

North Park Mission Statement, Part 2 9-24-17 Connect

Psalm 16:**3** *As for the saints who are in the earth, they are the majestic ones in whom is all my delight.* Story goes that there was a man who was stranded on a desert island for six years. Finally, a rescue boat came to get him and when they arrived on his own private island they noticed there were three huts on the beach. They asked him what they were and he explained that one was his house, and one was his church. “*But what about the other one,*” they asked. “*Oh,*” he said, “*that is the church I used to go to.*” Our world is filled and the church is filled with individuals who are either mildly or severely disappointed over the church. And let me tell you, if you aren’t disappointed with the church, and this church in particular then you haven’t been here very long. Stick around, come closer in, and you will join the ranks of the disappointed. I expect that I experience more disappointment from my church than almost any of you. There is another group that disappoints me a lot. That is my family. I experience more disappointment from my family members than any of you do; but you know what? I love them more than any of you do. And I take more delight and pleasure in them than any of you do. And I am committed to staying in relationship with them as long as I live. Do you know why? They are my family and I love them! With our families there is a union, a bond. We generally understand that, and what I want to lay before you today are the implications of coming to see the church in a Scriptural way, as the family of God, your family with whom you have deep connection.

Our mission statement as a church says that we have purposed to make disciples who worship God passionately, connect with each other in caring community and impact the world by word and deed. Over three Sundays we are breaking that down and looking at the three critical terms we ask you to remember – worship, connect, impact. Worship. Connect. Impact. Last Sunday we spoke to the whole matter of impacting the world by word and deed. Today, we look at connecting with each other in caring community. Another name for community is *family*. God calls us to be His sons and daughters which makes us what? Brothers and sisters. What a glorious truth that is! The implications of it concerning our relationship to God are enormous, and so too are the implications concerning the church. John 1:**12** *As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.* So, this whole matter of salvation, of coming under the mercy and Lordship of Jesus Christ, has a significant family orientation. When we are born again, we are born again into the family of God. When you

or your wife have a baby, you don't just have a boy or a girl. You have a son. You have a daughter. You have a brother or a sister. We are not born as isolated individuals. There are connections. Those connections are intrinsic to who you are. As Christians, we have our differences but we all have the same awesome Father, and still more – the same Lord, the same faith, the same Spirit. And God our Father wants us together. The apostle Paul calls us often God's household. I Timothy 3:**15** *I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.* Sure, there are disappointments that come our way in the church. I bet you have been disappointed by members of your family. But when you are family, when you understand the connection that exists, you push through that. In our church I am typically called Pastor Dan, but you know what they would call me in the Baptist church? Brother Dan. In the Episcopal church I would be Father Dan. In our language we recognize that the church is a family. Can we get it to go beyond our speech and affect our hearts, and how we view each other and relate to each other? Can we experience the church as a family?

Today we talk about what that means. Most obviously it means that church life is personal. You may feel like a robot or a number at work, but at home there are, usually, real relationships, real love, real affection, real intimacy. Your work can be professional, but home-life is always highly personal. Anybody here a fan of the old comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbs*? Here is one where Calvin says, "I called Susie a booger-brain after school and she went home crying." Hobbs replies, "Goodness, why would you do that?" Calvin: "I dunno I was just teasing. I didn't mean for her to take the insult personally." Oh boy. When it comes to your church-life we do want you to take it personally. Life in the church family is, was, always will be, personal. At least we want it to be that until we reject it. You want your elders and pastors and church friends to relate to you in a personal manner, don't you? Or am I to just be a professional pastor, never getting personally involved with the members of the church? When your husband dies, or your child runs away, are we to come over and weep with you in professional manner? Romans 12:**10a** *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.* Does that sound kind of personal? My relationship to my phone company is not that. I have a thoroughly consumer orientation to my phone company. I don't love them, they don't love me. We are just in a mutually satisfying contract and if I can enter a better one I will. But that is not how you deal with family. Consumers are asking, "What's in it for me?" That is what guides me as a consumer. But what

guides me in my family life is love. Love. *Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.* Jesus said, “By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love, one for the other.” Family life means love, not consumerism, not selfishness.

Then too family life involves intimacy, closeness. Not everyone wants that. Some resist being a part of a church family. If people start to get too close they will hit the road, or hide, fearful of being known. But in healthy families there is an openness, and honesty with one another. Around family you aren't so concerned about the way you're dressed or how the house looks. You can be and ought to be real around brothers and sisters, especially in a family living in a house of grace. Are you, are we living that way?

Thirdly, family is where we grow up, where we mature. That is, we grow most effectively, in families. Our growth, our discipleship is not an I thing or a YOU thing, it is a WE thing. Ephesians 4:**15** *Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up.* The New Testament is full of this. It is Christ in us the hope of glory. We, the church, will overcome the gates of hell. The very idea of the church stands over against the notion of private spirituality in which you have your own little thing going with God. Lots of people are out there trying to be spiritual, trying to connect with God, but, as they see it, other people have nothing to do with it. Some do their religion by television or computer. The internet can be a great assistance to your connection as we discussed a couple of weeks ago. I really believe that. I am more connected to some folks because of Facebook. I like it for that. But it is dangerous when technology becomes a substitute for conventional connection. Don't let the media replace flesh and blood people. But don't think that just showing up at a worship service meets the need any more than a Facebook community does. Some actually show up at church services but then turn and go home at the last amen. No relationships. No sharing in the gospel. But dear friend, the love of God in Christ calls us together, draws us together. Jesus didn't gather around himself twelve individual disciples. He gathered twelve brothers into a team. Connecting with each other in caring community means you know the brethren – at least some reasonable portion of them. You are worshipping with them, growing with them and with them also impacting the world. Is your spirituality an experience shared with other believers? If not, you are missing out on one of God's premier provisions for your growth in grace. And the church is missing out on your valuable contributions.

Let's proceed now to our fourth point for this day which is the challenge to be a caring community. Not all churches will truly be such a thing. Not all aspire to that. Some are content to be a worship center. By "worship center" I mean a place that people only attend to do their worship thing. They may have friends there, but basically they go to enjoy the preaching and the music. There are some great mega-churches out there, but there are also some large so-called churches that are very popular as a place to go on a weekend, but they aren't really churches because this element of family is not there. Community may be in the name but not in true experience. But listen, family is not something you attend. It is something you are part of, vitally connected with. When I was in college I never heard someone say they attended a certain fraternity. A fraternity is something you are in. But people all the time say, "I attend this church, that church." Attendance and engagement or membership are very different entities and only the latter fits the paradigm of the family. God calls us to be a family. What does that mean? How we can apply it?

First, consider the role of the leadership of the church, those of us charged with providing structure to our ministry and our fellowship. There is no way that we can produce brotherly love. There is no way we can program a family spirit. But we must do two things. One is to teach the gospel because that is what thrills our hearts and unites our hearts, and the other is to provide a context, or atmosphere for genuine family life to occur. If all we offer people is a worship service like this, no matter how great it is, we have not provided for the church family. We have not created contexts for genuine relationships that transcend the superficial. That is why we want to continually put before you the importance of our small group or care group ministry. A healthy church not only will be meeting together in the context of celebration, which is what we do Sunday morning, we must also meet together in the context of cells. By cell I refer to a small group – could be 3, could be 15, but a group small enough to know everyone and for everyone to communicate together. In families, everybody gets a chance to talk. Everyone's voice is wanted and needed. The primary place in a church where that happens is in small groups. This is where care takes place. That is why we call ours "care" groups. A typical group has other purposes and does other things. There is Bible study, there may be accountability, there is prayer and worship, but the essential element for all of them is mutual care in connection. Got it? This is where friendships are built. This is where we are prayed for. This is where you can open your life to others and mutually grow. You want to promote community and family in our church? Start a

care group. Join a care group. Your leaders are committed to small groups as a critical, central element of our church life. About half of our adult membership is currently in a small group. We are wanting to grow that percentage over time. We want to have all kinds of groups available, men's, ladies, couples, seniors, and youth. We are praying for leaders of new groups. Maybe you are not in a group at all, but you have a heart for this ministry. Talk with Pastor Ben about this. You looking for an open door to make a difference in somebody's life? There is a wide open door my friend in this area of care groups. Wide open. And if you know you just don't have the gifts or the time to lead a new group, join me in praying up those who do have those things. We want our care groups to increase in quality and quantity because we really believe that people grow up in community.

The other context for real family life to occur is meals. Healthy families eat together. Acts 2:**46** *Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.* Man, in the breaking of bread, in the fellowship of the table there is a bonding that takes place. We get to do that today with our lunch after worship. I appreciate our deacons helping to make that happen for us. I am glad we are doing that monthly now with our Compass events. I believe we need to be eating together more as a people. More fellowship meals, more small group meals, more pot-providence times of joy. Those events may not seem very spiritual to some of you, but they are designed to set the context for friendships to build and for genuine family life to occur. I believe that in our care groups, and our ladies and men's ministries, and our youth group, there are some opportunities set before you. I hope you will take advantage of what we have.

There are responsibilities that fall on the leadership of the church, a leadership that desires your help, and is calling on you to step up to the plate at some point. When the invitation to plug in, to relate, to be a part of the community comes, what will you do with it? How will you relate to the church as family? We conclude by looking then at what all this means for you personally, because when we talk about the church we are talking about you. It always fascinates me when people say, "The church ought to do this, the church needs to do that." And I wonder who exactly they are talking about. When you join the church, you are the church. Now, brethren, our unity, our family life depends a great deal on how well we remember what God says about us. When we speak to each other, do we remember, as we do, that we have one father, that we are one family, that we will be such forever? I figure that, if we did that, three things

would be true. First, we would value each other. We would be mutually precious. Listen, God says your biological family is an important priority. I would not suggest otherwise, but I would challenge where the family of God comes into your value system. Do you truly think of the church as your family? If not, it is likely that this dynamic, living organism gets very little of your time, very little of your money, very little of your prayers. So, what are some new ways you can value and invest in your church community? Can you make our Compass gatherings a priority? Can you start inviting folks into your home? Can you assist with our Coffee Connect ministry? Pray about these things.

Secondly, if you remember that we are family, you will be ready to share with your church. That is the chief responsibility in a family. The only child doesn't have to share his stuff, but he also misses out on the relationships. But, when you have the brothers and sisters, what do you have to do, kids? You have to share – the food, the toys, the bedroom, the bathroom. That is the price of family life, but the rewards are oh so sweet.

Thirdly, if you remember that we are a family you will make the effort to connect. Please don't ostracize yourself from the family by your own decisions. These may be self-pity-based decisions, pain-based decisions or just decisions that flow out of skewed values. But, whatever it is, I urge you to heed God's word which instructs you to connect with the family. But, some of you are thinking. "I've got too many problems of my own to get involved in the church." The idea is that if I ever get everything else in my life in order then I'll show up more than Sunday morning. But, my friend, church isn't just for leisure time. It is not at the periphery of the Christian life, it is at the center. And unless you are one of the rare few who get so caught up in church-life that you neglect your soul or your family, unless you are one of those and hardly any of us are, then your church family, in the long run, does not take away from your life, it adds to your life. It does not take away from your family, it adds to your family. It is the enemy of your soul who seeks to persuade you away from what God has provided.

So, I ask you this morning, "Does your life reveal a connectedness with God's family, the church?" When you build a building you glue bricks right on each other. There is a closeness there. Do you know anything like that with God's people? Do you relate to your brothers and sisters like a real functioning family? Or are you out there like one lone solitary brick? What good is a solitary brick? Put them together and you can make something great. On your screen you will see a diagram I got from Rick Warren who calls it the five circles of commitment.

Going from the outside in there is the community that doesn't do church at all, then the crowd or the regular attendees at church, then inside that is the congregation or the members of the church, inside that are the committed, that is the maturing members, and then at the center is the core of the church, those who are truly giving, truly serving. I would like to add one more circle in the middle. One more point. That is Christ. And as we move further in, as we grow in our devotion to the church we become closer and closer to the Christ Himself who gave His life for the church. Today, my challenge is this – locate yourself on this chart, and then make a commitment today to move one or two circles closer. Will you do that? As we close I urge you to simply ask God if He would have you connect to His family here in ways that you have not already, and then be ready to act on what you hear. Let's pray.