

Harris Creek Baptist Church
Jonathan Pokluda
December 5, 2021

2021 Year in Review

Amen, so great to be with you this morning! Church, if we haven't met my name is JP or Jonathan Pokluda and today marks our family's three-year anniversary of moving to Waco to be a part of this movement. And there are times in life (congregation claps and cheers) thank you (JP jokingly bows). No.

There are times in life, right, where you're moving through finish lines and when you move through finish lines it's often moving through a starting line. And that's what that season felt like for me. It felt like the closing of a chapter and the turning of the page and the leaning over to finish one race only to begin another one. And when we began to process, to think that God might be calling us here, I did all of the things that you think that I would do. I asked all of the questions, 'where are my kids going to go to school?' 'What neighborhood would we live in?' 'How is the state of the church, the health of the church?' 'Is it going to be okay?' 'Am I going to pull my kids away from friends in their classes and our school and our house to go down there to fail at something?' You know, all of those insecurities all of those things, the lack of faith. One of the things that we did due diligence on was our financial situation. Which you know that's not one of my strongest suits. Right! I take those numbers and I hand them to the smartest people I know. I can remember, you know, sitting with my friend who has his MBA from Harvard and he's looking at this and he's like, "well, you know they have \$6.1 million in debt. Right?" I'm like, "yes, I know." And I mean here's the deal, I have experience preaching you know, experiencing leading organizations, experience leading a church staff, experience leading a church. I have ZERO experience, none whatsoever, preaching under debt. And here's why that matters. Because the scripture tells us in the Proverbs that the borrower is slave to the lender.

Okay, how that equates in *preaching world* is the preacher is slave to the givers. The way that works itself out here in America is what I would call one of the greatest evils in the church. The deal that pastors strike is that 'Hey if you'll just show up and you'll keep giving and you'll keep the lights on, then I'll just entertain you.' I won't ask much of you, I don't want to run you off, don't want to you to go to any other church, you know I want you to stay here, stay comfortable. Right? And we strike that deal. I see it happening everywhere and it works itself out as an ineffective church. I don't want to give my life to an ineffective church. I will NEVER...EVER strike that deal with you! Like you need to know that. If you're looking for the country club, you're looking to just be entertained for an hour and a half on Sunday, this isn't your place. This isn't your church; you're going to want to keep looking.

So today is our Harris Creek Wrap, if you understand the Spotify reference. That's really what's going to happen today is some looking back. It's going to be some celebration, if you will, some

thanking God for what He's done here. And really, I hope, a vision that you'll respond to. The goal today is to celebrate God's faithfulness, to communicate clearly to you, and to invite you into a new chapter. Somewhere in there is going to be an apology from me so you're not caught off guard. That's what's coming this morning.

And if you feel like you only come to church when they talk about money, you should come more often because we only talk about money about two times a year. But it is your lucky day, uh; there will be some discussions around money today as we kind of move through celebrating all that God is doing and has done here. This is not my effort to let you behind the curtain. This is my continued effort to tear down the curtain. I am committed to you, to complete transparency as early and as often as I can. The problem you will have with my communication is that we will tell you too much too early. And you choose problems when you do that. Sometimes you have to come back and say, "Okay, I know I said that, but it's actually moved to this." And we're going to try and communicate to you now and always as early as possible. There is no curtain to look behind. As soon as I know something, you guys are going to know something as quickly as I can communicate it to you.

I am committed to doing away with church polity if you will. This 'us and them'. I believe that you are the church, you are a royal priesthood, and you are the pastors. So, this has been the hardest part about being here in Waco. You know, it's like when you say church people think "oh yeah, church, that thing that I went to growing up." And you're really redefining it. It's like, no, what I'm talking about is different. Then you have people here like, "yeah, I heard that before." And it's like no-no-no, but hold on, hang in there with us. I want to show you something different. Not like we're the only ones that figured it out, but there are a lot of places that haven't figured it out. They're playing the game. There are a lot of places out there that are playing the game. I'm committed to NOT playing the game with you.

So just to move back to that story, we move here to Waco and week one I have a meeting at the title company and we're refinancing our loan. This is again uncharted water for me. So, I go in. There are lots of papers. There are two elders there, the owner of our bank there, and I'm trying to understand terms that I'm hearing for the first time. And I want to insert this right here; the bank in our story is not the bad guy. In fact, they're a hero that God used in this narrative. The bank, TF&B, just to say who it is because a bank bailed on us. A larger, more national bank bailed on us last minute. TF&B came in last minute and said, "Hey, we'll get it done." And they made this building possible. And what they've done since then, is lowered our rate at every turn. And this was just another example of that. We came into a room, they were lowering our rate and we had a seven-year arm, it adjusts in seven years, and it was a large sum of money.

And so, I go home, and my head is just kind of spinning, if I'm honest with you. I'm like man what, is this like my lot forever? Like is this what it will be? And I heard from the Lord, I would say like as I was reading the Bible, I was in Genesis, and I was ready about Joseph actually. He was interpreting dreams and I just sensed seven million in seven years - seven million in seven years. And so, I went back to the elders, and I said, 'I think the Lord wants us...' because we were talking about okay well we can refinance then in seven years, if rates go up hopefully we

can find favorable terms...’and so it’s like seven million in seven years. That’s what I heard.’ So, I wrote it on my whiteboard; seven and seven.

And so, this is the month, December 2021. And what you need to know, and this is again just communication, 25% of our annual budget comes in December. That’s a huge number! So, we rely heavily on this month. And so naturally, what I’m going to call you guys to do is to give aggressively because what we’ve done this year is we have aggressively tackled our debt. So, what I would do, it makes logical sense, is to say ‘hey we’re not out of debt, we want to give aggressively, push us through that finish line and then raise that 25% that helps us do day-to-day ministry in this year. ‘So that would make logical sense to do that today.

(Long pause) I want you to know...I don’t have to because Wednesday of this month we paid off that debt. (Applause and cheers). Three years later, we are debt free. For the first time in several decades and it is an enormous grace of God to be able to do that and to celebrate that with you this morning. And I am committed to not being manipulative and holding that up it’s like I told you as soon as we can, we will! And that is us leaning through a finish line. That’s what just happened, is we just finished one race.

And so, the reason that I need to apologize, here’s the apology; is I want to be a man of great faith. When you lack faith, I want you to be able to borrow some of my faith. And I can remember thinking seven and seven, like God can you do you that? I hope you can! I mean wow! If I say that, like can you please? Like seven million in seven years, please God that would be huge. And we talked. We were like, “Man that’d be great if God could do that.” And in three years, He did it. And I didn’t see that coming. (Pause) Men of great faith aren’t often surprised by God. Romans 14:23 says, **‘everything that does not come from faith is sin.’** And so, will you please forgive me, for not having a bigger faith in that? I’m asking. Will you please forgive me? (People in audience say yes) Thank you friends.

As you know, God often works in ways counter to our intuition. Counter to our logic. If He wants to set His people free, He will bring them up against the sea with their enemies fast approaching. If He wants to defeat a warrior giant, He selects a boy with a slingshot. If He wants to save the world, He sends a baby. God works in counter-intuitive ways. And so, you may be wondering, ‘Well, how did this happen? Like what did we do? Was it some gift? Some large seven figured gift?’ We’ve had two six-figure gifts that we’re extremely grateful for, extremely helpful, but the vast majority of knocking down this tree is just faithful axe chops, faithful giving from members here.

So that’s how we’ve done that. No thermometers. We’ve not asked you to pledge, really, we’ve just prayed. Like, ‘Lord would you do it.’ And when we got here, we would pass the plate. I will show you my cards I don’t like doing that. So, I just said, “Hey can we not do that a couple weeks?” And what we learned when we didn’t pass the plate is that we took in four thousand dollars less than when we did. On average, four thousand dollars would come in when we did. And I said, ‘then we have to stop’. And the reason I know that sounds counter intuitive, but the reason I said that is because the scripture has such a stern warning about giving out of

compulsion to manage perception. Which is what I feel like happens when you get that plate and everybody's looking at you and you're like all right, I only have a hundred. Oh, that's going to hurt you right? That's what can happen in that moment. And I don't want to do that. Here's what the scripture says, 2 Corinthians 9:7, **"each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion. For God loves a cheerful giver."**

Then in Acts 5, you have one of the strangest narratives in all of the New Testament potentially outside of the resurrection, in my opinion. You have a couple named Ananias and Sapphira who sell a field and they bring that money and they laid it at the Apostles feet, but they had secretly held some back for themselves. And God kills them both right then and there. And it is a stern warning. You're like, "What is going on there? What happened? What's happening there?" They were managing perception. They were trying to appear holy while really wanting to control their situation. And I don't want to do that. And I think it's probably one of the biggest challenges that I have seen here in Waco, Texas.

It's an American problem, but specifically really concentrated in our Bible Belt, Belt Buckle Culture. People want to look like Christians. It's their club and they go to church, and they tithe, which is an Old Testament model. They think, 'Hey what can I give? I want to pay my dues to just do enough to make myself look holy.' And that's very different than the call of the scripture. We don't want to raise up churchgoers here, we want to make disciples. And disciples are being made here.

If you participated in helping us pay off that loan, thank you. I mean that. I cannot say that in a way that you would know how I feel. It's just impossible. But I am overwhelmed, I have been, I have cried on several occasions overwhelmed with gratitude for God working through you. If you didn't get a chance to do that, I'm sorry. The opportunity is behind you. This building that you come in every Sunday, you enjoy the chairs you sit in, the doors you walk through, the places you drop your kids off, others paid for it. It's been paid for.

And so, the story is if we look at our members, 43% of our member gave to support this mission in 2021. And to me, as the shepherd of this flock that is an alarming percentage. It seems to say that 57% of our members are not members at all. Now here's what is true, there are two things true about that gap. And again, this is my effort to give you the best communication that I can give you. Those that didn't give, it's that they didn't give a dollar - like not one single contribution to this mission. We accounted for your know husband and wife, if you know one household gave, we counted that, we've done the math. So that's what's left who didn't give to this mission. But what's also true, because I understand outside of 2020 people come on hard times, is not one of those people that didn't give came to us and said, "Hey, we need help. We just want you to know, here's our situation, here's what's going on."

Here's why that is a really big deal to me; is because I know that your spiritual growth and your generosity are going to be directly aligned. I've seen that. I've consulted with churches. I've been in church long enough to know that. Let me say that because there's some of you, you know, you've been beat up by modern church world and when I say that you are cynic. You hear

vision, right? You hear manipulation. There's no manipulation there. I don't say that strategically, it's just a fact. Like it is just a fact. Like if you're so jaded in your walk with the Lord where you feel like, "Hey, the church just wants my money." Um, don't give. Like continue to stay here, let the Spirit work in your heart, let the Spirit soften your heart. But absolutely you can go anywhere, look at any organization; your generosity and your spiritual growth are going to be directly aligned.

So, I want you to walk faithfully with Jesus here with us. That's been my prayer. So, I'm going to read to you the prayer of the Apostle Paul over the church in Ephesus, because as I look at Ephesus there's so many things similar to where we are right now. It's a lot like Waco. It had, there at the center... In the first century, it was the largest church, the fastest growing church of its day. Paul had a deep affection for them. In the middle of their city was this tourist attraction that people would come from all over to visit it, called the Silos. (laughing) No, it wasn't called the Silos. It's called the Temple of Artemis or the Temple of Diana. And people would come from all over to see it. It's such a strategic place to start a church a work of God and impact the world.

This is what he says, Ephesians 3:14, 20-21, "for this reason I kneel before the father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all of the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generation, for ever and ever! Amen."

So, as we just give thanks to God this morning for His faithfulness, as He's done here at Harris Creek more than we could ask for or imagine. I asked for seven years, I didn't ask for three. I mean He didn't even hit the halfway mark. He's just like I'm just showing you that I'm God and that you're not. He did something I didn't even ask for and honestly didn't even imagine. I hate that, I'm grieved by that for myself. You now, I want to begin to see God as bigger. I thought that we would take communion. So, you got those cups that you got when you came in so just grab those.

This is if you're a believer, this is for you to do if you have a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. What it means to be a believer, it's not a church goer, it doesn't mean you were raised in a Christian family, it doesn't mean you grew up going to church. What it means to be a believer is that you have trusted in the death of Jesus Christ as a payment for your sins and you've trusted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit to defeat death. Which means that as you sit there, you know, you have the confidence that you're going to be with God forever. Not because of anything that you've done or will do, but because of what Christ did for you. And so, you walk in that confidence.

So, Jesus did this. He gave us this metaphor. And I grew up in a faith that believed in something called transubstantiation, which teaches that this literally becomes the body and the blood of Jesus Christ. And I don't think that's true. I understand why they think that because Jesus used some confusing language. Language potentially confusing to me, that you would eat of my body and drink of my blood. I mean, the criticism of the first century church was that they were cannibals. The people killed them and persecuted them because they believed they were cannibals. And I don't believe that we're eating the literal body and the literal blood of Jesus. So, what happened in my own life is I corrected it by going way over here and saying, 'oh, it's just symbols, it's just elements. You know, we got these at Mardel's and it's just to remember and reflect on the gospel.' And I think the truth is somewhere in the middle. That Jesus gave us this tradition so that we would take part of it at a heart level. It wouldn't just be another thing that you would go through the motions, that we would literally think as He sat there with His disciples.

He was at Passover meal, and He grabbed the bread and He's trying to tell these guys...they've been really hardheaded. He's like, "Guys I'm going to die." And He takes the bread, and He breaks it, and He says, "this bread it's like what's going to happen to me for you. I'm going to die in your place. God's wrath is going to be satisfied on me for your sins. It's going to hurt. I'm going to be crushed for your sins." He took the bread and broke it and said, **'this is my body. Whenever you eat of it, do so in remembrance of me, the body of Christ.'**

There on the table was a cup, chalice most likely, a cup they would all drink from. And it was some sort of wine, most likely red wine. And He says, 'this is the cup of my new covenant and I'm going to do a new work. You guys have been killing bulls and goats and rams to try and have your sins forgiven. You've been working your way up to God, out of faith of the One who's to come. I am that Messiah.' He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He says, 'this cup, it represents the new work that I'm going to do. The wine in it represents my blood that will be poured out for you to cover your sins. So that when God looks at you, who sits outside of time, He doesn't see the pornographer, He doesn't see the materialistic, He doesn't see the greedy, He doesn't see the one obsessed with herself. He sees the payments, my blood that was poured out on your behalf. **'Whenever you drink of it, do so in remembrance of Me, the blood of Jesus Christ.'**

What I want you to do for just a minute is sit there. Just sit there and reflect in your own heart. Thank God for His faithfulness. Thank Him. Ask Him to examine you. Say, 'hey, is there anything in my life that is out of line? Anything that is off? Anything that I need to focus on? Is there anyone that I need to be reconciled to as soon as I leave here to call somebody or to show up at their house and ask forgiveness?' So just take a minute to give thanks to God and ask Him to examine your heart.

(Video playing with narration) 2021: With all the challenges and twist of this year, we got to see our church rise up.

(narration of video by JP) When Jesus told twelve guys He was going to build an unstoppable force, you fast-forward the tape, it's the greatest prophecy in the scripture. Here we are man, because here we are (music 'Here We Go'): 161 Baptisms in 2021 (video showing baptisms); 865 New Members; 713 Participate in Sisterhood and Men's Studies (video showing women and men in groups); 3,432 Households Streaming Weekly in 2021 (video showing JP preaching); 10,923 Mobile App Downloads in 2021 (video showing Nate Hilgenkamp speaking); Resource Posts Shared/Saved 21,037x on Instagram (video showing person with phone); Becoming Something Podcast 1,566,083 Listens in 2021; Played in 49 Countries (video showing person with phone) (music fades out)

(video goes into young man speaking) "In the beginning of 2021, I was living in Asheville, North Carolina just listening to Harris Creek in my spare time. After a lot of prayer and going through the word and seeing what it says about making like bigger decisions and I get a text from a friend and he says, 'hey, I'm staying in Waco. I need a roommate.' And I'm like well it looks like I'm moving to Texas."

(video goes to another man sharing his story) "My family and I moved to Waco about five months ago. We wanted to find a church that was not only Bible believing, but a church that was community driven. (video shows young man and woman shoveling mulch in a backyard and playground) Seeing the church in the community is a direct reflection of the gospel."

(music continues) 1,047 Members Serving (video shows individuals working); 46 New Adult Life Groups (video shows older individuals sitting around doing devotions); New Ministries (video shows younger individuals laughing, hugging with books and the Bible in their laps: screen flashing at bottom The Lab, Rhythms, Disciple making Teams-International, Equipped Disciple, Illuminate – Special Needs, Marriage Class, Ministry Partnerships); 1250+ College Students in Life Group (video showing sanctuary filled with young adults); 4,218 Engaged in Bible Reading Plan (video shows man's lap with Bible and devotion)

(video goes to worship service and narration has woman giving her story) "I've known Jesus, I've loved Jesus, but He has become more beautiful to me since being at Harris Creek."

(video goes to worship service and narration has man giving her story) "I want for people to not see me, but to see Christ in me."

(video goes to woman looking out the window on a rainy day with the words on the screen – 150 Coming Weekly to Re: Generation and woman giving her story begins) "I was on the road to death; God revealed that I had been believing a lie that I couldn't trust people with hard things. I just really didn't know where I wanted to be (shows woman now being baptized) if I wanted to in the world or with Jesus. I'm Kiki and I have new life in Christ."

(video goes to another young woman giving her story) "I didn't realize how much better life could be with Jesus and knowing Him and feeling known."

(video goes to young lady being baptized and a story by a young woman) “Before I knew Christ, I was definitely lost. I was searching for comfort and joy from everywhere besides Him. My name is Jessica Austin and I have a new life in Christ.”

(video continues and music is loudly played ‘Here We Go’ while video has young children outside playing games) 200+ youth reached this year (video continues with young adults playing games); 567 Kids Served in Fall 2021 (video shows young woman with two young girls outside, girls hugging, families worshipping, fireworks, overview of Harris Creek) (congregation applauding at conclusion of video).

(JP walks back on stage and begins speaking again). There’s so much happening in that video. There are so many numbers I know that it’s hard to keep up with them. One thing that we do as a staff is we try to go and do something fun at least once a year. And so last year what we did is we went to Waco Escape Rooms, and we broke up into four teams. And if you’ve ever done an Escape Room (JP pauses and raises his hand and ask) ‘how many of you have ever done an escape room?’ Okay, well so basically, you’re in this room with your team and you’re focused on the assignment at hand. Trying to solve a riddle, do some math - math is hard. You’re looking for clues and the walls don’t go all the way up to the ceiling so you can hear what’s happening in the other room. And every now and then you just hear these shouts and these celebrations and like this confusion in the other room. All while you’re focused on your room.

So, with the four teams we can’t see what the other teams are doing. And that’s kind of what it’s like to do ministry here. There are all of these things happening in these rooms and on the days of the week that many of you, most of you, aren’t in. And so, you can’t see them and so this is our effort to kind of show you what God is doing.

That on Monday nights, here we have a Recovery Ministry in 2021 we started with 13 people in that room. Throughout the year that grew to 150 people seeking recovery here in Waco, Texas. On Tuesday, we are caring for our women and Sisterhood is an amazing ministry. Hundreds of them are gathering around the word - many of them reading the Bible for the very first time. On Wednesday, hundreds of men gather in the room over there in Stage 2 at 6:30 in the morning to learn about God’s word and then that evening dozens of married couples sit around the table working on their marriage. And we’re seeing marriages restored, divorce papers being torn up, people being reconciled.

And then on Sunday, like on Sunday here at Harris Creek... We opened this building and the very first time I taught there were 425 people in this room in one service. So, it’s less than half full. Well, now we’re running three services at a 110%. In fact, you’re in here and so you can’t see what’s happening out there. Many of those services, in our peak times when everyone’s coming, the lobby can look like this (music playing worship - video is shown of the lobby filled with chairs and people worshipping and listening to the sermon on a television screen).

161 baptisms. There was a really big number up there, 1,000,566 streams this year of a podcast that is produced with makeshift mics. I got a call this week, ‘Hey, how do you do that? How do

you guys do that podcast? What kind of production?” What kind of production do we have? (JP snickers) We bring mics into a conference room, and we talk about Jesus. And then Nate edits it. Nate has no editing skills whatsoever. Somehow, it’s become 0.1% podcast in the world shared as its top 250 most shared podcast in all of the world. We have 1 in 10 Baylor undergraduates in a Life Group here at Harris Creek (congregation applauds and cheers) 1 in 10. We are partnering with you to disciple your children and I would put our student ministry up against any in the country. Over 800 new members.

And as we talk about reaching the world, like folks from all over the country will watch this. Here’s just a pin of America (video shows the pins of America on the map across the US) right. That’s this morning whose watching this service from other places. Hey guys! And then if you want to talk about reaching the nations, did you know this morning we’re reaching the nations? Here’s a global map around the world (video shows global map with pins in Africa, Europe, India, South Korea, and a few others). And you’ll see some of those pins in other countries, right? Hey guys, that’s what God is doing!

And so, as we talk about over 800 new members, listen for me there’s no mystery to what I bleed when you cut me – it is the one. It’s the one I care about. The one right. The story is the currency that we trade on staff. Where is God moving in the hearts of His people? So, it’s not about the butts in the seats, if you will. It’s not about all of the numbers. That’s data, that’s facts, that’s figures. Those are things you might want to know, but for me it’s always what the Holy Spirit is doing in the room for the one person. In fact, here one of my favorite membership class moments is this. Would you watch this with me?

(video playing of JP on stage with the membership class – script of video):

Woman: Does it have to be your past sins, or you know things that you just don’t want ever brought up again? That you’ve dealt with, God’s forgiven you and that’s way back there, you know.

JP: Yeah, I would just say it doesn’t have to be anything. It’s not, this is not a contest of who can be the most vulnerable. Um, this is not, it’s not any kind of um you know, we’re not just, it’s not a test to see how Christian you are. Everything that God does is restorative and so the only reason that you would go reach back into the past is for the purpose of restoration. And if that was something, like there was work that God wanted to do there, you know. And so, I’m trying think in my own life, um (JP takes a long pause) So here’s one. Like I’ve bumped up against a lot. Is you know someone’s had an abortion and they think I’m never going to talk about that. I will never bring that to the light. And then one day, they do. And somebody just throws their arms around them and says, ‘I love you so much, you are so loved and we’re so glad you’re here. You are welcome here and you have a home here.’ And then somebody else says, ‘Gosh I can’t believe she said that me too.’ You know then somebody else is like, I thought I was going to take that to my grave, but me too. And you just see the enemy, who just had his grip on somebody’s heart, so tight, just loosen it. You know and he loses his power and then all of a sudden, they have a ministry now to people who’ve made that decision, I see that all the time, over and over

and over again. So, the enemy is the deceiver. He comes alongside you and he's like you can't tell that. You say that they're going to reject you, that's just the language he speaks. "Hey, don't you dare say that." And when we do and you receive grace and love and acceptance, it's powerful. And so, it's not a contest. Nobody has to do anything, but we all should do everything that we can to be restored fully to God. So that's not just for you, I mean that's for everyone. I know everyone in here has those kinds of questions, including myself, just one more clarification.

Woman: Well, I don't want anybody to run up and hug me. But I'm 61 and I had an abortion at 17. (JP jumps off the stage and walks towards the woman speaking) so it's very ironic that you just said that as an example. But please, don't... (woman begins to sound tearful as JP continues towards her)

JP: Yeah, yeah absolutely...absolutely. Stand-up be my favorite part of the night. (JP embraces the woman) You are so loved, and you are so welcome and I'm so glad you're here. You are welcome and you have a home here and God's going to use that story here. Okay, I'm so glad you're here. All right (JP encourages the congregation in the video to clap for the woman) come on...come on guys! That'll be my favorite part of my year. (video stops playing)

So, if you want to know what kind of church we are, we're the kind of church that throws our arms around people who have hurts, people who have hang-ups, habits they're looking to be restored. We are that kind of church and we're on the front lines of calling out the things that the enemy has hid in darkness. That's what we do here in Waco, Texas. In our Churchianity culture, we manage perception, and we are on the front lines. And you, because of where you are at right now, we are on the front lines working against that. God is doing a work here to expose secrets.

And so, I know as you see all of that, there may be a cynical spirit in the room. Maybe just one maybe just two. Like oh all the numbers, all the things. Look there's a fine line between communicating well, celebrating what God is doing, and boasting. And I understand. I want to stay on the right side of that line. So, I'm boasting in the work that God is doing here because here's the reality. We're not good enough. I'm not good enough. I have known that very much my entire life. I understand I can put words together, right. That I can maybe entertain you with an illustration, but God is doing a work here despite of me. I've got a two-year degree in art from TSTC, okay. We are a group that really values education and higher learning because of the university in our land. And God is doing something here at Harris Creek and you're a part of it. Like you are a part of it.

Recently in our city there was an event, a race called an Iron Man. Anybody do the Iron Man? I see you; I see you okay. And so, the thing with an Iron Man is you swim Lake Waco. For me, if I swam Lake Waco as soon as I reached the shore I would just be so done. Well, I would have drowned in the middle. But let's say, somehow, I reached the shore - I would be done. But I still have 2/3 of the race to go. Then you get on a bike, and you think you're done when you finish the bike race, but then you have to run. It's like one race after the other. As we move through a finish line, we are walking up to a starting line.

Debt is not sin, but it does limit you. And we have been limited in what we can do here as we have aggressively been paying down this loan. The Lord has removed that and now the responsibility increases. And I hope what you learned today is just a commitment to us being the very best stewards of God's resources that we can possibly be. So that as you think how you want to generously invest in His Kingdom, that number one on your list would be your home church. The one that plays a role in equipping you. And so, what now?

The Lord's just, I mean truly like I think through this body, through many of you, through people on staff, He's just grown my heart around a number and the number is 1181. That number represents the number of kids in the foster care system in McLennan County. In our county, where we live, there's 1,181 kids without a mommy and a daddy to go to. And there's this enormous problem where we are. That number has doubled, more than doubled since 2011. So, it's a growing problem and McLennan County has nearly as many children in the foster care system as Travis County. Travis County includes Austin, Texas.

And so, this is an area where we punch above our weight and not in a good way. And I think it's symptomatic of the church not being the church. And because of a limited number of people licensed to be foster care families here that 65% of those children have to be sent to other counties and because of the chronic shortage here in Texas, 450 children were placed in unlicensed facilities. And so, what I want you to know this morning and here's a big announcement, is we're building another building. Okay?

We've paid off this building and now we're going to build another building. And you might think well, is it going to be a children's building? Are we going to add to this building? Are we going to increase the size of the worship center? One day I'm sure we're going to do all of those things, but the next thing that we're going to focus on is building a transition house for these kids. And so, we've been looking for partners. We've been interviewing partners and we think we found one. They have a plan, this will double as a CPS office, but right now they're just placing someone in CPS basically just to be present as kids sleep in their office. But this will be an actual house. It will be warm, it will have bedrooms, it will have beds to sleep in.

And so, this is kind of the next effort. The next thing as we trip through this finish line and we walk toward a starting line, I have no idea what God has in store for us in the next five years. I hope that it's church planting. I believe it's reaching the nations. We've made some strategic hires to reach the nations, specifically closed countries without access to the gospel. I believe it will be training pastors and sending them, training communicators. All of those things are what I want to be part of. I know it's going to be engaging the lost, equipping the saints and empowering you guys for service.

I want to finish well. I want to finish well. So, make no mistake about it, I'm asking you to go all in on this mission. In every way. To be in a life group here. To get over your skepticism or your experience in the past, it's time to heal from that and take a step forward. To serve here, to use the gifts and talents that God has entrusted to you so that you would be a part of this church and not just going to this church. And to give here generously to this mission. Knowing that we are

going to prayerfully at every turn be the very best stewards of God's resources, because they're all God's resources, that we can possibly be. That's the ask today.

Someone recently told me, "Hey, I'm really proud of you because when you talked about money you didn't apologize, and I feel like the church always apologizes." That's just confusing to me. Why would I apologize for calling you to make the single greatest investment that you could possibly make? If I told you to buy Bitcoin when it first came out, I wouldn't be apologizing to you today. Right? What I'm talking about is a significant better investment than Bitcoin.

Let me tell you a story that really ministered to me. One day I heard Randy Alcorn say this, he said "Hey if you get a job for a year in France... So, you have to go and live in France and earn a good living there, but you're just there for a year. And on the airplane home, on the airplane ride home you can't bring anything back with you, right? As you make money there, you're not just going to spend it all on croissants, you're going to send that money back to America where you'll be able to enjoy it for the rest. You're not going to furnish your hotel room with all kinds of nice furniture and buy big screen TV's that you can't take with you back to America, because you're going to realize that's a bad investment. And so, you're going to make money. You're going to enjoy the things that are there for you and you're going to send those resources back home and that's what we're doing." Right?

The scripture, Matthew 6, is calling you to, **'invest in eternity where you're going to be able to enjoy that investment forever and ever and ever.'** Listen, if you think there's any manipulation in that, it's not like I get the money. Okay? We're not one of those churches where I'm like taking some off the top or anything. It doesn't go to my house fund or my car fund or my shoe fund. Make no mistake about it, we're taking that, and we feel the incredible burden that it is to say, "Hey, how do we unleash that for the kingdom?"

I just want to make disciples. That's it. I want to make disciples. No manipulation in that, I just believe that. I want to finish well. Ephesus, they did not finish well In Revelation 2 this is what he says, **'to the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have preserved and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen, repent and do the things you did at first.'**

And I feel that so deeply here because everybody has a "church", and they have the three churches they used to go to. And everybody here has some church story about how they were burned out or manipulated or a reason why they don't have to follow the rules. And I hear it week after week. 'Let me tell you why I don't need to get a life group...' 'Let me tell you why I don't need to expose my finances...' 'Let me tell you why I don't need to confess sin...' 'Let me tell you why I'm above the instruction that you're giving from the stage...' And I'm just saying, "Hey man, can we just undo some things? Can we start around ground zero?"

I'm not a perfect pastor; I'm going to disappoint you. I hope that the Spirit of God moves when I do, and I stand up here and I say will you please forgive me because I whiffed. I hope that's what happens, but you guys don't need to trust me, and you don't need to trust Harris Creek. And it's not even about trusting the elders. It's just saying, "Hey Lord, I'm going to be faithful while I'm on this earth. I'm going to remember the love I had at first and I trust you." And if something bad happens, I pray that you would mercifully expose it God and that you would continue this thing that you started, this race that we're in. That we would run and not grow weary and that we would finish with faith, more faith than you have right now. That's my prayer for you all the time. Lord will you increase our faith? Would you grow our faith? Would you help us to love you more at the end of the day than we did at the beginning?

So, Father, would you do that as we worship you now. Would you increase our faith, help us to love you more at the end of this day than we did at the beginning? Would you do that here? And as we sing to you Lord, we just celebrate the cry of our heart is your goodness the thousands and thousands of blessings that you have laid upon us. God, we give you praise. We give you all the glory and God, we give you all the thanks. All the power is yours. All the honor is yours. Everything is yours. Lord, we love you. In Jesus name, amen.