

From My Heart to Yours, 9/3/23

Let me frame our time together with a couple thoughts. This message is a little different than a typical Sunday. Here at Brandywine Valley we believe in a steady diet of expositional preaching from the Bible, which just is a churchy way of saying- we want to hold the authority and sufficiency of Scripture high, to let it speak to us as we walk through a book of the Bible, or a passage of Scripture. Having said that, today we are stepping away from our usual preaching rhythm because I'd like to share some personal lessons God taught me during my sabbatical because I believe it will serve our church well. And some of the more vulnerable things I share with you today, I share with some trepidation although a confidence in the Lord, but I'm willing to be vulnerable with you because I'm not interested in leading a fake, plastic church where everyone acts like they got it altogether and everyone is "happy all the day" as the old church song goes. This is more like a hospital for fellow sinners than a Christian country club. As we say, it's OK not to be OK, and we love each other enough not to let each other stay that way.

With that introduction out of the way, here's an outline for our time together. **3 Lessons: A lesson on Discipleship.** For our life together as a church. As I embarked on my sabbatical, a key focus for me was to wrestle with this question "How do we develop resilient disciples of Jesus in our increasingly post-Christian culture?" And while on my trip to Kenya, Africa of all places, God impressed some answers to that question.

Do you have a place that you have traveled to that captures your heart? Where you feel like maybe in a passed life (I don't believe in such a thing) that you lived there? For me that place is Kenya. About a week of my time was spent visiting our missionaries and my longtime friends, **Pastor Steve and Mary Ngenga**. This was my second visit, my **wife and I met the Ngengas 12** years ago, you may recall we attempted to lead a Brandywine trip to serve with them just before the pandemic and Lord willing we will do so in 2024. More about that in a moment. The rest of my time was adventure: hiking, boating, culminating in a 3 day safari in the **Masai Mara** [Picture w/masai people]. The safari was an exhilarating combination of wonder and fear...that everything out here can kill you. Just show you my best picture **[Cheetah]**. If you want to hear more about that or see pictures, take me to lunch at Mission BBQ. The Ngenga's ministry is called **Camp Brethren Ministries** in the foothills of Mt. Eburru. There ministry includes a primary school and high school with over 500 students, orphan care, a medical clinic and birthing center, a feeding program and special needs ministry. To give you a sense of the growth in the last 12 years just in their school alone, here's a **picture of the primary school** when we were there in 2011, the high school was still just a dream at the time and here's the **primary school now**. And Lord willing we will be sending a missions trip there next Summer to help with the amazing work they are doing. In fact, Sunday October 1 Steve and Mary will be visiting with us.

At the center of all their ministry is church planting and discipleship, that's their heart. The discipleship lesson came from my ministry alongside Pastor Steve and Mary in **Kasarani**, slum where Steve is pastoring a church. For three days in Kasarani we ministered to people on the streets, **played with lots of children**, but the primary focus was home-to-home visitation, like this home, and here's one **more picture**. We would pray with members of the church and the

community, provide encouragement, help with practical needs. And each day we travelled Pastor Steve took along a handful of men from his church, some new Christians and some who have been Christians for a while. And along the way, he would ask them questions, and want to know what they learned, he would model for them what to do and then have them do it. And Mary was doing the same- meeting with the women, providing counsel, training them on practical needs. Here are some of those **men and women**. And I could just see the growth happening in their lives and a simple, ancient truth was really impressed on my heart and it's the discipleship lesson for us. **Discipleship at its best happens at the intersection of mission and relationship.** In meaningful life-on-life relationships while serving, ministering, doing the work of God. Isn't this the Jesus way? Jesus' method was not at a distance, it wasn't a lecture over zoom, it was deeply intimate and relational as the disciples watched Jesus how Jesus lived. It was when the disciples saw Jesus praying in Luke 11 that they wanted to learn how to pray like Him. It was when Jesus was between feeding the 5000 and casting out the demons from the man called Legion in Matthew 14-15 that Jesus taught them the lesson about faith out on the Sea of Galilee. In the great commission in Matthew 28 "Go on mission and make disciples." It's while we are on the move. And as I reflect on my life, and I wonder if you reflect on yours, you might find the that times when you leveled up in your Christian life was at this same intersection. Maybe it was on a missions trip, or when you were stretched by getting out of your comfort zone serving with your small group, when a mentor had you teach the lesson when you weren't really sure you were ready. It is at the intersection of mission and relationship when discipleship is at its best. And so, we want to work hard and think hard about what it looks like to fan the flame of this kind of culture at Brandywine and adapt our resilient discipleship pathway in this direction. But let me encourage you to seek out these intersections in your life- where you are on mission (serving, leading, teaching) in meaningful relationship with others (small group, a mentor, a leader).

A Lesson on Weakness There was a popular worship song in the early 2000s by Matt Redman called Heart of Worship. "When the music fades, and all is stripped away, and I simply come." That lyric captures the experience of the last six weeks of my sabbatical. Who am I, when music fades...when ministry fades, when my pastoral responsibilities are stripped away and I simply come before God as Nate? Intellectually I know the answer to this question, but I really had not experienced this since I became a pastor 16 years ago. In extended time off you come to grips with how much of your identity, sense of worth is wrapped up in being a pastor, being a leader with problems to solve and sermons to write and people to help. Now I was supposed to rest, no emails, no sermon writing, no problems to solve, no people to serve. And that truly is a great gift and very important for me long-term. And it gave me a great opportunity to spent unhurried time with my wife and family, I got a list of house projects done which Shannan is very happy about. I'm grateful for all of it. But, it was also a real struggle for me if I'm honest. I experienced some disorientation, mild depression maybe? I really haven't yet found the words for it, but there was definitely spiritual warfare happening. As I'm beginning to experience this, I sustained a minor injury because on a mountain bike ride I thought I was still in my 30s... and it required me to either sit or lay down for hours at a time, and lasted about 3 weeks, right in the middle of my sabbatical. I'm sure you've all experience that dog pile feeling when setbacks and disappointments occur one after another? And I started to experience some frustration and

anger, even toward God, I had things I wanted to accomplish, God why would you let this happen to me on sabbatical? I just seemed a little cruel to be honest with you. And this led to self-pity, and I allowed that to make me irritable at times with my family, and make me apathetic and a lack of motivation to study, read, pray... there were times when I was just laying there on my bed just staring at the ceiling... and in those moments shame started to creep in followed by that accusing voice that maybe you are familiar with? It sounds like this, "Just look at you, how pathetic. The church is expecting that you are going to be using this time to grow and come back with all these profound things to say and you are staring at the ceiling. Unproductive. What a loser. How can you be a pastor? If anyone in the congregation saw you now they wouldn't want you as their pastor." I wonder if you are familiar with that, maybe different words but the same tones? Let me tell you, it's not the voice of Jesus, it's the voice of the enemy, who the Scriptures call the accuser. By God's grace I began to heal up and feel better, but it was a slow climb out of that place.

As I was journaling toward the end of my sabbatical it dawned on me that maybe what appeared to be time wasted, unfruitful is maybe something God ordained, something he intended for my good...seems like something God would do. I couldn't see it at the time, but I see it clearly now, that one of the lessons God was teaching me was about weakness. I don't know about you, but one of the last words I like to use to describe myself is weak. The opposite is true, I want to project strength and capability. I work out to be strong, I got an education and I read lots of books to be intellectually strong, I work hard as a pastor so that I'm strong spiritually and in my ministry... And here I was, the music faded, everything stripped away, and what I experienced was weakness...and quite frankly, it didn't take much to get me to that place. God was chipping away at my false self, my ego, the things I cling to for a sense of strength, self-assuredness, capability, worth and accomplishment. He allows these things to happen so that I can get a glimpse of my utter, desperate need for Him, of my complete inability to merit any good apart from Him, and allow Him to build me back up. He allowed me to have an intimate experience with what I know intellectually- that, "Apart from me you can do nothing." While journaling about this experience God was saying to me, "I don't want you to know ABOUT weakness, I want you to KNOW (experientially) weakness so that you can minister to others in their weakness." And this is the experience of many of you here today and I believe this made me a better pastor because of it. And this leads right into the **A lesson on God's Love**

In the midst of my weakness God intimately taught me something about himself. **2 Corinthians 12:7-9** *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* I don't think I've ever fully grasped what this means, but I think I understand experientially more now. One layer of this is I experienced the grace and power of God's unconditional love for me in weakness. At my weakest moments, I experienced in a tangible way that shocking reality that even still, not a single thing changed about God's love and acceptance of me in Jesus Christ. He doesn't love me less when I'm at my worst, and he doesn't love me more when I'm at my best. My friend Mark Johnston, pastor of Journey Church in Newark, texted me in the beginning of my sabbatical, "I'm praying that your sabbatical is restful,

restorative and clarifying; but more, that you experience the Father's love in a deep and abiding (and perhaps even kind of raw) way." Pastor Mark's prayer for me was answered in a dramatic way. The experience of being unconditionally loved in my weakness, pulled me out of that place and put me back on solid footing, restoring my joy, restoring my passion and gratitude for his goodness to me.

And all of this really leads right back to the gospel that we celebrate at the Lord's Supper. You say, "Nate how do you know, I mean really know that God loves and accepts you? Maybe you just felt it but how do you know it's real?" Friends the proof is in what the Lord's Supper symbolizes. There is no love greater than this Jesus says, to lay down one's life for his friends. Well Jesus didn't just lay down his life for friends, he did it for enemies and sinners like you and me. This is the proof. The bread is the symbol of his body given for us, the cup the symbol of his blood spilled out for us. He gave his life as a sacrifice, as a substitute for sinners so that we can be completely forgiven, loved and accepted by God forever. That's how I know it. And that's how you can know it. Maybe for the first time or just renewed again today.