

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(September 13, 2020)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Lessons Learned**

(A few lessons Jesus has taught Northwest Community Church)

#### **Introduction: Top ten...**

This morning's message is different than my normal message. So, if you are newer to our church, you should know what I am doing today is not what I usually do.

Typically, my sermons focus on one central Bible passage. I seek to explain what the text is saying and then explore how that passage applies to us here in 2020.

This message is not that. Today's message is not a failed attempt at Bible exposition. Today is contemporary story-telling with a biblical backdrop.

We're taking a time-out from exposition (after Philippians and before Jeremiah) to reflect together on lessons the Lord has taught us here at Northwest over the years.

Much as former late-night TV show host, David Letterman, used to do, I'm listing ten (my "Top Ten") lessons God has taught us.

To say "God has taught us" is not to say that we have perfectly learned any of this. I am just identifying ten of the things that I would say are central to life in Christ and to our life together.

I'm starting off on the lighter side, pointing out how God has taught us, shaped us, and trained us through failure.

#### **1 - Profiles in failure (Luke 22:54-62)**

*A personal and musical failure*

Our church began in June of 1982 and our first meeting place was at a YMCA located on Wurzbach Road in Leon Valley.<sup>1</sup>

Four couples initially joined Kathy and me in this grand venture. We were soon joined by others who were curious, met with us, worshiped with us, and dreamed with us.

We needed lots of things at the first, one of them being music for our Sunday morning gatherings. But nobody had volunteered to lead songs.

So, because I became a Christian in the '70's, I played guitar. And because I played guitar (not all well) one Sunday during that first summer of meetings, I strummed my way through the song set I had put together, which included the never to be forgotten, "*On the Wings of a Snow White Dove*".

Immediately after the service, Bill and Tricia Brunson volunteered to lead music.

My failure turned out to be a tremendous win for the church.

I have not led music since, but many fine men and women, youth and children have exercised their musical gifts and blessed us at Northwest.

Then, while I love to preach and to teach Scripture, there have been some very memorable gaff moments.

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<sup>1</sup> That "Y" is no longer there, but in the summer of '82, we met for worship in the Arts and Crafts room.

*Insert foot, then speak*

Once, I was describing what happened in Old Testament times on the Day of Atonement. The High Priest's job on that day was to enter the Holy of Holies and offer sacrifice for the sins of the people.

He wore a robe, on the bottom of which were sown bells. From the sound of the bells inside, the people could tell if God had struck the priest dead or had accepted the sacrifice.

What I actually said on that Sunday was that *"the people standing outside could hear the sound of the High Priest tinkling in the Holy of Holies."*

And then there was the time when I was speaking of the role of the apostles in the kingdom over which Jesus will one day reign.

The Lord told them that they would each be given authority and a throne. Quoting Jesus, I meant to say, *"In the coming kingdom you SHALL SIT on twelve thrones."*

What I actually said was nothing like what Jesus said. I have since diligently practiced saying, *"Shall sit."*

The ministry win has been my practice of manuscripting messages, which helps avoid gaffes and ensures careful thinking and preparation before speaking to you on Sunday.

*I am in good (biblical) company*

Over the years, many of us here at Northwest have failed in ways that aren't so funny.

And we have learned from those failures. God has matured us through failure. We have learned that our failures aren't fatal.

It is the consistent testimony of the New Testament that God teaches us more through failure than through success.

Just think about some of the earliest Christian leaders.

- On the night before Jesus was crucified, Simon Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus.
- Saul of Tarsus was Enemy #1 of Jesus' church, persecuting, jailing, and killing Christians.
- The young man, John Mark, abandoned Paul and Barnabas on the First Missionary Journey.

Talk about failure.

Later, though....

...Peter had grown to the point that when he was condemned to die for his Christian witness, he asked to be crucified upside down.

...Paul, the persecutor, became Jesus' most passionate - and persecuted - apostle.

...John Mark became so reliable that Paul requested that he help him out in his final imprisonment in Rome.

*You are in good company*

Our church has learned and is continuing to learn that failure isn't fatal.

If you have failed, you are welcomed here. This is a safe place for those who have failed to regroup and to rebuild.

We are learning to be a church where we can experiment with new ideas for serving Jesus and others. Go ahead and try something.

Think freedom and liberty. Think creativity. Think grace.

Then, too, we have learned that there is a role for everyone in the church to fill. Nobody needs to sit on the sideline.

## 2 - Everybody plays; No one is indispensable (1 Corinthians 12; 1 Peter 4)

### *Human body parts and their roles*

Paul explained this concept in 1 Corinthians 12 when he used the human body to illustrate how the church works.

His point was to highlight that every body part has a function, that no body part is useless, and that no body part can do all that the body needs.

It's just the same with the church. People with a variety of skills and abilities, passions and interests, are needed in a church.

### *Church members and their roles*

I am in awe at the amazingly complex workings of the human body. I am no less awed at the workings of churches, including ours.

Consider the skill sets and interests necessary to carry out a multi-faceted church ministry.

The Apostle Peter divided up the ministry gifts into *speaking* and *servicing*. (1 Peter 4:11) Using that division, our church has speakers, those who teach.

Some teach adults, other teach teens, and still others teach children. Some teach ESL or Citizenship classes. Some teach in a discussion-oriented ABF, Care Group or Men's / Women's Bible study setting.

Lots of teachers teaching lots of different groups in lots of different settings.

And, following Peter's division, there are servants.

Some come to church early on Sundays to set up the building for worship. Some stay late to close it all down, emptying trash and such.

Some cook and serve food. Some have tech skills that allow live-streaming. Others have tender hearts to hold and play with babies and toddlers in a nursery. Or they help overwhelmed moms with childcare or meals.

Some sing or play musical instruments. Others serve by way of visitation and hospitality.

Some serve by leading and organizing ministry teams: Elders, Deacons, Women, Men, Youth, Missions.

What would our church be without any of these? Nobody does everything and everybody is necessary.

Here's something else we've learned. We've learned the power of team.

## 3 - Better together (Acts 6; Luke 12; 1 Timothy)

### *Life is a team sport*

During many of the twenty-two consecutive NBA seasons during which the San Antonio Spurs made the playoffs, they were known for playing "team" ball.

Sure, we had the Big Fundamental, Tim Duncan. But, for at least a few years, Spurs ball was what Magic Johnson called "*the beautiful Game*." It was all about passing and team defense.

In sports, the better team wins. In business, in families, and in life, generally, people working together as a team win.

When it comes to serving Jesus, we have learned that plurality of leadership and of involvement - team - is the way to go. That's what Jesus and His first followers thought, too.

*Serving Jesus is a team sport (Acts 6; 1 Timothy)*

When Jesus sent His disciples out on a preaching tour (Luke 12), He sent them out in pairs, not alone. When Paul went on a missionary journey, he always took partners. When writing the New Testament letters, the apostles were careful to refer to church leadership in the plural, not the singular.

*"Team"* is written all over the history of the early church.

We've taken all of that to heart and have learned the power of team here at Northwest.

Right now, I serve with faithful men and women on staff, godly elders and men and women deacons who have great hearts for Jesus.

There is a worship team, a team of women who lead the women's ministry and a team of men who lead the men's group.

There is an Encuentro leadership team, a Children's Ministry Team, a team that promotes cross-cultural Missions, and an Outreach team that is helping us serve our community in Jesus' Name.

Jesus has taught us that team ministry is a biblical principle of the first magnitude. We have also been blessed to learn the power of small, which is different from the world's norm.

#### **4 - The beauty and the power of small (Matthew 5:33-35)**

*The world of big*

Except for the unusual current era of COVID-19, Grand Openings are the rule when starting a business.

Go to Shark Tank, get investors, and launch big. The world around us knows how to do things big. Jesus consistently championed small.

*Jesus and small*

He told His disciples that the kingdom of heaven was like a mustard seed. It starts really small and grows to be the biggest plant in the garden.

The kingdom is like salt. Just a light sprinkle on your food will do the trick. It's like leaven, yeast. A pinch mixed into a lump of dough will cause the whole lump to rise.

Jesus' birth in a Bethlehem stables signaled small things to come. And, sure enough, His ministry began with the calling of a few fishermen, a water-to-wine miracle at a wedding in a small village, and healings of people with no stature. Small stuff.

At the peak of His ministry, He was attracting crowds of thousands who came to hear Him speak and to be healed. But Jesus wasn't ready to go big. So, by giving a most unusual sermon (John 6), He turned 95% of the crowd away and went small again.

The trajectory of His life continued trending small, as during His final days He was rejected by the power brokers of His day and was finally put to death on a Roman cross. Microscopic.

But, what started small as a mustard seed grew to be enormous. The Jesus movement soon permeated all of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even the remotest part of the earth.

*Small and the work of God*

Here at Northwest, we take our cue from Jesus. We don't despise small beginnings. We believe that God can take our salt-sized service and multiply it.

A simple cup of coffee in Jesus' Name can turn into a life-changing conversation. A meeting or two with a friend can open eyes to eternity. Telling a Jesus story to a child over Zoom or in a classroom or before bedtime plants seeds that will produce fruit years later.

The lesson of small has been especially powerful during these last months of COVID-19 restrictions. There are no large crowds, but there are people.

Jesus' interactions with a leper, a Samaritan woman, a rich young ruler, Nicodemus, a centurion, a Gerasene demoniac are our guides. We see individuals. Persons.

We value investing in this or that one person. Jesus' mission was the world. His strategy was one person at a time.

Northwest has also learned - repeatedly - that God is a super-gracious, giving God - and that He gives that we might give.

What follows is a beautiful tale of financial multiplication, with a point.

## **5 - Getting to give (2 Corinthians 8-9)**

### *A tale of multiplication*

#### Hollyhock to Guilbeau

The first property Northwest bought to establish a home base for ministry was at 6011 Hollyhock, just off Babcock Road. In the mid-1980's, we paid \$150,000 for three acres of raw land and dreamed of building there.

Soon after we bought that land, the Texas economy crashed.<sup>2</sup> That downturn hurt businesses and churches - including our own - and building plans went untouched for a few years.

By 1991, economic conditions improved, and Northwest was ready to re-consider a physical building.

But, rather than build at Hollyhock, we sold that property at a tremendous loss (\$50,000). And the same economy the lost us money on Hollyhock allowed us to buy the bankrupted Guilbeau Plaza for a steal (spiritually speaking, of course) for pennies on the dollar.

#### Two acres to twelve

We soon bought the two acres next to us on Guilbeau for \$40,000. And then, when the price dropped on the twelve acres behind us to \$125,000, we sold the two acres for \$120,000 and bought the twelve at a near even swap.

#### 60-fold increase

Four years ago, we sold ten of the twelve acres for \$2.5 million to a group that built The Bristol apartments. And, for the past three years we have been using the proceeds of the land sale to accomplish a lot of things that are pushing Jesus' mission forward.

For one, we've made enhancements to our facilities, improving aesthetics, function, and accessibility.

For another, we have used the land sale proceeds to fund projects that our missions families needed help with in India and Sweden and Nicaragua and Kenya and Spain and in San Antonio with Youth for Christ and Destino.

We also sponsored a "matching gifts" program in which every dollar given by a Northwest attendee to one of our ministry partners was matched by a dollar from the land sale proceeds.

And we are now sponsoring a Kingdom Investment Initiative where we are using those funds to resource ministry initiatives that people in the church are excited about to reach people and to meet needs in Jesus' Name here in SA and abroad.

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<sup>2</sup> Due to an oil crisis.

### *Multiplying seed for sowing (2 Corinthians 8-9)*

I tell these stories, not to brag on our savvy with regard to buying and selling property (NOT!), but only to say that God has been very, very gracious to us over the years.

And to say that His gracious provision has allowed us to be more generous than we could have ever dreamed of being.

It is God's plan that when Christians or churches have more than they need, they are to use as much of their "extra" as they can to serve those in need. (see 2 Corinthians 8:14; 9:8, 11)

Jesus hasn't taught us that the more we give, the more we get. He has taught us that the more we get, the more we get to give.

Here's another one. Over the years, we have come to believe in the power of a certain kind of relating. We get this from what the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3.

### **6 - Relationship is the thing (2 Corinthians 3)**

#### *Old vs. new*

There, Paul describes the superiority of Jesus' New Covenant to the Old Covenant under which the Jews lived from Moses forward.

One way in which the New Covenant is better than the old is that the New is *eternal* while the Old is *temporal*.

This is seen in the case of Moses' face, which after being with God in the tabernacle, literally glowed. But when he left, the glow faded. That fading glory is true of all things Old Covenant.

Paul tells us (2 Corinthians 3) that Moses hid the fading glory of the Old Covenant by placing a veil over his face so that his fellow-Jews wouldn't see that his face eventually stopped glowing.

Paul characterized Moses "veil-wearing" as inauthentic. He was pretending that the glow was still there.

#### *Veiled vs. open*

Paul writes that we who know Jesus don't need to wear a veil of pretending. In Christ, we can live transparently.

In this way we message that we're not what's special. There is no mystical "glow" about us. The point is Jesus.

We gladly admit to our weaknesses and failures so that all attention is directed to a perfect and all-powerful Jesus.

In fact, it is by living with no veil - no pretending - that the power of God is unleashed in our lives.

This is what we (today, ironically) refer to as *masks-off relating*.

We believe that we are to relate to others openly, transparently, genuinely, authentically.

Gods' transforming power is unleashed when we get real and vulnerable, when we get open and genuine. Jesus has been teaching us to admit struggles, confess inadequacy, exult in failure, embrace the truth that it's not about us. It's all about Jesus.

Here's something else that Jesus has been teaching us, and it is an outgrowth of His lessons in genuine, transparent, masks-off relating.

### **7 - God restores messes - like us (1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2)**

Northwest is not the church of the "together." We are a fine bunch of messes. We are all broken, and in different ways. And Jesus is in the process of putting us broken messes back together.

As we get to know each other, love each other, gain confidence that we are safe with each other, we get real with each other.

And that's when what we are actually wrestling with starts to come to the surface. That's when stuff gets dealt with.

When we get real and "open", Jesus' power is unleashed and healing comes. Transformation happens. We have seen this repeatedly.

Some years ago, we held a restoration service for a man in our church. After a period of sin, he confessed, profoundly repented, and deeply changed, as he was shepherded by several people here.

While that very special service of celebration was going on, and while people were rejoicing at the work of grace in this man's life, another man was out in the lobby, weeping.

None of us had known the background of this man in the lobby until that evening. We found out that he had been found guilty of grievous sin while on staff at a church in another city.

That church, rather than restoring and then celebrating, had told him to silently leave. When he saw the celebration going on over the restoration of the man who had sinned here, he mourned what he had not received, rejoiced in that man's restoration - and accepted it as his own.

That evening was a wonderful experience of grace squared. Two men restored. One public; one private.

I want to be careful here. I'm not telling this story to throw another congregation under the bus or to brag about here.

I simply want to give thanks for what Jesus has been teaching us over the years.

He has taught us that no one is beyond redemption and that no damage is irreparable. He has taught us that the Holy Spirit works powerfully when Jesus' church pours out acceptance on a troubled soul.

Jesus has taught us that His church is to be a special harbor for those who are hurting, even if from self-inflicted wounds. And it has been a great joy to watch as Jesus has repeatedly brought someone or some family back from the brink.

We haven't done it perfectly, and there have been plenty of times when our efforts have failed or have been clumsy.

But we have learned that when it is functioning the way it was designed to function, Jesus' church provides the best setting where the sad, the defeated, the grieving, and the confused can find restoration.

For this next one, we would have said it from the start. But, in recent years we have entered into it more thoroughly. The "it" I have in mind is the beauty of diversity.

### **8 - Beautiful diversity (John 17)**

It is one thing for you and me to unite when we are of the same ethnicity, socio-economic background, and political persuasion.

It is quite another thing to be united when there are differences on those fronts. Jesus teaches us to delight in differences, to unite with those not like us, and to embrace diversity.

Encuentro, the Spanish-speaking arm of Northwest, has moved us toward this. Encuentro has prompted a growing appreciation of a different culture, a different concept of time and timelines, great music, wonderful food, and (except for recently) hearty *abrazos*.

Likewise, our wonderful English as a Second Language classes have allowed us to interact with and serve in Jesus' Name people from Turkey, Mexico, China, Japan, Puerto Rico, Peru, Russia, and India.

We are learning that embracing diversity can be funny, it can be difficult, and it is always worth it.

Why?

Because, as more and more people who are less and less like the majority culture join us here at Northwest, they will not so much assimilate to us.

No, we will accommodate them and we will show the world what Jesus said we would show, that He is the One who unites us - not politics, not demographics, not age or gender or ethnicity.

We're on the homestretch now. Here's #9.

### **9 - The global work of Christ (Acts 13:1ff...; Revelation 5)**

It's good to be committed to the ministry of the local church. Jesus has taught us that life in Christ is not just local. It is global.

God is at work in the whole, wide world and we are learning that if our hearts are to beat with His heart, we will pray and invest in reaching that world for Jesus.

Northwest supports missionaries who live in Sweden and in Spain and we support those who serve to bring Jesus to high school and college students here in San Antonio.

We support ministry partners who have a presence in Africa and Central America, India, far east Asia, and throughout the Spanish-speaking world. And we support those who support persecuted Christians worldwide.<sup>3</sup> What a privilege!

I think one of the most beautiful images we get to glimpse of life after this life is over is found in Revelation 5. There, we see people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation gathered around God's throne, praising Jesus, their Redeemer.

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<sup>3</sup> Over the years you have given me the opportunity to gain exposure to some of what God is doing in different parts of the world sending me on mission trips to Belgium, Guyana, Mexico, Russia, Uruguay, Chile, India, Nicaragua, and Kenya.

Learning to involve ourselves in God's global work reminds us that He doesn't just want to save people who are here and who are like us, but all kinds of people from all over.

There's one left. I had a very difficult time narrowing down my comments to anything like a thirty minute time frame for today. Much more could be said - but then, much less could have been said, too. So, here's the last thing I want to say.

### **10 - Next Steps with Jesus for all (Matthew 28:18-20)**

Jesus teaches us that there is nothing more important in life than being in a relationship with God. This relationship with God may be likened to a good, long walk.

At the beginning of this walk we learn about His perfect life, His miracles, and His teaching. We learn that He died on a cross for our sins, that He rose from the dead, and that He offers eternal life to anyone who believes in Him.

The first part of the walk involves moving *toward* Jesus, whose arms are already outstretched to welcome us. When we believe in Him, we start walking *with* Him, taking more and more steps with Him in to faith and obedience.

Today, every one of us can take a spiritual next step.

If you haven't believed in Jesus yet, you can take a next step toward Him by learning more about Him. By all means, do that.

Your next step may be to realize the amazing grace He is offering and to accept that grace by putting the treasure of your trust in Him, today. And if you have already believed in Him, you will always have more "next steps" to take with Jesus.

Those next steps may involve putting into practice any of the things I've listed this morning. But rest assured that you will never "arrive" at perfection. Walking with Jesus is a never-ending adventure.