the intention of your heart.

Here's the prayer (and there's no magic in these words):

- "God, I admit that I continually fall short of who you want me to be. I am a sinner."

Just say that in your mind. And maybe even think of a few examples, big or small.

- "God, I believe that you came and died on the cross ... to pay for all of my sin ... past, present and future."
- "And I say yes to Jesus and I receive Him as my savior. Though I am not good enough, He is."
- "Jesus, come into my life ... save me from my sins ... and teach me how to live the way you want me to live. Amen."

Now, if you just prayed that prayer with me (and you weren't just repeating magic words), you can be sure that God has done what you have asked. Because you have believed in and received Jesus ...

- You are forgiven of everything. You are free from the penalty of sin.

- You have been transferred from the Kingdom of Darkness into the Kingdom of Light.
- And the Holy Spirit of God now lives within you and He will guide you and direct you through the teachings of the Bible and the counsel and encouragement of other believers who are also following Jesus.

Now, in a lot of churches when a person makes the decision to accept Christ, the pastor invites them to come forward to declare their newfound faith. And that's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. Basically every church I was part of in the 20 years before NHCC did that. And that's what I did when I became a Christian (as we have just defined it) as a teenager. I walked the aisle and prayed to receive Jesus.

But we don't do that here at NHCC ... and, again, not because we have an issue with churches that do. Rather, we would rather emphasize what Jesus emphasized with regard to this matter. And what Jesus told the church to do was to preach and teach the "good news" (which is what I just did) and then *to baptize people who believed and received Him* as a sign that the old way of thinking about God was gone and the old way of living has passed away and that they are now alive in Christ.

So, if you just prayed with me, I want to invite you to *also* say "yes" to Jesus' request in this matter by declaring your faith in Him at our baptism on the first Sunday in October.

On that day, we're going to have a special celebration of our 20th anniversary at a picnic which will be held right after third service and, as part of that picnic, we're going to baptize.

And I know that some of you were baptized as infants and that's cool. So was I. But it's time for you to make that decision for yourself and I hope you will. More details on what you need to do to sign up are in the program ... but now we need to move on.

"Mission-Driven" Defined

So, where were we before we chased that, hopefully, Holy-Spirit-inspired rabbit?

Ah, yes, I was saying that in the beginning of 1994 – nine months before the baby that was NHCC was officially born, I began to recruit *mission-driven Christians* to help me because, as much as I believed in the vision of NHCC – what it was supposed to be about, how it was supposed look and feel (which I will talk about next week) – there was no way I could pull it off by myself. Obviously!

So, as I said earlier, whenever I talked to people either in a group or one-on-one about

- Why we needed another church (in a city that has hundreds already) ...
- How this church would be unique ...
- And how they could get involved ...

... I would give out a "wanted" poster for mission-driven Christians.

And on that poster, I defined what I meant by the term "mission-driven."

A mission-driven Christian, I wrote, is one who knows and loves people who don't attend church, is burdened by the desire to see them come to Christ and the church, and is motivated to make personal sacrifices to accomplish that end.

I went around and showed this poster off and had all these meetings, presenting this message to people. And people signed up left and right. We couldn't keep them out.

I'm kidding. Actually, most people said "no" to the invitation. It was little depressing at times.

But *enough* said "yes" that we were able to put together a core group of about 35 adults and a dozen kids. And that little group met together on Sunday evenings in the spring and summer, learning what it meant to be a church; learning about the unique vision and values that were going to shape us as a church. And then, in September, we held services for three Sundays in an empty auditorium at New Mark before the official launch on October 2nd.

The auditorium was empty for two reasons:

1. Since we had never done church before (at least not like NHCC) we thought it would be a good idea to practice before we sent out invitations to the entire Northland.
2. It was empty because everybody had a job to do and everybody was practicing that job!

It was an amazing month followed by an amazing Grand Opening Sunday in which 367 people showed up.

Of course, looking back, I have a tendency (as do others who hear the story) to romanticize that period and those people who made up the core. "It was those few hardy souls; those raw-meat-eating sold-out-to-Jesus storm-the-gates-of-hell believers; those *mission-driven* Christians upon whose shoulders this church stands."

- As if ... being mission-driven as a Christian *is meant to be something out of the ordinary*.
- As if ... being mission-driven is what happens only to *a strange group of people* like the gal in the drama who at some point get whacked over the head by the Holy Spirit and can't think of anything but going to Africa as a missionary (or joining up with some crazy young church planter who wants to do dramas and country music in church).
- As if ... being mission-driven is limited to *a small subset of super-spiritual men and women* who, at some point in their life, receive a "calling" from God to go to seminary or to work on a church staff or in a parachurch ministry.

Now, I certainly don't mean to minimize the commitment and investment of that core group of people who helped to start NHCC (some of whom are still with us today – which is even more amazing) but, quite frankly, there was nothing special about them – or about me, even – *as it pertains to this particular issue* because, according to the Bible, being mission-driven as a Christian:

- Knowing and loving people who aren't part of the church ...

- Having a burden to see them come to Christ and the church ...
- Being motivated to make personal sacrifices to accomplish that end ...

Being mission-driven as a Christian, according to the Bible ...

- Is *not* supposed to be an “out of the ordinary” kind of experience.
- And it’s *not* supposed to be something strange that happens only when the Holy Spirit moves in your life.
- And it’s *not* meant to be limited to a small subset of super-saints ...

... because, according to the Bible ...

Every Christian is supposed to be “mission-driven” ...

... even if you never go to Africa ... or quit your job and go to seminary ... or leave one church to go help start another one.

If there *is* any uniqueness or specialness attached to being mission-driven, it’s only because most Christians simply do not understand that it’s part of their spiritual DNA. We do not understand *that’s who we’re meant to be* and so we don’t arrange our lives so we can be mission-driven ... which then makes the people who *do* – like those who help start churches or go into foreign missions or go into full- or part-time vocational ministry or, even something less dramatic like ...

- Leading a small group
- Teaching God’s Word to children and teenagers
- Playing an instrument or singing in the band or performing in skits and dramas in church services
- Serving on the tech team or the hospitality team
- Cooking meals for people in need
- Giving 5% or 10% or even 50% of our income so that the ministry of the church is fully-funded and not continually running on the bare minimum ...
- Showing up for services and being friendly and on time.

The fact that most Christians *don’t* arrange their lives so that those things can happen, from the biggest of those to the least of those, that they don’t arrange their lives to be used by God in some way in His mission to redeem the world makes those who *do* those things seem unique or special or super-spiritual. But they’re not.

The truth is they’re just doing what God says all of his children are to be doing.

In fact, Jesus once made that exact point. He was meeting with his disciples one day and they were talking about these kinds of things and he said, “guys, I want to make sure you understand something because you’re putting a lot of energy into following me and you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing, but I want to make sure you understand something...”

“When a servant comes in from plowing or taking care of sheep, does his master say, ‘Come in and eat with me?’ *Luke 17:7 (NLT)*

“No. He says, ‘Prepare my meal, put on your apron, and serve me while I eat. Then you can eat later.’ Luke 17:8 (NLT)

“And does the master thank the servant for doing what he was told to do? Of course not.” Luke 17:9 (NLT)

“In the same way, when you obey me you should say, ‘We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.’” Luke 17:10 (NLT)

Now, that sounds a little harsh, so don't hear what Jesus is not saying. Does God appreciate and reward servants who do what He asks? Absolutely, He does. Jesus says so over and over in the Gospels.

For example, not too long after he made that statement about “only doing your duty” to his disciples, Peter said ...

“We have left everything we own to follow you!” Luke 18:28 (NET)

Then Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, there is no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of God’s kingdom who will not receive many times more in this age—and in the age to come, eternal life.” Luke 18:29-30 (NET)

When you invest yourself in God's mission there will always be some kind of reward for doing so. That's just how God is. It's in his DNA, so to speak.

But, just because you *do* invest in the advancement of God's Kingdom, that doesn't make you special. *That's just what you're supposed to be doing.* That's in *your* spiritual DNA, so to speak. When you *don't* do that – when you don't arrange your life so that you can be involved in God's mission, you are acting out of character. *That's* what's strange. That's the unusual stuff. Not the other way around.

Two Key Principles

Now, at this point, I know that some of you are thinking, “Wow, Rick. You're hitting this nail pretty hard. You're really coming on strong on this issue. Why are you so amped about this? What makes you so convinced about it?”

I'm convinced because of two principles I learned many years ago – when I was in my 20s – that radically changed the way I looked at my life, which is why I'm so amped about it.

And it's no exaggeration to say that these two principles were the seed of NHCC, planted in me long before it ever occurred to me to get involved with starting a church ... let alone lead it. They were grounded in me long before I ever thought about going to seminary and changing my career from software-engineering to full-time ministry.

The first principle comes from something that Peter wrote to Christians who were part of a group of churches that were under his leadership umbrella. And I can remember being blown away when I realized what he was saying to ordinary Christians; people like me and you who had families and jobs and everyday responsibilities; people who were not by any stretch of the imagination what you would call “super spiritual.”

This is what he wrote:

As you come to [Jesus], a living stone rejected by men but chosen and precious in God's sight, you yourselves, as living stones, are built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood ... 1 Peter 2:4-5 (NET)

And I can remember thinking, "What? I'm not a priest. I'm not even Catholic. I'm just a regular guy who became a Christian when he was 15 years old. And I'm a geek. I'm into computers not the Bible. I'm not very sensitive or compassionate. I hardly know how to pray sometimes. He can't be talking about me." Maybe you feel the same way when you hear that.

But a few sentences later Peter repeats it and expands it.

"No," he says, "it's true."

You [plural – all of you who are Christians] are a chosen race [even though you are of different races ethnically and geographically].

You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation [even though, a lot of times, you don't feel or act very holy].

[You are] a people of [God's] own [possession], so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one (Jesus) who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9 (NET)

And that's the first principle. Principle #1. Every Christian is called by God to be a priest.

- Ordinary people (not just pastors and ministry leaders, or the guys who wear the collar with the black robes) ...
- Just as they are (you don't have to be perfect – just growing) ...
- Right where they are (you don't have to become a missionary or quit your job for the ministry) ...

Those folks, Peter's saying, are, in the mind of God, his priests.

Now, again, that doesn't mean that some people aren't supposed to go be missionaries or change careers to be pastors and staff in churches and ministries. And it doesn't mean that we're not supposed to develop more and more maturity so we can be more effective as we invest ourselves in God's mission.

It just means that every Christian – in the "right now" of their life – is meant to be a player. Every Christian has a part to play in seeing that, as Peter puts it, "the virtues of the One who brought us from the Kingdom of Darkness to the Kingdom of Light are proclaimed to the world."

And by the way, that's not the same thing as "witnessing" – you know, where Jesus tells his followers (you and me, if we're Christians) to be witnesses to what He's done for us. What Peter is saying here *includes* that but it goes far beyond it; far beyond just being an individual light in our world that points to Jesus.

Peter says that each of us (if we're Christians) are part of a spiritual house; we're living stones in the walls of that house which, again, means we each have a part to play in something much bigger than ourselves. We'll talk more

about this next week but what Peter is getting at is that we are meant to work together with other priests (ordinary people) to build the spiritual house – the church – so that the goodness of God (the gospel, the good news) can be shared with greater effectiveness to the world around us than any of us could ever hope to accomplish on our own.

See, there's a point in your life and mine, as Christians, where we've got to stop thinking that we're *going to church* and start thinking that we *are the church*. We're being built into a spiritual house and God wants to use us for great things.

So, that's the first principle that radically changed how I looked at my life many years ago. Strange as it may sound, I'm a priest. You're a priest. All God's children are priests. It's strange, but it's true.

The second principle is this ... and it's very simple ... and we've talked about it on many occasions ...

Principle #2. We are blessed to be a blessing.

You can't miss it – it runs all through the scripture. To put it another way, God never blesses you or me solely for our own benefit. God never blesses us without the intention that we then turn around and point someone else to the source of that blessing.

And there are more scriptures than we have time to look at that teach this principle ...

... beginning in the Old Testament where God tells Abram that he will bless him with a son and grandsons and great-grandsons – so many that his descendants would number more than the grains of sand on the seashore – and that through him (through the blessing of those sons) the whole world would be blessed.

... continuing on to where Jesus tells his disciples “freely you have received from God, so freely give to others.” He's blessed you, so you bless them.

... all the way up to the scripture we just read where Peter says “you came to Jesus and received salvation; now you get to work together with other believers to share that with everyone else so that they, too, would be blessed to know what you know and experience what you experience.”

Conclusion

When you start seeing your life in that way; when you realize that God's purpose for your life is much bigger than you becoming successful and comfortable in your own little world; that He blesses you so that you can be a blessing to others – it radically changes you ... and – this is amazing - it turns out that it blesses you even more.

Here's what I mean by that. 20 years ago, when I recruited people to help launch NHCC with that “wanted” poster, I also included a list of benefits that people could expect if they said yes. That same list is still valid today.

If you become a Mission-Drive Christian, you will receive:

- A sense of purpose in your Christian life like nothing you've ever known before
- Accelerated spiritual growth as you trust God to work through your life
- The thrill of seeing people connect with Christ and the church, and there's nothing like it.
- The adventure and paternal pride of birthing a new church (or helping this one, or any other one, to grow up and be what God intends it to be).

Friend, God wants you to be a “mission-driven Christian.” He’s called you to be priest helping to build the spiritual house that proclaims His virtues to a lost and hurting world. And He’s blessed you so that not only are you blessed but so that you can be a blessing to others and point them to Him.

Let’s pray.

<PRAYER>

Feature – “Motion of Mercy”

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Speaking of being a blessing ...

In just a couple of weeks, it will be time for the NHCC Golf tourney.

This is a great opportunity to play golf ... which most of the time is a blessing (and even more so when you play as part of a team in a scramble which is what this even is) ... and by playing you get to be a blessing to others: your time having fun on October 3rd will benefit two outstanding organizations. Synergy Services and Restart are groups that help kids who are transitioning out of the foster care system. And the track record on kids who transition out and who are not cared for by organizations like these is abysmal. These kids just fall off the face of the earth. So, we’re going to raise money through this tournament to help these kids and the organizations. It’s a great opportunity if you’re a golfer.

This FRIDAY is the deadline. If you want to play and contribute to this, we need to hear from you by Friday. You can sign up on northheartland.org or you can sign up here in the commons.

Endnotes