

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

40th Anniversary Celebration of God's Faithfulness

Pausing As We Pass a Milestone

(Lots of Bible passages. Really.)

Introduction: Cairns we have loved...

When you're walking on a poorly marked trail in the woods, - especially late in the day when the sun is setting, and weird noises abound - it is easy to get worried that you may have lost the trail.

When you find yourself in that scary predicament, the sight of a *cairn* is a great relief.

A *cairn* is a pile of stones that is intentionally placed beside faintly marked trails to let hikers know that they are actually on a trail.

If you pass a prominent cairn - a milestone - is an even greater relief.

Milestone cairns are trail markers PLUS. They may signal a fork in the road or a significant mile marker. A milestone lets you know that you are not only on a trail. You are on the correct trail.

There are several mentions of milestones in the Bible.

One of the more prominent milestones is mentioned in the book of Joshua, when the Jews built a cairn after God stopped the flow of the Jordan River so that the Jews could cross over into the Promised Land without getting their feet wet.

Joshua records that they set up a milestone made of twelve big rocks - one for each of the tribes of Israel - on the western (Promised Land) side, to mark what God had done for them.

For generations, every time a Jew saw those rocks it reminded him or her of God's provision for them in the past and it fortified their faith for the challenges of the present.

The image I'm inviting you to keep in your mind during our time together today is that of a cairn, a milestone.

Today's milestone invites us to give thanks to God for what He has done in shaping our church over forty years. And it will fortify us for the challenges and the opportunities ahead.

Not that I landed on this theme easily. I've thought a lot about what I would say today.

One option: Famous Forties of the Bible

Since this is our church's 40th anniversary celebration, I gave serious thought to bringing what would be, for me, a first, a sermon based on numerology.

I was going to call this message, "*Famous Forties from the Bible.*" I quickly decided against that direction after some reflecting on the Bible's forties.

There were the forty days of Noah's flood, the forty years of wilderness wanderings for the Jews, forty days before the judgment on Nineveh (from Jonah), Elijah's and Jesus' forty days of fasting.

I realized that the "famous forties" aren't all that encouraging, and I did want today to be encouraging.

So, I have decided to go in a different direction. I'm going to produce five stones that will build a cairn.

Each stone represents one major way in which I believe God has shaped our church over the years and points the way forward for exceling still more.

Before that, though, a few words of gratitude are in order.

First, thanks, church.

Thanks, Church

I'm not wearing rose-colored glasses this morning. So, I will freely admit that the last forty years has not been all smooth sailing, butterflies and rainbows. There have been stresses and strains.

But I am extremely grateful to God for the Northwest of the past and present for having provided me and Kathy and our kids with the freedom to have a rich life, both inside and outside the church.

When our kids were young and growing up, you gave us space to have a family life that was deeply involved in but not defined by church.

On a personal level, thanks for giving me freedom to pursue activities that stir my heart (like backpacking).

And thank you for supporting and cheering me on in my desires to be involved in the broader church of Jesus outside of San Antonio. (A bit more about that later.)

Thanks, Church Leadership

Thanks too, to the current Northwest, consisting of great teammates and great friends who fill my life with great stories that remind me of God's grace and faithfulness.

So many of you - current and former Elders and Deacons and staff and ministry leaders and others whom I have only recently gotten to know - have poured into my life. You have richly blessed and enriched me and my family.

Thanks to My Family

And I am so very grateful to my family for being a part of this wonderful journey.

I'm grateful to God for my son, Ben, my son, Zach, and my daughter, Erin. They were all key players in the life of the church during the time that they attended. And I could not have done what I have done without their partnership during those years.

Most of all, I am grateful to God for Kathy. Her faithfulness and her partnership in this journey of serving Jesus has been a blessing beyond words. And our lives, joined in a one-flesh relationship for 43 years and counting, has been and is God's gift of grace to me.

Today, we are celebrating forty years of God's amazing grace and faithfulness to this expression of the body of Christ.

He has provided for our church's needs in remarkable ways. He has shaped and molded us over the years in distinctive ways.

So, today my aim is to list the distinctives that I believe God has pressed into our church, how He has shaped us over these years.

I'll give a disclaimer to this message at the outset.

In presenting my list of Northwest distinctives - stones that will build a milestone - I'm not at all claiming that we have arrived at perfection in any of these distinctives. To the extent that they are marks of our church, we still have a long way to go.

Plus, these are my thoughts, not anything I received last week from on high. So, if you disagree with me, that's OK. Let's get together soon and talk about it...

My fervent hope and prayer is that this time together - message, meal, testimony, song - will be a vision-casting moment for us all for a future filled with more and more and more of the best of what we've seen together, so far.

The first stone of our milestone I'll list is this. I believe that God has shaped our church to serve the least, the last, and the lost.

I - God Has Shaped Our Church FOR the Least, Last, and Lost

The Bible's Story

When the Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth, he pointed out something that the church might not have taken as a compliment.

[1:26] For consider your calling, brothers and sisters, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble...

Frankly, the church at Corinth was a mess. Paul scolded the members for suing each other, getting drunk at the Lord's Supper, practicing and tolerating immorality, breaking the church into factions, abusing spiritual gifts, and falling into wrong beliefs.

Talk about messy. Well, from the very beginning, Northwest has seen its share of messy, too. Here, I'm speaking about a particular sort of messy.

Northwest's Story: Steve and Friends

Back in the '80's, not long after we began, when we were meeting at the Scenic Hills 7th Day Adventist Church on Bandera Road, a man named Steve started attending.

Steve was desperately poor and needy. I suspect he was in his 30's when he was attending, but it was hard to tell. He had lived hard, and he only hung around for a year or two.

But from the very beginning, I recall how Steve was welcomed and embraced. I had the privilege of listening to his story, his painful, sinful, ugly, raw story.

The hearts of those who made up a very young Northwest broke for Steve. Jesus used our church to breathe hope into his life.

Over the years, many more Steves have made Northwest their church home.

Over twenty years ago, some teenagers at the church began a ministry they called Bread and Water. For a few years they and the church as a whole lavished love and grace on some of our city's homeless population.

Limo Joe and David, Elizabeth and Karen and Kevin, and many more, all desperately loved by God, were loved by our church.

God gave us a rich connection with people our society would deem the least, the last, and the lost.

It was a very special season of service and blessing. It was also a season of loss, filled with memorial services where we said good-bye to many of these friends who died early.

Over the years, God has glorified Himself in this church by bringing to us the least, the last, and the lost.

The Lord of the church graciously convinced us early on that every person has worth and value. We taught us that if God welcomed someone like Paul the Christian-killer, and that if God welcomed someone like me, He also welcomes Steve.

It is as if Jesus was saying to us, "*Church, I never forgot the least and the last and the lost. Don't you forget them, either.*"

So, God has shaped us into a church, like Corinth, filled with messes who welcome people who are fellow-messes.

Now, I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings or if you think I'm being rude to you by referring to you as a "mess," since you're a part of our church. I do apologize. Sorta.

More honestly, you should know that this has never been a church for the together. We are a church for messes, pastored and led by messes. We're all messes. That's why Jesus came.

This first stone leads to a consideration of the second stone, another distinctive of the 40-year-long experiment we call Northwest.

We are a church shaped by God for the broken.

II - God Has Shaped Our Church FOR the Broken

Broken by Life

Biblical story

It's easy to make the case that the church of Jesus was made to serve the broken. Jesus' ministry to the poor, the sick and diseased, the leper and the demoniac would prove that.

No surprise, then, that our church has been shaped to be a special place of healing for those broken by life.

Northwest's story

If you are new to Northwest, you may not know the names of Joe and Laura Johnson. The Johnsons began attending in the early 80's and Joe was among our church's first worship leaders.

They had three kids - and soon four - when Joe began having headaches. He went through a series of agonizing diagnostic tests before it was finally determined that he had a particularly nasty form of brain cancer - astrocytoma.

Joe's decline was steady and obvious. The church rallied around the Johnsons, providing care for children and support for Laura.

Joe's passing was our church's first funeral. His loss called out the members' best instincts for nurture and practical help and generosity and compassion.

It is buried deep in the DNA of our church to rally around those who have suffered.

We have never done it perfectly, but it is part of who we are to be a healing presence to the person and to the family who has suffered a crushing blow.

God has also shaped us to be a healing presence to people who have been broken by their own sin.

Broken by Personal Sin

Biblical story

I would not have guessed, forty years ago, that passages in the New Testament describing "church discipline" would become extremely familiar to me, and very precious to me. But they have.

These passages (Matthew 18; 1 Corinthians 3; 2 Corinthians 5) describe a process for restoring a believer in Jesus who has sinned.

There are levels of severity in this process, and over the years, Northwest has followed this process countless times.

Northwest's story

Often it has been with me.

I am deeply indebted to the multiple fellow-Elders who have made observations about my style of relating or speaking that have produced growth.

I thank God for the people in small group settings who have asked pointed questions that have prompted reflection.

I have needed the words of others who have pulled me aside and pointed out areas of my life that needed to be addressed.

Many of you have served and are serving me in this way. Thank you.

It is not uncommon for us here to engage with each other in these ways, honestly, with masks-off, speaking the truth in love.

I don't know how many of these private redemptive discussions have taken place over the years between members. I'm not privy to them all. I don't need to be. But I know they happen.

And, there have been a limited number of times when a member here has strayed into sin, and the process laid out in Matthew 18 for private rebuke and then for public discipline has been applied.

Has this been painful? Sure. Has it been worth it? Absolutely. Has our following this process often produced repentance and restoration? Yes.

In fact, I would count among the highlights of our church's history the times when we have held "Restoration Services" where members have been publicly restored after their repentance and rebuilding following sin.

There are lots more beautiful stories of restoration - many in progress right now - of a more private nature, where lives are being rebuilt to the glory of God.

God has shaped our church over time to be a safe place for a very big club, the club of those who have failed.

Flawed people are welcomed here. You have a flawed pastor, flawed Elders and Deacons, flawed staff, and a flawed membership. It's who we are. Seeking to restore each other is how we intend to roll.

The third stone. God has shaped us to be a church for the work of God outside the church.

III - God Has Shaped Our Church for the World Outside the Church

Scripture's Call

All the way back in Genesis 12, when God gave Abram great promises, He called Abram to be a blessing. (Yes. In the original Hebrew, Genesis 12:2 ends with an exhortation that is, literally: "***And you, be a blessing!***")

That has been the call of God to His people ever since.

Today, we are blessed beyond measure in Jesus, and we are called to be a blessing to our world.

We do that by evangelizing and disciple-making (Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8), and by meeting needs in Jesus' Name. (Galatians 6:10)

Northwest's Answer

In San Antonio

I think that God has shaped our church to put feet to this mission in a number of ways. For instance...

God bless those who have led the Food Pantry ministry over decades, including the Sattlers and Nicole Johnson who are leading it now. Thanks be to God for all of you who are contributing every month to the Food Pantry.

By the way, did you know that it is our policy to not turn anyone away who comes to us for food? If we, have it, we give it. Giving from the Food Pantry is not needs-tested.

We do that because freely giving is such a great picture of the Gospel. And the Food Pantry does give us the opportunity to share Jesus with lots of people who come by for food.

Then, since very early in our journey as a church, we have maintained a Benevolence Fund – not a part of the General Budget - that provides assistance to people inside the church and in the surrounding community.

Most of the funds go to meet the needs of members. But we do often help those with pressing needs who don't come to our church. Each interaction provides a chance to befriend someone and to share the Good News of Jesus.

Encuentro has helped us reach out to people in our city by partnering with Child Protective Services and Adult Protective Services, meeting physical needs and sharing Jesus' love.

And in this season, there is a team of people who are serving a refugee family, recently spirited to San Antonio from Afghanistan.

This family would have been targeted by the Taliban had they stayed. People in our church are helping them learn to navigate life in America. We are praying - especially given the language barrier - that God will creatively make Himself real to them.

All of this is a small part of our local serve-outside-the-church story. God has also shaped our church so that we serve Jesus' purposes in some very desperate places outside of San Antonio.

The world outside of San Antonio

Back when it was safer to do so, our youth group took regular trips to Mexico, and once to Costa Rica. Individual teens have taken their own short-term missions trips, and many, many adults have gone on trips to all sorts of places to serve Jesus.

We are blessed to support an incredibly powerful family of missionaries that includes great friends who serve with great ministries.

And in recent years, above and beyond our normal funding of these missionaries, the Lord has allowed us to give from the Land Sale Proceeds funds to contribute to what Jesus is doing around the world.

And you have allowed me the rich opportunity to take a couple of dozen short-term Missions trips to participate in what God is doing in other parts of the world.

One Missions Committee member would always shout, when I mentioned an upcoming trip, "*Will we be paying for a round-trip ticket this time, too?*" The answer was always, "*Yes.*"

Thanks for always bringing me back.

There is a big world out there beyond Northwest, and God loves all of it. He has shaped us by giving us the "want-to" to be involved in all of it.

God has also shaped us to be - at least He has for quite a while, and at least by North American standards - relatively small.

IV - God Has Shaped Our [smaller] Church to Make Impact Disproportionate to Its Size

Now, let me just affirm that I don't have a problem with big, generally, or with big churches.

As with most churches, our church was larger, numerically, prior to Covid.

I and the Elders and Staff and Deacons - and you! - want to welcome anyone who comes to our church.

We want to serve them and help them grow in Christ. We want to be as hospitable as possible to all, and we want all those for whom Northwest would be a great fit to stay and to take their next steps with Jesus here.

So, we would welcome bigger. And big can be wonderful.

But over the years of my time at Northwest, God has opened my eyes to the entirely biblical beauty of small.

Biblical Examples

Mustard seeds

Jesus gave parables of the power of small when He spoke of leavening a whole lump of dough with a very small amount of leaven and tiny mustard seeds that grow into plants big enough to provide nests for birds.

And nowhere is the beauty of small more evident than in the story of Gideon from Judges, chapter 7.

Gideon's army

Israel was preparing for battle against the mighty army of Midian, an army that had tens of thousands of soldiers.

So, Gideon, a judge in Israel, put together an army of thirty-two thousand Jews.

God took issue with the size of Gideon's army.

[7:2] The LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands..."

So, by stages, the size of the army dwindled from thirty-two thousand, down to ten thousand, and then to three hundred.

That was when God said, *"Now THERE's an army I can do something with!"*

Using a divinely inspired military strategy, the three hundred Jews defeated the vastly larger army of the Midianites - and guess Who got the credit? God did.

When a group that is small does something big, everybody knows that there is something going on beyond human talent.

In the current NBA playoffs, the Golden State Warriors are favored to win the NBA Finals over the Boston Celtics, even after the Celtics won Game 1.

If the Celtics go on to win the series, it will be an upset. But we'll say, *"Well, the Celtics have a great team, too."*

But if the Golden State Warriors agree to a seven-game series against Braun Station Elementary, and the Bobcats take the Warriors in four games, we're all going to say, *"There's something more going on here than talent."*

And when a smaller church is involved in something really BIG, everybody knows, *"That's not them. That's God at work."*

Northwest's Story of Small

There are some obvious benefits to being a smaller church.

It may be more natural and normal to develop close, intimate relationships in a smaller church than in a church of thousands. (Although it is certainly possible to find great relational connection in a very large church.)

And it is certainly more possible for people who are attending a smaller church to know the leadership well.

But the primary upside of small is this: Small protects us from relying on our own strengths and resources and drives us to depend on God to do what only He can do.

Small churches doing big things calls attention to the One who empowers the big stuff.

When someone hears that the amount of money our church has invested outside of our church over the past three years, above and beyond our regular missionary support is \$371,928, everybody knows, *"God is in it!"*

When a church our size has a well-staffed ESL program, a Food Pantry, offers a Spanish-speaking ministry, and serves refugees, people don't think, *"What a neat church!"* They think, *"There must be something else going on there..."* - and to God be the glory!

The final stone we'll add to our milestone this morning is one that surfaced early on and has resurfaced repeatedly through the years at Northwest.

I believe that God has shaped us to be a church where Jesus-followers are free and empowered to do what is on their hearts to do for God.

The word I'll be using is *unleashed*. And the concept of unleashed Christians is deeply embedded in the New Testament.

V - God Has Shaped Our Church to be Unleashed

From Scripture

The Apostle Peter told his readers that they all had gifts from God that they were to share. In Jesus, everybody is a ministry somebody. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

The Apostle Paul urged everyone who belongs to Jesus to jump into service. The Christian life is not a spectator sport. We each are to serve. Attendance is the first step. But after some grounding in the faith, church attendance is to lead to the exciting, fulfilling launch into service. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

In the Life of Northwest

This service often takes place within the core ministries of the church. We aren't the church we need to be if there aren't people serving in Sunday Schools and nursery, with youth and men's and women's studies, in music and ABF, and more.

But there have always been non-core ministries operating alongside the core here at Northwest.

These ministries ("unleashed" ministries) generally begin because of the Spirit's promptings in the heart of one person, or among a small group of people, not because of an Elder or staff initiative.

These unleashed ministries have been as diverse as the people who have led them, ranging from: an after-school mentoring program (Westway) to several different sorts of recovery groups, from serving women trapped in degrading work to offering connection to kids and moms (Kuppas and Kiddos), from teaching English as a second language to lavishing value on people who live outside (Bread and Water), from supporting crisis pregnancy centers to fostering, from teaching citizenship classes to teaching exercise classes.

The sky is the limit. Through the years, a distinctive has developed at Northwest of seeking to empower you to do what is on your heart to do for God.

And next Sunday, when we're back at Guilbeau, we'll have an exciting announcement to make about a new initiative designed to help you get unleashed.

Conclusion:

So, here is our cairn, our milestone. We are a church shaped for the least, last and lost, shaped to serve the broken, shaped to serve the world, shaped to make impact disproportionate to our size, and shaped to unleash members into God-honoring service.

This milestone assures us that we are on a trail, confirms that we are on a good trail, and points us to a great future on this trail, to the glory of God!