Creating a Culture of Retention
Belhaven College Service of Dedication

TRANSCRIPT
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He led me to a place of safety; He rescued me because He delights in me.
Psalm 18:19

He led me to a place of safety; He rescued me because He delights in me.

When I selected this verse of the year, I had more responses than any of the previous thirteen verses God led me to choose. Your emails came back as a collective sigh of relief to the reminder of God's protection during very difficult times.

The 18th Psalm is, for sure, one to tightly grip in the challenges of 2009:

> The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my savior . . . He is my shield, the strength of my salvation, and my stronghold
>
> He heard me from his sanctuary; my cry reached his ears. Then the earth quaked and trembled; the foundations of the mountains shook;
>
> He delivered me . . . *He led me to a place of safety; he rescued me because he delights in me.*

Worrying about your 401-K feels rather shallow after you read through this great Psalm a few times.

But, for higher education I believe the fallout from the global economic crisis has not yet been played out in its fullness and even tougher days are ahead. It is likely these next years will be the most difficult period for our industry since World War II.

I am convinced all the challenges are lining up to bring about a seismic shift to American higher education in the coming five years because of eight factors:

1. state budgets cannot sustain public universities at their current level
2. federal and state support will be shifted to community colleges – essentially shifting the tax burden to local communities who cannot absorb those costs

3. for-profit schools will gain wide acceptance, including the new group of those who have chosen to label themselves Christian

4. online education will become standard

5. endowment dependent schools will not recover their free spending ways

6. private schools cannot sustain the dramatic run-up in tuition discounting that has characterized the last decade

7. major gifts to support construction will be rare

8. financing will no longer be a viable option for schools to grow

While our industry is in for many attacks, God has led Belhaven to a safe place that I believe is going to make these next five years our greatest opportunity to thrive.

And, to understand why we need to be grounded in the enormity of the promise of this scripture, let me give you a three-minute outline of the text as a foundation that needs to be understood from a personal level before we can apply it to the College.

1. The Lord is more powerful than our minds could ever comprehend
– but we don't live like He is.

We serve a God of infinite power, but we too often live as if the limits of our circumstances define His boundaries. Those things that keep us awake at night are not roadblocks to God's reach into our lives, but the start of our trusting in his power rather than our own.

The Lord is more powerful than our minds could ever comprehend – and we need live like He is.

2. We will always be attacked at the point of our greatest weakness
– but we are convinced it will never happen.

We each have a weakest point. And while we work to shore up various aspects of our life, our weakest point tends to go unaddressed because of the complexity of dealing with the issue which is not easily unraveled. So, we tend to sweep it aside, assuring ourselves that it will not become a problem.

But even though we work hard to convince ourselves it is not troublesome, scripture tells us it is exactly at that point where threats will gain a foothold to overtake us.

Where is your weakest point? You'll most likely find it either in that part of your life you flaunt the most, or that part you work hardest to keep hidden.

3. God promises to lead us to a place of safety
– but it won't be because you've earned it.

You and I are trying to serve the Lord, do the right things, be people who honor the name of Jesus, and, so of course, God will keep us safe. No, God leads us to a place of safety because he delights in us, not because we have earned it.

When I reach a pivotal passage in the Bible, I'll often try to gain insight by referencing a number of translations to see how the original idea is expressed in other words. But when you look at our theme verse, every translation I could find uses the world "delight" to describe how God views us.

What is it to delight in someone? We sometimes delight in each other, but those relationships can also frustrate, confuse, or antagonize as well. The safety we provide each other is most often earned.

The only glimpse we can get into how God feels about us is to remember the delight that bubbled up inside us when our own children were too young to frustrate, confuse, or antagonize. We delighted in simply who they were – not what they could do for us or against us.

Looking at that sleeping baby, who brought no value added into the room other than DELIGHT makes every parent commit to leading that child to a place of safety. And if all parents had kept those commitments the first time they shed a tear of delight over that crib, we'd have a much better world.

God promises to lead us to a place of safety – but we can't earn our way there. Rather, we are promised the Lord's protection simply because he delights in us as His children.

Psalm 18 is brimming with assurance during troubled times. But that's not why I selected this verse as a theme for our faculty and staff, although I may preach on it along those lines for students in our first chapel of the new semester.

Instead, I'm more interested tonight in our collective and individual calling of God for each to bring our talents to the table to assure that Belhaven College is a place of safety for our students.

Most of higher education is not a safe place. Fifty-two percent of evangelicals who attend a secular university will lose their faith totally by the time they graduate. Only 1 in 5 evangelical freshmen will attend church regularly while attending a state school. The aggressive anti-Christian agendas of faculty, as well as the elimination of any quality lifestyle norms, tear down faith, and the erosion to the Church as a result has been enormous.

But the picture in many Christian colleges is not always rosy either. Watered down theology regarding the uniqueness of Christ and the Bible invades too many schools. Conflicts in science departments over creation have broken out into disturbing battles.

And the soloing of departments and offices on campuses create the same breeding ground for division, skepticism, and cynicism that has become the norm in the rest of higher education.

It is no wonder that American higher education has reached an all time low in its retention of students – having dropped sharply in just the past three years – leaving behind a path of drop outs who will spend years working to overcome the consuming failure, dashed dreams, aching disappointment, and haunting humiliation, while dragging with them accumulated debt of little value.

Higher education can be a very unsafe place - where students, as well as faculty and staff, will be attacked at their point of weakness.

And that's why I love "our Haven." There is a difference here that runs counter to all of higher education and even too many of our Christian Colleges. This difference has become built into what our biology faculty might label our DNA, the philosophy faculty would call our ethos, and the business faculty would call our organizational culture.

A purposeful organizational culture sharpens vision, creates cohesion, and frames standards of operation and success. It generates the conditions for an organization to grow, rather than struggle, just as the physical environment enriches or limits the development of life.

And while excellence and quality are not guaranteed when organizational culture is persistently developed, mediocrity and bureaucracy is assured when it is ignored.

Maybe it is because of the rawness of the economic times that brought the real challenges to the surface this past year. Schools have been reaching out for help. I was invited to look deeply into the organizational culture of three other Christian Colleges – and I didn't like what I saw.

I looked at faculty handbooks built on a foundation of mistrust. I saw departmental hording of resources for their own gain at cost to the entire institution. I was hit by curriculum driven by specialized agendas rather than the needs of students. I looked at athletic teams who operated as independent islands.

I saw student life programs that would rather gloss over student needs than get messy. I saw leadership more concerned with power than service. I was confronted with boards that were dysfunctional because their individual agendas were shaping the school rather than working as a single policy unit.

That examination made me more thankful than ever for Belhaven. Because our distinctive is not our programs, buildings, policies, management, or even individual people – but it is a collective God honoring *organizational culture* the Lord has allowed us to build which runs counter to the nature of the rest of higher education.

Belhaven's culture is void of the type of struggles that are tearing too many schools apart. God has led us to create a place to work, live, and study that is built on a totally different set of objectives– and it is this unique culture that is the essence of Belhaven.

A group called Culture Builders studies organizational culture, and their summary of the nature of an optimized organizational culture couldn't better paint a picture of Belhaven than if I wrote it myself. It is a place where:

People like to come to work
The mood is optimistic and joyful
The vision and purpose are clear and inspiring
Employees are aligned with the shared vision and purpose
There are few limits to creativity and growth

That is what I find in us, and that is a culture rarely seen on other campuses.

The Council of Higher Education Management 2006 study concluded, that setting aside financial issues, the strongest threats to higher education were (1) resistance to change, (2) complacency (3) organizational silos. No matter how you slice Belhaven, you wouldn't find any of those three in our culture.

Just like the diversity of nations around the world, every college, business, organization, church, and ministry has a distinctive culture. The best organizations and companies create a purposeful culture that permeates every level of operation, messages, priorities, and personalities.

The most distinctive corporate cultures can be summarized in a single word, such as:

Disney is happy.
Starbucks is mellow.
McDonald's is consistent.
Wal-Mart is inexpensive.
Google is experimental.
Volvo is safe.
Apple is innovative.
Southwest Airlines is fun.

Belhaven is Christ-focused.

All that we are and do comes from and points to Jesus. Our Christ-focused culture is the safe place to which God has led us, not because we earned it, but simply because He delights in us as His children.

What does our Christ-focused culture look like?

Let me summarize seven strands of our Belhaven culture that combine to make us so dramatically different from other schools. You'll see in each that they always come from Jesus, and they point to Jesus. And each of these cultures runs in stark contrast to the prevailing nature of higher education.

Then to conclude tonight, I want to challenge us to develop an eighth distinctive culture for Belhaven College. But first, let's look at the safety we find in the seven culture strands God has given us:

1) <u>We have a culture of stewardship</u>

We are one of the few colleges in America that did not cut one position, reduce one employee benefit, or eliminate one program because of the economic crisis of the past year. I feel a bit like Jimmy Stewart after the run on the bank in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life.*

They carefully managed every dollar to meet their obligations, and when the clock ticked down to six o'clock closing and their doors were shut, they celebrated with two dollars left in the vault.
Reading the higher education news every morning, I've almost become numb to the dramatic cuts that higher education has made. And, the gut wrenching letters I've seen from some of our Christian college friends, who have sliced their budgets to the bone, make me cringe for the level of hurt they must be feeling as both people and programs were let go.

I am convinced that in this financial crisis Belhaven did not need to make the dramatic cuts that have over whelmed so many schools, because for years we have developed a culture of stewardship that permeates all we do.

We invest in that which is important, lasting, and quality but are careful with every expense and every position. We can squeeze more out of dollar than any school I know; and if you don't want to carry a full job load and a half, Belhaven is not the place for you to work.

When the librarians, coaches, and faculty are making suggestions of what they could do without this past year, as times got tight, I thanked God how our culture of stewardship makes Belhaven is such a very different place.

2) <u>We have a culture of putting students first</u>

At Belhaven, I'm always amazed how our faculty meeting topics are about addressing the needs of students rather than campus politics. Our athletic teams are focused on developing players as people of character as well as being competitive, rather than winning records being our primary driver as are most of college sports.

On most campuses, policies, curriculum, and delivery systems are built to control students, rather than serve them. But I've been in meetings through the years around here with various departments on our campus that had diametrically opposed viewpoints about how something should be done, but we have work through those knotty issues to get good solutions, because, there is total agreement we all want what is best for students.

It's not always easy – and natural tensions between perspectives will often be part of the process – but I never question anyone's desire to what is best for students.

Even when fixing a broken pipe, air conditioner, or moving equipment, I see in our physical plant how they do what they do to serve the needs of our students. They understand their purpose goes far beyond the project on the work order. And the same is equally true of our security team – but they have to be more serious, so they do it without the jokes and teasing.

3) We have a culture of biblical depth and proportion

The integration of faith and learning is the framework of our sister Christian colleges around the country. Blending faith in every academic discipline should be central – but for us, it is the starting point, not the finish line that it has become for most Christian college campuses.

I believe the difference for us is our commitment to a scriptural foundation for our teaching rather than simply an experiential faith component. The experience of faith is critical, for faith must be lived out.

But when you build an academic course, a student life event, or an athletic team from a foundation of scripture, rather than only how you feel about your faith, you have established a biblical depth that is sustainable for our students.

We need to always be sharing with our students more of what God says about the world, instead of just how we feel about it as followers of Christ. It's in this biblical rootedness that God leads us to a place of safety, and that commitment to a scriptural foundation is central to our culture.

Additionally, our biblically rooted culture gives us proper proportion. By that I mean that, too many denominations, ministries, and Christian Colleges have developed a skewed view of God for their students by allowing non-essential elements of our Christian faith to become essential, or essentials become lessened.

I like how the Evangelical Free Church expresses it, saying "we major on the majors, and minor on the minors." For Belhaven, we teach from a firm grounding in a high view of scripture, clear Christology, and a Reformed worldview, but we allow around that the mosaic of God's people in Kingdom work.

We've become accustomed to a culture that is biblically grounded and properly proportioned, and in that there is safety. But what the Lord has given us is rarified air in Christian higher education.

4) We have a culture of Godly pride and accountability

One of the ways I've heard Belhaven often described is as "home." I'm always amazed at how many alumni we have who can't wait to come back and to work here. And maybe it's a southern thing, but around the world our alumni consider this "home."

This is our home, and we treat it that way. At home, you're proud of what you have – no matter how much or little it is. It is yours, and you're thankful for what you have. I see that in our campus interactions we protect and defend this school like it is our home.

We want guests to see the best of what we have, we want to invite our friends in with gracious hospitality, and we want to take care of every little corner of Belhaven because it is home.

But here is the key to this culture of Godly pride – Jesus is not a guest in our house, rather, Belhaven College is His home. And that distinction makes all the difference in the world. So we should be brimming with pride for all God has done here.

With the security of home, there is also accountability to do whatever is necessary to make home function well. Before I left home tonight, all dressed up in my double-breasted suit and starched shirt, I took the garbage cans to the street. It's my home, and the trash collectors come in the morning, so you do what you have to do.

The core of Belhaven's work ethic is not that we staff so tightly – which we do – but that because this is our home, we all focus on getting the job done, rather than worry as much about whose job it is to do.

This is not a place where you'll last too long attempting to be isolated into your primary responsibility and let the rest of the campus do as they might.

Lone rangers don't fit in our culture, and I've seen many drop out after a year or two with us. Because if this is our home, we all must do what it takes to make this a good place, even when it is not part of your job description.

5) <u>We have a culture of creativity</u>

God has lead Belhaven to develop a culture that makes this a remarkable place for creativity. We brag about our Arts - dance, theatre, music, visual art, creative writing, and now graphic design. But our creativity just begins, not ends, with the Arts programs.

I am impressed by the remarkable creativity in our marketing, admission, development, web, and other public messages of the college communicating complex ideas to a sound bite world.

And I see creativity in the bookstore, budgeting, classrooms, student financial planning, library, IT, and physical plant – creativity is ingrained in our culture in nearly every function across campus.

This is a safe place for us to experiment, break outside traditional boundaries, and discover unique ways to best serve students and support God's work here.

In this culture of creativity, the two characteristics I value most are, first, our willingness to move quickly to capture opportunities, and second, our understanding that not everything we will try will work as planned, and so we let it go if it's not productive.

Any time I'm asked to describe to higher education insiders the distinctive of Belhaven, I tell them the story of the origination of our master of public administration program. It was in a rather casual meeting during which someone raised the concern that there are a host of government employees looking to advance in their careers, and they need training that is biblically grounded.

In telling the story to higher education professionals I usually then remind them of the complexity built into every campus culture that makes the starting of a new degree a two to three year process.

And then enjoy watching their shock when I tell them that from the first discussion of an MPA, until the degree was unanimously approved by the faculty was just seven weeks. A world record in higher education that I guarantee will never be broken.

Creativity is not just about new ideas, but it comes down to effective execution.

Secondly, I love our culture that allows us to initiate new things, but is not afraid to back away should the idea not pan out as anticipated. Christian ministries are notorious for never bringing anything to an end.

In that ministry culture, organizations pile on new initiatives because the old ones have missed the mark, but are afraid to admit their shortcomings and cut them. Learning how to eliminate initiatives is as important as knowing when to begin one.

I value the courage of our faculty and board of trustees to start new programs, and the even higher level of valor they have to stop them if we determine the program is no longer helping us fulfill our mission. Most colleges cannot do that and surely can't do that without finding fault with each other.

6) <u>We have a culture of calling</u>

Our admission counselors often stop by the office with a prospective student and family and I always try to interrupt whatever I'm doing to talk with them. For years I've been concluded those chats telling them the same thing – not just because it catches them off guard, but because I believe it with all my heart.

> I will tell them, "if God calls you here we would love to work with you, but if this isn't where God wants you, don't you dare come here - because you'll only be fulfilled where God wants you to be."

Not just for students, but for faculty and staff that principle holds the same. If this is not a calling from God – whether that's to teach a classroom, coaching team, run an office or counsel students – don't you dare be here.

Calling to a purpose higher than your daily responsibility has to be what drives you if you want to find God's best for your life.

The first chapter of I Corinthians makes it clear: *Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you.* We have nothing without a calling from God.

7) <u>We have a culture of trust - in each other, and in God</u>

All three of these schools I was involved with this past year had so many layers upon layers of committees, I wondered how they had time for students, much less creativity and fulfillment.

Every administrative function had to have a faculty advisory committee. Every academic discipline had to have a board of oversight committee. Every committee needed a committee on committees, to assure each committee functioned as a committee.

As the old joke says, a committee is a group of people who individually can do nothing, but as a group, decide that nothing can be done.

Or better said, in one of Dan Fredericks' famous encapsulating lines that summarized a discussion we were having with a higher education official to explain how differently we function at Belhaven, Dan said, "we don't have committees to prove we don't trust each other."

Not only do we trust each other around here, but we trust God.

Sometimes when I bluntly think about what we attempt at Belhaven, I want to ask, "who in the world do we think we are?"

- We are going to go into Houston, Orlando, and Memphis to significantly enrich those huge cities?
- We are going to totally redirect the future of the Church in its understanding of the Arts?
- We are going to redefine business from a biblical framework?
- We are going to change the course of the general education core with our worldview curriculum?
- We are going to bring character back to intercollegiate athletics?

No, we are not – but God might. And like Elijah challenging the 450 Priests of Baal, we are stacking up our insignificant Belhaven College against the power of American higher education. The odds couldn't be more against us as our offering to God is laid on an alter of water soaked wood – with every obstacle against us.

But like Elijah, God's flame has been lit at Belhaven College, so that no one could say we did it, but only God gets the glory.

Belhaven is doing well, even in this tough economy. If our projections hold, we will grow by nearly 500 students this year. And along with the deeper push we are considering in online education, we could grow to over 4,000 students by next year at this time.

We are world class in the Arts, have a business school ranked as the most biblically based program in America, have pioneered a one of a kind worldview core curriculum, are the most ethnically diverse private school in the country, and have a leadership reach into missions.

We have a host of functional buildings, a web presence equaled by few, an online campus, four physical campuses, a wide array of graduate programs, and efficiencies at every level of our operation.

God has led us into a culture built on trust in God and in each other. And in doing so, like for the those standing around that alter with Elijah, when people see Belhaven College might they say, "The Lord—he is God! Yes, the Lord is God!"

These seven pervasive cultures of Belhaven are woven together to give us a Christ-focused culture that is our most treasured attribute. But there is one more culture I am convinced we need to develop, and I want to challenge us all to work together to add one more strand to this cord that creates safety for students.

This additional culture, like the others, bucks the trend of higher education. It is not what educators do – but it is what we must do. And that is this:

It is time for us to create a culture of retention.

We are student focused, we care, we correctly prioritize, and those are all part of a student retention, but we are not yet finding a break-through because our retention numbers do not look dramatically different from higher education in general.

I am convinced we need a culture of student retention that is not satisfied with excuses, or better said, the justifications higher education has created for not retaining students. Instead, we need to create a culture that expects us all to be thinking, working, and holding each other accountable for active participation in the retention process.

Look at Psalm 18 and in light of the core issue of retention: whatever attack is causing a student to drop out of school is their point of greatest weakness. And if we don't help by intervening as God's shepherds to lead students to a place of safety, they may begin a cycle of defeat from which they may never recover.

To change how we look at retention, and create a culture that seeks to lead students to a place of safety, we must be grounded in two foundational understandings:

First, we must be totally convinced that God delights in every single one of our students – not just the high ACT students who come with a winsome personality. But God delights just as much in those who are under prepared, those who are not motivated, those who have behavioral issues, and those who have to be pushed time and time again.

Jesus didn't die on the cross just for the students we delight in because they win the prizes at our awards convocation.

If God's delight in every one of our students isn't driving us, we will never develop a culture of retention.

Second, retention is everyone's responsibility, no matter what your primary job may be. Unlike nearly every other Christian college in America, we do not have a chaplain on our staff. I don't want one. If we had one, then the rest of us would not have to be spiritual advisors to our students. The same is true for a diversity officer.

And the same is equally true for retention. Yes, we need some people to lead us, and you're going to hear from the leaders of our retention task force tomorrow, but the responsibility is yours - to look out for and intervene with students at risk . . . whether you are charged with teaching in a classroom or cleaning one.

All of us must be actively involved if we are to create a culture of retention that permeates everything we do.

We need to get past plans and talk and good intentions, and reach students where they are most hurting – because when we don't, our witness as a Christian college is empty to students.

This summer, I was trying to get something from a doctor's office. It was a bit complex, and because of its nature, there was only one nurse who could make the arrangements. I called, and called again…got transferred a few times and left voice mail messages several other times.

As the week wore on without a response, and my frustration grew, my calls got more frequent. But still no response.

Finally, I got a long voice mail message on my cell phone. This nurse told me how I was bothering her with my questions; how I didn't understand all she had to do; and how I'd get attention when she had time to deal with it. She told me her policies don't allow what I want, and her time is too restricted to make any special exceptions for me.

And then Nurse Ratched ended the call with . . . have a blessed day! I don't want words without actions and the right attitude – if she really wanted me to have a blessed day, she would have fixed my problem.

And you know what, when we don't reach out to students who are dropping out – and our students who are staying don't see us reaching out to those in need - it's like us saying have a blessed day as we allow them to go out the door onto a road of defeat and our witness means little.

So how do we build a culture of retention? Let's look at the biblical model for retention. And if you didn't know there was one, you'll find it in Luke chapter 15, and I took the liberty of presenting it in a way that shows us the retention outline:

If you had one hundred sheep, and one of them strayed away and was lost in the wilderness, wouldn't you

(1) leave the ninety-nine others

(2) to go and search for the lost one until you found it?

And then you would

(3) joyfully carry it home on your shoulders.
When you arrived, you would
(4) call together your friends and neighbors to rejoice
with you because your lost sheep was found.

First, if God is going to lead us to create a culture of retention, we must be willing to leave the ninety nine others.

Your primary responsibility may seem like your most important job, but to Jesus, finding the one who was lost is more important than your primary responsibility.

It is hard to leave grading papers . . . processing financial records . . . developing a game plan . . . recruiting a new student . . . returning stacked up phone messages, but the biblical model of a culture of retention begins by leaving your primary responsibility – yes, all 99 of them – in order to go find the one that is in need.

You know, the Walt Disney company has one of the most cohesive cultures of any business in the world, and they teach all 120,000 of their employees, that no matter what your individual job, your responsibility is built on the assumption your primary task is to create happiness for guests.

Starting tonight, at Belhaven, no matter what your individual responsibility, your job needs to be built on the assumption that your primary task is to find and rescue lost sheep.

But if you want to cut to the bottom line in frankness, I don't think it is that we are too busy or we are unwilling to find the lost one. Instead, we have bought into the culture of the rest of higher education that retention is just a matter of playing the odds, and we have to expect to lose a certain percentage of students if we are going to be of quality.

- So we justify, the students, in whom God delights are just not yet ready for College, and if admissions would bring us better students, we wouldn't have the problem of retention.

- Or, they need to fail to get the hard jolt that will teach them a lesson.

- Or, maybe we don't search for them because we've become convinced they only came to play sports, and so, they won't care about the rest of their life.

- Or, we say of our adult students, they have personal conflicts right now, and that relieves us of our responsibility.

- Or, of our traditional students we claim they don't fit in our community, which is code for they are not Christian enough for us – which is all the more reason they need to be here.

- Or, we quote research that claims they are most likely to continue at another school eventually – and if we don't believe any more strongly in the mission of Belhaven than to think them landing in another school is just as good, then we need to close up tonight.

Or the capstone of all these higher education fabricated justifications – they are adults and we need to treat them as such and not go after them. The biblical model of retention is about sheep, not lambs. Full grown sheep, who should know better than to wander off, are the exact ones Jesus said to leave the 99 to go find.

Those excuses are grounded in the traditional selfishness of higher education, rather than serving students in whom God delights.

Belhaven, we need to stop making excuses that justify us not retaining every single student God brings into our flock. It is time we stop just clapping for the graduates, and start crying over those who drop out.

<u>Second, the biblical model of retention says we should go and search for the lost one until you find it</u>?

Lost things don't come to us, we have to go look for them, and it takes effort to search. And lost students won't be found if we don't put in effort to go looking for them.

Here is my insightful observation after 20 years in the college presidency: students, who are thinking of dropping out, don't care what your office hours are, or where the signup sheet is for preregistration.

It takes effort to reach out to frustrated students, and it takes effort to keep students from allowing small things to become their excuses for dropping out.

This summer I received this email from an adult student:

Dear Dr. Parrott - I have tried calling everyone I can think of and no one will help answer this simple question... This is my question: who fills the drink machines in the buildings? I start class at 6:00 P.M. and do not leave until 10:00 P. M. We do get a break and it is at that time I would like to be able to at least get

something to drink, however I have been unable to for the past two weeks. I have tried to get an answer to this question, but have been transferred too many times to count.

I don't know who she called, but I do know the right answer that should have come from the first person she talked to was: *Sorry the machine is not filled. I don't know who fills them, but I will find out and help get it fixed, or get back to you with an explanation if we can't fix it.*

Retention takes energy away from other things, but simple effort from all of us can make all the difference in a student's experience.

That student didn't need to be passed from office to office – one of us should have taken that question from her and fixed the problem so she could focus on school, and I'm sure the many burdens she has to carry at home and work in order to be successful in the classroom.

You see in the biblical model of retention shepherding is not a restful occupation. In fact, it is often a combative one to protect the sheep from all that could harm or distract them. If you're not getting out of your comfort zone, you're probably not out there looking for the lost among our sheep.

But be clear of our instruction from Jesus – finding is the goal of the biblical model of retention. Being satisfied with only searching is not an acceptable outcome.

Shepherds in Palestine grazed their sheep in difficult and hazardous terrain. So there were many places and reasons why one of the sheep could wander off. And so they worked in groups of 2 or 3 shepherds in a flock to learn from each other, and together, they became experts at tracking lost sheep.

Tomorrow, we're going to hear some steps we can take to start to become better at tracking lost sheep, and I pray that God will open our eyes to students all around us who are waiting for someone to reach out in compassion and friendship, and save their college experience when they are being attacked at their point of greatest weakness.

Finding requires us to be purposeful, committed, smart, and diligent, if we are going to create a culture of retention, those must be hallmarks of all of us who are responsible for the students in our care – the ones in whom God delights.

<u>Third, when you find the sheep, the biblical model of retention says you would joyfully carry it home on your shoulders.</u>

When sheep wander off, there is always a reason – they are board, hungry, curious, adventurous, or just a loner by nature. And among college students, the reasons to wander away may not be much different.

Although I'd add to that for many of our students who come from troubled backgrounds, this may be their first experience in a caring community of accountability. And that is difficult to not wander when you've never before been in such a setting.

It's been said that character is developed in community but tested in isolation. If we don't keep students in the community long enough to develop their character, the isolation of the world beyond Belhaven will lead them to fail the test of character nearly every time.

When we find lost sheep, they will be tired, worn out, have little reserve, confused, and maybe combative or injured. So what does higher education teach us to do when we find lost sheep:

- scold them for getting lost,
- put a higher fence around them,
- threaten that if they get lost again we won't come looking for them,
- and point them back to the flock and do right, with no support for what got them lost to begin with.

Instead, the biblical model of retention instructs us to stoop down and pick up that lost sheep and joyfully carry it all the way home on our shoulders. We need to provide such caring support that we can create meaningful connections with students to get past the surface excuses for dropping out, and help them deal with the real issues.

It is pretty clear that the shepherd's first responsibility is to carry not to punish. If we are going to create a culture of retention that bucks the pattern of higher education, we need to do more carrying and less correcting if we want them to see Jesus in us.

Finally, the scripture instructs us to call together our friends and neighbors to rejoice.

Here again is where our culture of retention must be different. If you believe what you lose, can be equally replaced, it is not worth much effort to find it. And there is little to rejoice about if you happen to find it.

I've lost more than one pair of cheap cuff links, forgetting them in Hampton Inns while getting ready for that yummy free breakfast. But it's not that big of a deal if I lose a pair because I have a supply of them.

But once I lost a pair of cufflinks my dad had made years ago in India, and gave me before he died. Not only did I physically panic, but I nearly missed the plane home looking until I found them.

Higher education tells us when students drop out, you don't need to look for them and instead, just go get some more who will replace them. They are all the same – the only goal here is filling up the seats in the classroom.

So if some drop out, we can replace them with new students who look just like the ones we lost.

Which of the new students starting this week does God not delight in, and can just be replaced with a duplicate if they happen to drop out?

If we don't delight in every individual student in the way that God does – there is no reason to search, no reason to find, no reason to carry them home, and surely no reason to rejoice. Our culture of retention must be grounded in seeing each of our students in the way God sees them.

Could we have 100% retention of all our students? That will be for God to decide, but God didn't say to start looking only if we've lost more than 35%. I think the math department will verify that the biblical model of retention calls for looking if we lose only 1%.

I am convinced that God doesn't send us any students in order for them to fail. And we need to create a culture of retention that makes possible God's working to bring success to every single one of them.

Conclusion

In closing let me tell you about a story I've heard a dozen times through the years, but it is a story I should have heard thousands of times.

It is not a story that is shared until years after the circumstance, because it may take even decades for the importance of it to be remembered and appreciated.

But when this story is told, it will be one of the most important stories the teller ever has to share in their entire life.

They will tell it to employers and to pastors. They will tell it to their friends, and to those they mentor. They will tell it to their children so many times the kids will get tired of hearing it. It may get told in civic club

meetings or bible studies. It will get told around scouting campfires or as part of pep talks for little league games.

The teller may not remember accurately exactly how it happened, and they may embellish it as the years increase, just because the pivotal nature of the event becomes so much more important to them when they realize what might have happened had the event not occurred.

And while each of these stories is a bit different, they all begin with the same phrase that goes something like this . . .

> *In college I was about to give up. But someone wouldn't give up on me, and my entire life was turned around and I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for professor* _____ . . .
>
> or Coach _____
> or security officer _____
> or my RD . . .
> . . .the people in student services
> . . . an admission counselor
> . . . the registrar's office
> . . . or the man who cleans the gym

My prayer for this year is that together, we will become so focused on creating a culture of retention at Belhaven College, that stories of rescued lost sheep will become common-place, as God works among us to bring our students to a place of safety because he delights in them.

Prayer –

> This year, allow us to be your hands and feet and voice to lead our students to a place of safety, and may your delight in each one of them show through us.