

## Love Thy Neighbor!

The preacher said to his congregation, "I want everyone who wants to go to heaven to stand up." Everyone stood up, except for one old man in the front. So, he said, "I said, I want everyone who wants to go to heaven to stand up!" The old man in the front row remained seated. Finally, the preacher said, "Brother Williams, I said everyone who wants to go to heaven, stand up!" And the old man said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were getting a group together to go now."

Going to heaven is one of the best benefits of being a Christian. So much of what we do is geared at helping people to enter those pearly gates.

One of our church values is this: Reaching our community with the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel, that means the good news. That good news is that we are no longer separated from God due to our sin. Jesus tore down the wall that separated us from God by taking the sin of the world upon Himself. That's not only good news, but that's also great news!

So, how does that affect how we act as a church?

Most churches in America grow by what is called transfer growth. That means they grow because someone who went to one church left that church and came to our church. Most of us here today came as transfer growth.

Transfer growth is good. If someone moves to this area, I want them to transfer to our church, amen?

Now, I'm not so hot about stealing people that may have gone to Eagles Nest or Timberwood or Heritage or whatever other church there is in the area. That's not always healthy growth. Someone gets upset and leaves that church.

In many cases like that it is for personal preference that one may leave...not getting there way. That's not good.

Sometimes it's unresolved conflict that causes one to change churches. Again, that is not good.

But then there is conversion growth. This is where someone who is not connected to another church or to Christ and they come to faith in Christ due to the people who come to our church and that person then begins to attend the Log Church. That's conversion growth. I love conversion growth because when a

sinner turns to Jesus for salvation all of heaven rejoices.

In a recent research on attitudes toward faith of the unchurched, millennials and irreligious there were some surprising results. Much of the information from this research is documented in the book “You Found Me” by Rick Richardson. Let me share some of the findings and strategies proposed in this book with you.

First, “Among top-10-percent conversion-growth churches, it is not just individuals but the congregational community as a whole that is characterized by missional engagement.”

This simply means that it takes all of us to reach the lost in our community. None of us needs to do it all, we work together to help people take one step after another in their journey to faith. Several months ago, I handed out these clips as a reminder that each of us can be one link in the chain that brings someone to Christ. Will you be a link?

So, how do we become a missional congregation? Richardson says there are 3 discernable steps in this process. They are:

1. The congregation has a distinct sense of belonging to its community.

We are seeing an increase in this in our church. Recently EPIC has hosted classes on Alzheimer’s care. As a church we open up to police tactical training on site. We host the craft fair for Crosslake Days, and we have hosted the Senior Expo and even the Mayor’s state of the city address.

There is more we can do, but we have begun that process.

2. Those in the congregation BLESS our community.

You remember what BLESS is right? Begin with prayer, listen, eat, serve & share.

This is what you are doing with your neighbors in the community. This step is vital if we are to become a church that grows by conversion growth. We must build those relationships.

3. The church builds on the relationships it has developed as a means of bridging the gap between the church and the community in bringing people to church.

That is the final link, the bridge we build to our community. Each of us plays a part in that bridge, we are each a link.

Imagine what it will look like when we get to know the people in the community, build friendships and ultimately invite them along on this great journey of faith. Do you see the change that will bring to our communities?

Transformed people will transform the community!

Richardson also proposes 3 strategies to make as a missional congregation. These strategies reflect the steps we just looked at. The first strategy is:

1. Members of the congregation build relationships with people in the community.

This isn't accomplished by any program we set up. It must be natural and relational. We have to take the time and look at who God has put around us. It may mean we need to make ourselves available to what God is doing around us.

Lost people matter to God; do they matter to us? Should they?

The second strategy is:

2. Churches need a bridge between the congregation and community, a person who simultaneously belongs to the church and belongs to the community.

We need people who can straddle the line between the church and the community. These people build trust and then are able to influence the people in the community. John Forney is a great example of this with his work at the Loon Center.

There are 4 qualities for these bridge people.

1. They have a deep and abiding faith and love for Jesus.

We need this if we expect to create change in others. How can we lead to something we aren't experiencing ourselves?

2. They must also have a love for the church.

We must love the bride of Christ and understand the local implication that we as a body should be living out. If we don't love one another, then what are we inviting others to join?

3. Bridge people model belonging through investing in the community and its people.

If we care about our community, we will be involved. This is why I meet monthly with the Crosslake Cares organization. We need to be involved. This is why Pastor Mike has served on the School Board for the Crosslake School.

4. Bridge people are not only intent on influencing their community but display a clear willingness to be influenced by others.

Being open shows respect and appreciation for those in our community. If the only example the community has of church people are the ones who judge them and want their own way, no bridge will ever be built then you remain alone on an island. The key is relationships.

The third strategy is:

3. Focus on the unique needs and cares of the community.

Crosslake, Nisswa, Pequot Lakes, Emily, Merrifield, Breezy Point and other towns in this area are unique unto themselves. They are nothing like the Twin Cities suburbs that many of us come from.

This is the challenge for us to discover the needs here. We can't be so single-minded as to reduce the needs of who we can prepare a meal for. It goes deeper than that.

We've done pretty good with this as we have addressed the greater need for mental health care in this area. We have just entered a partnership to do a mental health digital campaign targeting everyone from Crosby to Baxter, north to Pine River and over to Emily. This campaign reaches out to those suffering from anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide. Projections show that we will have 40,000 touch points per month over the 6-month run of the campaign. Please pray that we reach those in need.

But it doesn't stop there. We need to continue to learn about the hidden needs so we can really make a difference.

Again, the key isn't a program, it is building relationships. It's hard work, but there is no short cut to reaching people.

The bottom line is, why would we do this? Building relationships is hard work, so why would we do that?

The first reason is that Jesus commanded it.

Matthew 28:18-20, "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

We are to teach them to obey everything He has commanded. How can we do that if we don't obey the Great Commission?

The second reason is the second part of the great commandment.

Matthew 22:37-40, "Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Let Jesus' words sink in. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Do we have that love for them? It's a hard bar to reach, it requires humility and patience.

Then notice, "all the Law and the Prophets HANG ON THESE TWO COMMANDMENTS." This is foundational for our faith and for the vision of our church. We close each service with three words, "You Are Loved." Stay seated, we aren't done yet.

These words aren't a slogan! We are loved with a love unimaginable by our mere human minds. God loves the world so much that He gave, He sacrificed His own son, His one and only son so that we could have everlasting life with Him.

In the second commandment He is asking us to love others so they can experience the love of God too. Will we love?

1 way we can do this is to invite families to bring their kids to Mom & Dad's night out December 5<sup>th</sup>...