

***What Everyone Needs!***  
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick  
Theme: Spiritual Fundamentals

About 20 years ago I had a colleague in Middletown, OH who was the pastor of a very small Blue Ball Presbyterian church in our community. He was pretty much *the guy*. They had a very, very part time custodian and a volunteer who came into the office once a week to do the worship bulletin. They had a small choir that got together on Sunday mornings to rehearse before the service and yes, my friend was the director. They usually practiced a hymn as anthems would have been beyond their reach. And they had a pianist... most of the time. She was a bit frail and there were those Sundays when she didn't show up, so their congregation of about 40 folks would sing acappella.

Now the fact is my colleague (and I apologize because I can't remember his name. It might have been Eric but it was nearly 25 years ago... Does that ever happen to you?) Anyway Eric was a people person. To meet him was to like him. And he couldn't stand working in the church office alone. So, one day he made a decision.

He moved his office to the Burger King. It was just about a mile down the street from our church and probably about a mile from his church, too. So every now and again I would drop in to have a cup of coffee with him. Honest to goodness... Eric was in the BK every morning during the work week and that is not an exaggeration. He took the same booth – it was in the corner looking out onto Breiel Blvd. – and he would be there a good two or three hours at least. In exchange for the space, he bought his breakfast every day which included something new back in the Burger King of the mid 80's... a bottomless coffee cup. I'll tell you, the BK lost money on Eric because I don't think I've ever known anyone who could drink as much coffee as this guy. But they came out ahead in the long run because this was the spot his friends would oftentimes come to visit... and of course, the coffee was always hot and fresh.

Well, you can guess what happened, can't you? Before he knew it and quite without intention, Eric was pastoring another congregation. His little corner became a pastoral counseling center of sorts. People would see him in the same spot everyday with his Bible and other books spread all across the table writing away on one of those yellow legal pads, and they'd come to see what he was up to.

They were simply curious at first, but eventually relationships were budding. Eric confessed to me one day that his BK congregation was much more stimulating than the one that gathered in the sanctuary of his church on Sunday morning. These folks that came to visit were excited about spiritual things. However, as Eric quickly learned, their excitement was not connected to a church on Sunday morning. More often than not, they had had less than positive experiences with the church. He'd invite them of course, but rarely was that invitation accepted. Though they were spiritual, they simply weren't interested in traditional religious behavior.

Sounds like this experience unfolded yesterday, doesn't it? We've all grown accustomed to hearing these kinds of stories. Indeed, for many today the new chapel is *Starbucks*. And a lot of ministry is happening in coffee shops across our land.

I read an interesting account recently about a pastor named Dan who was part of a large church staff. He confessed to his colleagues that he was getting stale and needed to do something new. So, in an effort to refresh himself he took a part time job at a local coffee shop. Listen to this description of his experience... "All 21 people he worked with believed in God. Not one was an atheist... They were all very positive toward God and spirituality... A second surprise was that all were interested in spiritual things, but not in Christianity or the church. No one wanted to hear Dan's proofs for God or invitations to come to church or ideas about salvation. Almost everyone thought they knew what Christianity was about and had decided they didn't want it. They were post Christian. At some point along the way, each of them had experienced a breach in trust related to Christianity. Maybe a Christian friend had been hypocritical or pushy. Maybe when they were young they had attended church and found it boring and irrelevant. Maybe they had watched TV preachers and been turned off. Or maybe they had experienced a tragedy – death or sexual abuse or some other trauma – and felt that God had been distant and uncaring... The biggest thing Dan learned is that people in this generation have a prior question of trust that must be addressed before we can have meaningful spiritual conversations with them" (Preaching, Volume 24, No. 5. Mar/April 2009, pg. 50).

I find that fascinating, don't you? For millions of people today, spiritual reality is no longer found in the church. AND, we have to establish trusting relationships with folks before they'll talk about the spiritual realities in their lives. Now that's what I call a challenge. But guess what... this challenge isn't new.

In this second chapter of Hebrews which we are considering today, we see a similar circumstance being addressed. At least that's what it feels like to me. The writer of this letter whose identity is questionable was addressing a problem facing the early church. Listen again to that first verse: "**Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.**" Evidently, even before the church was a couple generations old people were beginning to drift away. And this is always the reality facing the church.

It's been said we are forever only one generation away from extinction. For you and me, this church is a vital part of our lives. We have heard the message of Jesus in this place and have identified with its truth. Yet what is happening in our day? We see it in congregations all across the country. Folks are drifting away and if we are not intentional in our desire to stay connected to the faith community it can happen to us. With so many things vying for our attention, we too can easily find ourselves removed.

The writer then posits another argument in this warning to pay attention. Ours is a message from God himself, he says, and it has been confirmed in many ways. It's been brought to life through signs and wonders and miracles. And those who have been blessed to hear this message or experience it in some powerfully personal ways have passed it along. On top of that, God has filled people with gifts from the Holy Spirit to communicate His truth. In other words,

God has been active in the lives of human beings, sharing his story in ways that have the power to change lives and enhance the world. And it's up to you and me to see that these stories maintain their authenticity... their urgency... and their importance.

Yet evidently, too often we're missing the mark. Somehow we're not communicating clearly enough those things that are essential in a way that is inviting and engaging to those outside the fellowship. And what are those things? Let me suggest a few that I believe to be fundamental truths central to our spiritual well-being.

First of all, I believe everyone needs **love!** If there is one word that is synonymous with Jesus it is love. He didn't come here to judge... he didn't come here to condemn... he didn't come here to denounce... he didn't come here to criticize. Jesus came to this earth with one mission and that was to show us a better way... the way of love. This is the basis of historic Christianity... *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* If those who are drifting away could experience this love through their relationships with God's children, they wouldn't be lost to the church. They would be tearing down the doors to get in.

Secondly, I believe everyone needs **forgiveness!** Once again our message needs to be clear. We who are part of the church are not more sacred in the eyes of God than those standing outside the life of the congregation. No, we're all the same for as the Bible says, *none are righteous. No not one!* The reality of sin is universal. And we all need to be forgiven.

Third, I believe everyone needs **community!** No healthy human being is going to make it through life alone. We all need to be connected to others. Now it's true that some of us are extroverts and others of us are introverts. We relate to others in different ways. But that doesn't negate the fact that we all need to be related. You and I choose to find those relationships within the walls of this sacred place. Others are finding those connections, as we've suggested, through the modern day chapel – the coffee house. Still others find their associations in bars. Remember that wonderful program called *Cheers?* It was the place where *everyone knows your name.* We all need to be known and we all need to be connected. We all need to be part of a community and in its finest moment, this is the church.

Finally, I believe everyone needs a **purpose!** Some might call this a mission... others may refer to it as a vision. The bottom line is clear. We all need something greater than ourselves toward which to strive. And this purpose is something we pursue through all our days. What is your purpose?

I have a little statement of purpose or mission that I created 40 years ago. A dear professor in seminary who is now long gone, J. C. Wynn, sat with me in his office one afternoon and asked a challenging question. "John, what is your purpose in life?"

Well, I knew the answer to that one and I responded quickly. "My purpose is to be a pastor."

"No," he responded, "that's what you want to be. But what is your purpose?"

I thought awhile and said, “I want to care for people.”

No, that’s what you want to do. But John, what is your purpose?

On and on our conversation went until he challenged me to steal away and to think and pray and to write a clear statement of my purpose in life. Why are you here, John, and how will you live?” That was his challenge to me.

I came up with a simple line and about a month later I shared it with Dr. Wynn. *My purpose is to experience the love of God and to be an agent of his grace.* He smiled and nodded and encouraged me to never forget my purpose. And that’s what I’ve sought to do throughout my life sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing but always seeking. I’m not unique, dear friends. Every single one of us needs a purpose.

Well, at least for this pastor, these are life’s fundamentals... *love, forgiveness, community and purpose.* We all need these gifts to be alive with meaning and integrity. And I believe that in this diverse world in which we live, there is no one who brings these realities to life like the one we call Jesus. For he is the perfecter of love, the essence of forgiveness, the foundation of community and the soul at the center of our purpose. And we need the church to bring this good news to a hungry and weary world. At least that’s my perspective...

Amen and AMEN!

A pastor named Dan

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