June 4, 2017
Lead Pastor Jim West
BLESS Series 2017
Confessions of a Selfish Coward
Hebrews 10:23-25

Church, this morning I have been asked to provide an overview of the BLESS movement; but I’m not going to do that. You have already had an outstanding overview of the BLESS movement provided by Pastor Rob Wegner two Sundays ago, and last week we had an outstanding panel of leaders speak to what BLESS is and why it is so important. If you have been away for a few weeks, I encourage you to watch those messages and get plugged into one of our many BLESS groups that are happening throughout the metro in a neighborhood near you.

Instead of a formal overview and introduction to this BLESS series, I intend to share my heart with you as your pastor. I know, that’s not like me…I’m typically a predictable nerdy expository guy, and that’s my comfort zone when I’m standing before you each Sunday. But this morning I will share my heart with you, and I will ask for your forgiveness in advance. My comments may and will likely offend or even disillusion some of you, but at least you can go home knowing this day that your pastor told you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So here it goes.

First of all, I want you to know that I have been struggling mightily now for the better part of a year. A lot of that has to do with what we have been praying for in May…and that is the VISION for Colonial. Here’s the back story.

Just about a year ago I felt like I had a vision for Colonial that I brought before the Elders: I simply called it “Multiplication.” My vision was to set aside a large portion of our tithe from the Capital Campaign to serve as seed money for planting churches, establishing new sites throughout the city, and even growing new sites through mergers with other churches. My vision was to begin an intentional process of multiplication through various models to expand Colonial’s influence locally and around the world. My vision was inspired by several conversations that were all happening at once with some men in my relational world who wanted to plant churches, other pastors who had expressed an interest in their congregations merging to become part of Colonial, and some church members who wanted us to plant a new site in their community. Although I felt certain that this vision of multiplication was from the Lord, I asked the Elders to read a book on church mergers, and I then divided them into teams and asked them to explore some of the conversations I was having with church planters and pastors from the interested congregations. And they did. However, as the months went by, every door that had previously been open began to close…in fact, they all closed. Then, tension began to build among the elders. My interest in pursuing multiplication was not shared by most of the elders at the time, and the more I pressed into it, the more the tension grew. One elder articulated the
tension when he slammed his hand down on the table last fall and asked the question: “I want to know who is leading this church! Jim West, or the elders?” The gentleman’s question was not meant to be hurtful, but from that moment on, I began to shut down. I didn’t have a plan B in terms of vision, neither did the Session, and I couldn’t fathom launching a capital campaign without a compelling ministry vision attached to it; but of course, that’s exactly what happened last February when we launched the Freedom Campaign. I suspect that may have something to do with why our 5.4 million dollar capital campaign has stalled out at 3.2 million dollars in pledges, and my failure to articulate where we are and where we are going accounts for why our congregation is suffering from the longest season of “vision drift” that we’ve had in 10 years. In short, I feel like I owe you an apology…I do not think I have done my job very well in this past year.

Now, anybody who knows me can tell you that, historically, I am a vision junky. I love a God-honoring vision that stirs the souls of Jesus-followers to give and live sacrificially in order to accomplish Kingdom agendas. In 2008 we had a vision to establish orphan projects in Africa, and we did. In 2010 we had a vision to get out of our unfaithful denomination and get out debt, and we did. In 2013 we had a vision to engage in reaching unreached people groups in India and to open our hearts and homes to children in the foster care system, and we did. In 2016 we had a vision to launch our new trimester groups, and we did! I love a VISION…it’s what fuels my jets! So, to be adrift without a vision for where we’re going…for close to a year now…is not only painful for a guy like me, it’s also humiliating. I’m the Lead Pastor…I’m supposed to be the vision guy. My staff depends on me to keep the vision hot…and so does the congregation…so you can imagine how hard it has been for me to stand before you week after week and ask you to pray for us to discern God’s vision for Colonial. It has been a humbling season for me to say the least.

Now, around the same time that all the tension was taking place with the elders, some local pastors came to see me with an idea for the 2017 “What if the Church?” partnership…it was this movement called BLESS that we’ve been telling you about for the past few weeks, and as I’ve mentioned to you before, I initially found the idea very exciting and full of hope. For those of you still unfamiliar with BLESS, we’re talking about a very simple rhythm of living that blesses our neighbors and leads to conversations about Jesus. BLESS is an acronym, and each letter represents part of this lifestyle.

The “B” represents: Begin with Prayer, which means specifically praying for neighbors by name.
The “L” represents: Listen and Engage with what your neighbors share about their lives.
The “E” represents: Eat together, share a meal and develop a deeper relationship
The “S” represents: Serve—find a way to serve others as Jesus served his disciples.
The last “S” is…..: Sharing your story—simply sharing what Jesus has done in your life.
The vision cast by these pastors was that 50 churches in the metro would teach on the BLESS rhythms with the hope that our congregations would begin to intentionally bless their neighborhoods in the name of Jesus by specifically praying for our neighbors, listening to their stories, inviting them to share a meal, serving them in some way, and then sharing our faith story.

As the vision of the BLESS movement was laid out before me, I knew then that this was something God was doing…it was a powerful Kingdom Vision; but in my mind, it was something that would compliment my Colonial vision for multiplication. However, after the painful lessons I’ve learned this year, I think it’s safe to say that God is not all that interested in “complimenting” my vision! I still think multiplication may be in our future somewhere down the road, but right now the leadership at Colonial has one vision and one vision only for our immediate future, and that is BLESS.

God has not allowed me or the elders to present any other vision that would compete with BLESS this summer. I am more convinced than ever that this is what God has set before us, and not only for Colonial, but for 50 other congregations around the metro, and many more around the country. It would appear to me that God’s vision for HIS church is multiplication through mobilization…it is to reach one person at a time with the Gospel as His people bear witness to their neighbors through the rhythms of BLESS.

Now, in all honesty, I am both thrilled and horrified about the BLESS movement. Let me tell you why.

First, I’m thrilled because I believe this rhythm of intentional living in our neighborhoods, our work places, the places where we play and the schools where we learn, could transform our entire city. I mean that with all of my heart. If we, as Jesus followers, were to live intentionally and take to heart the rhythms of BLESS, I believe many, many, people would come to know the love of Jesus and become His followers. When people begin to follow Jesus, it effects and transforms families, businesses, schools, governments…everything. The potential surrounding this movement is mind-blowing.

But here’s why I’m personally horrified when I think about BLESS, and here’s where my message gets really awkward (as if it’s not already awkward):

1) First of all, I’m horrified because I personally stink at just about every one of these rhythms (with the exception of eating. I’m very good at eating). I’m not kidding, by the way. You can ask my wife. I’m not good at praying for specific people to come to Christ. I’m a “shotgun prayer”…and my spiritual disciplines are pretty pathetic to say the least. Unlike James who writes “Be quick to listen and slow to speak,” I am quick to speak and slow to listen. I meet
people for breakfast and lunch all the time, but Christy and I rarely host people in our home for meals…especially “unchurched” people…we hardly even know any unchurched people! We have four kids and a dog…so our house is not “guest-friendly” on most days, and Christy and I both stink at planning meals more than 15 minutes in advance.

And here’s another confession: I’m not very adept at “serving” others. Christy is a natural servant, but I’m not…that is unless it’s part of my job description as a “professional pastor.” How pathetic is that? I’m just keeping it real friends…being a pastor does not make you a great person or a great neighbor for that matter.

2) I’m also horrified because I’m a coward. Truly. You may think it takes a lot of courage to stand up here and talk to hundreds of people every Sunday about Jesus, but true courage is talking to one person about what matters most…sharing your personal story with an unbeliever…that is courage that I often lack. I have no problem talking to thousands of people, but one person…horrifying—particularly if that person is my neighbor. There’s no hiding from my neighbor! What if I share my faith with my neighbor and then they begin to examine my lifestyle to see how Christians live? What if they come to the conclusion that I’m a hypocrite? What if I am a hypocrite? Horrifying…

3) Worst of all, I’m horrified because it’s my job to stand before the church and teach these rhythms as though I know what I’m talking about, which may lead you to assume that this is how I live in my neighborhood all the time, when in fact…I don’t. I wish I did…I’ve had my moments I suppose, but for the most part, I live most of my days in survival mode. See if you can relate with my life for a moment.

I get up reluctantly every morning because I stayed up too late the night before. Consequently, I’m running a bit late, I’m in a hurry, and there’s not much time for “quiet meditation.” As I promise myself to exercise tomorrow, I step on the scale and wish I had kept my promise from yesterday! By the time I’ve showered, shoved down a bowl of cereal, made my cup of coffee, done whatever I could do to help the kids get going, it’s time to hit the road. I may read a little scripture, I may not. I may throw up a quick prayer, but that will likely have to happen in the truck on the way to work. Once at work, I’m with Christians…all day long. I go from one meeting to the next, doing the best I can to do my job to the best of my ability, and when my day finally comes to an end, I rush home to help with the West taxi service, then dinner and bedtime with the kids. If there is any time remaining, I may or may not have a conversation with my wife, depending on what needs to be coordinated for the next day. I cherish a few minutes to read or watch a little TV, but in 15 minutes I’m falling asleep and dragging myself to bed so that I can pass out and get up and do it all over again the next day. When I do get a day off, I want to go fishing…period. I’m not interested in “evangelizing anyone,” I just want to be alone on the water or maybe in the company of a good buddy who doesn’t talk too much. Saturdays are ball games,
car/house/lawn maintenance, family events, maybe a wedding or a funeral, and then it’s back to work on Sunday. Throw in a few trips around the world, a few weeks for family vacation and holidays, and that’s generally my life.

Now, before you get up and leave…before you write me off as poser…I would simply remind you that a poser would not tell you the truth. I’m telling you the truth…my life is crazy, my schedule is generally out of control, and I’m a selfish coward. Now listen: I love Jesus…I truly love Jesus, but all kidding aside, I am a selfish coward on most days. I would like to believe that I can change my lifestyle…I would like to believe that I can live out these rhythms of BLESS…I would like to believe that I could personally build a relationship and share my faith with an unbelieving neighbor, but quite frankly, I’m horrified that I will fail.

Now…can anybody relate with my life and my mess? Am I the only selfish coward with no margin in the room? Listen…I get it. I get that our lives are crazy busy. I get that I already feel bad enough for what I’m not doing that I don’t need to add one more thing that will be left undone and make me feel worse. I get that even though I’ve been a Christian for a long time, and I love Jesus, and I believe in the truth, I generally stink at sharing my faith with another person…I get that. I suspect many people in this room are feeling the same way I am.

But here’s something else that I get, and I hope you do as well: I get that God loves me…He really does love me. I get that Jesus took my sin upon Himself so that I could be forgiven…and I so don’t deserve to be forgiven. I have done some terrible things in my life…I deserve hell…but God saved me when I could not save myself. And God has blessed me…tremendously. God has provided everything for me; He has given me his Holy Spirit and a peace that passes understanding, even in the midst of my mess; I hate pain but I don’t fear death, and I don’t walk around each day wondering if I’m an accidental machine that has no value, no purpose, and no future beyond my last breath. I have been blessed with an assurance that my life serves a higher purpose and that even the hard things in my life will work together for the good. I have a Christian marriage and a Christian home where love is exchanged, where forgiveness is extended, where there is joy and laughter, and I know I would never have married Christy or had the joy of parenting my kids had it not been for Jesus. I know who holds my future, and I know where Home is. I am blessed…so very, very, very blessed.

I also get that, according to Jesus, I am light in this dark world. I am salt. I am an ambassador of reconciliation. I am a servant and a son. I have been sent to bring in the harvest, to make disciples, and to make Jesus known to a dying and hurting world. In other words, I get that I have been blessed in order that God might bless the world through me in His name and for His glory.

I also get that I’m currently stinking it up when it comes to reaching my unbelieving, unchurched neighbors who know nothing of the light and hope of Christ that I take for granted every day;
and I get that continuing to live my life the way I’ve been living will not produce different results.

So Church, I’m asking you to help me change my life, and if you can relate with my mess, I’m asking you to consider changing yours as well. The people in your relational world, the people in your neighborhood, the people that you work with, the people sitting on the bleachers next to you…all those people need Jesus, and it’s our job to make Him known in this world. The BLESS movement is not asking you to come to the church more often or add more layers to your overburdened life. BLESS is asking you to consider the providence and sovereignty of God in a very local and tangible way. Here’s what I mean by that…

I believe God planted me at 14298 W. 156th Terrace because He knew exactly who my neighbors would be, and that is where my mission field begins. I believe my boys played on very specific ball teams so that Christy and I would meet very specific coaches and parents and kids who live within walking distance of my house. I believe God placed my kids in very specific schools so that Christy and I would develop relationships with teachers, administrators, parents and students who live just down the street from us. God placed Christy and I in the mission field where we live, but Church, we need your help to reach them. We need you to hold us accountable to living in these rhythms of BLESS. I need your prayers and your encouragement, and guess what…you need my prayers and my encouragement as well. Our text this morning reads this way: Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

As we begin this journey through BLESS, let us consider how to stir up…the Greek here is to PROVOKE one another to LOVE and GOOD WORKS! Provoke me to change my life; to live on purpose; Provoke me to pray and to listen! Provoke me, and I will provoke you!

And friends, let’s get over ourselves and invite our neighbors into a less than perfect looking house…newsflash…NOBODY CARES WHAT YOUR HOUSE LOOKS LIKE, THEY CARE THAT YOU INVITED THEM OVER FOR A MEAL! Come on Colonial…let’s stop making excuses and trust God to make our home HIS table for building relationships.

And let’s commit to serve…let’s find a way to join our neighbors when they are working on a project. Let’s not ask if they want help…let’s just go over there and help. And when they offer to help you, say YES! Thank you! And trust that God arranged that divine appointment.

And fellow selfish cowards, let us stir one another on to share our stories. I’m not the authority on anything in this world except that I am the authority on what has happened in my life. It is
true that I’m a selfish coward, but I’m not near as selfish or near as cowardly as I once was…I have been redeemed, and I am being transformed into someone new…someone unselfish and brave like Jesus…God’s not done with me yet, but there is a transformation happening, and that is a good thing. Listen: you are the unique authority for what God has done in your life. It’s not debatable, it’s not doctrine…it’s your story, and your story IS more interesting than you think, particularly to people who don’t know Jesus. People won’t know what Jesus has done for us if we don’t trust God enough to tell them our story…I know it’s scary, but it’s what God is calling us to do. I believe this is God’s vision for our city, and it begins now.

Let me finish by saying this: according to recent studies, the average Christian shares his or her faith with an unbeliever once every 27 years. That’s pathetic if it’s true, but looking at my own life…and I’m a pastor…I suspect it’s pretty close to accurate. Listen: BLESS is not about you evangelizing your entire neighborhood. BLESS is about blessing your neighbors, one person at a time, and I believe God would be ecstatic if every person here would simply share their story with ONE other person in the next year. Think about that: if our 1500 people in attendance today would BLESS at least one other person and share their stories, what would happen in our city? If the Jesus followers in 50 other churches in our metro did the same, what would the impact be upon our city?

It’s staggering to think about. So…if you’re kind of excited and mostly horrified…and you generally fit into the category of “selfish coward with no margin;” please join me for the next five weeks as we get equipped to BLESS our neighbors and to live on mission in the places where we live, work, play and learn. Thankfully we have a host of pastors and leaders who can help equip us to live in these rhythms, and I’ll do my best to help as well. Colonial: We can do this…God will accomplish it…we can BLESS our neighbors and be part of God’s vision for this city…one step at a time, one neighbor at a time. But it begins with Prayer...lots of prayer. More on that next week.

Let’s pray.