

COME TO THE PARTY!

LUKE 7:11-17

Most people think church is a drag. Most Americans believe in God – upwards of 90% - but the majority of our fellow citizens - well over 55% - consistently choose to be somewhere other than church on a Sunday morning. Why is that? There's a whole host of excuses or reasons that are offered.

According to well-known pastor and author, Rick Warren, there are four major reasons people give for not going to church: (1) "Church services are boring, especially the sermons." (2) "Church members are unfriendly to visitors." (3) "The church is more interested in my money than in me." (4) "We worry about the quality of the church's child care." Warren points out that none of those four reasons has anything to do with God. In other words, not many people say, "I don't go to church because I don't believe in God." People are more open to spiritual issues than we might think. The problem is that they don't always feel welcome or think that the church has anything to offer them that they need.

Here's a question: what's the difference between a party and a funeral? People go to parties because they're fun. A week ago Saturday, Cheryl and I went to the first Buckeye football game of the season. Now, that's a party! We walked two miles back and forth to our car... sweated off a gallon of perspiration sitting in the stadium... and endured traffic jams, why? Because it's fun! People go to funerals because they feel compelled by a sense of love or duty, not because it's fun. Unfortunately, many people approach church the same way. But when Jesus shows up on the scene, he...

JESUS TURNS FUNERALS INTO PARTIES.

Let's look at where that actually happened. That story helps us to highlight a universal truth: everyone encounters loss and tragedy in life. It might be the death of a loved one. But it could also be the death of your marriage, a broken friendship, the loss of a job or a lifelong dream that's gone sour. But this story also underlines a second truth: the message about Jesus only becomes good news when it connects with the bad news in your life. When your life is going well – no hardship, no suffering, no pain, no disappointments – you don't sense a need for divine intervention. But when you run into something bigger than you, or the weight of life's difficulties become too heavy to lift or emotional pain cuts like a knife, you long for Someone bigger than you to step in and make a difference. That's what happened to this widow from the town of Nain. When she met Jesus at her son's funeral, God became real to her. Her reaction was probably something like what we find in one of the Old Testament psalms: "You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy." (Psalm 30:11 NLT)

Knowing God is all about real and lasting joy. Feasts and parties show up a lot in the Bible either literally or figuratively. So does the theme of joy and rejoicing.

Do you remember how the angels rejoiced at the birth of Jesus and praised God? The Bible also tells us that there is joy in heaven when a single spiritually lost person gets connected back to God through Jesus Christ. Here's something else that happens when Jesus shows up:

JESUS TURNS EMPTINESS INTO OVERFLOWING LIFE.

Most people don't associate knowing or following Jesus with the most robust, fulfilling, satisfying kind of life possible. But that's what He said He offers: "The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life." (John 10:10 NLT) Notice carefully what Jesus says there. First, the thief wants to rob you of the joy God created you to experience. The Bible says there is an evil entity in this world who has the power to suck all the joy and hope out of your life. It's a personal being of enormous power and evil intent called the devil or Satan. Here, Jesus refers to him as the thief. What does the devil or Satan steal from people? He steals from you the truth that God loves you, that God desires to forgive you and that God wants to be with you forever. He steals from you a proper sense of your intrinsic worth and value as a creature made in God's image. He steals from you the idea that God is for you and insinuates that God is against you.

What else does Jesus say here? Secondly, He came to give you more life than the thief could ever steal. I learned in my study for today that the Greek word for the rich, satisfying, abundant life Jesus promises here is *perissos*. It means "exceeding" or full to overflowing. I understand that in the Norwegian Bible that word gets translated as *overflod* (pronounced "oooverflow"). I like that! In other words, when Jesus comes into your life, you start "oooverflowing"! Yes, Jesus did come to this earth to die on the cross and be raised again. But for what purpose? He wants you to overflow with more life and joy than you've ever imagined. The Bible says, "Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think." (Ephesians 3:20 NLT) How much life and joy can you imagine, my friend? Are you there yet? I'm not ashamed to say that I could use more joy, greater meaning and a fuller life. Here's what Jesus said to a spiritually empty woman filling her water pots at a town well: "Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life." (John 4:13-14 MSG) That leads me to a third point:

JESUS TURNS SELF-FOCUSED LIVES OUTWARD.

Many times in the church we have become inwardly focused on our own needs and what makes us spiritually comfortable. Is it any wonder then that people outside the church don't always find this a compelling place to be. A pastor named Dave went to a fast food restaurant that promised great food, fresh ingredients and friendly service. Unfortunately, the temperature inside the

restaurant was so cold that all the customers were eating with their coats on. Observing this while he was waiting for his burger, Dave said to one of the workers at the counter, “Hey, it’s pretty chilly in here. Any chance someone could turn up the thermostat a little?” The teenage girl at the register smiled perkily and answered, “No, we like it like this. This way it stays much more comfortable for those of us back in the kitchen.” Trying hard not to sound sarcastic, Dave replied, “Yeah, but all your customers are sitting out here eating their food with their coats on.” She looked out across the dining room and then back at Dave. Then, as if she thought Dave was a bit dull mentally, she slowly repeated, “We like it like this.”

Self-absorption isn’t limited to teenagers flipping burgers. It’s all too often how we in the church can treat folk outside the church. To those who find the church irrelevant or unfriendly, we say, “But we like it like this.” What matters is our own comfort not whether people without Jesus find this a meaningful and welcoming place to be. Jesus’ attitude stands in stark contrast to our own. He said, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45 NLT) I wonder if more churches – including our own – need to cultivate a “servant culture.” Just a thought! At the very least, doesn’t following Jesus mean that you become outwardly-focused and that you put the needs of those without Jesus front and center?

If I told you I had \$5,000 for someone who really needed it, whose name would be the first to pop into your head? I don’t know about you, but if you asked me that question, I’d say, “Me!” Aren’t you glad the Lord understands our human nature? He knows how empty and self-centered we tend to be. That’s why Jesus offers to fill you up before He asks you to flow outward. Let me say it again: Jesus has to fill you up before you can overflow. Without Him first doing something to you and in you, you will always be hopelessly inadequate when it comes to pointing other people to Jesus. Wasn’t that true of the disciples – Jesus’ first followers? What an inept, unimpressive and hopeless group! But then something happened to them that transformed them into highly effective messengers of who Jesus is and what Jesus had done.

This next verse is the key verse for this whole *Outflow* emphasis in our church. Let’s say it together: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NLT) Each of the four remaining messages flows from that verse. Jesus knew well how inadequate and inept those disciples happened to be. He knew that they had to be filled with His love and power before that same love and power could flow out of them to others. None of us have the power to point people to Jesus on our own. Just like the first followers of Jesus, we need to be filled by God before we can overflow with His love to others. Once those disciples got filled to overflowing with the life, love and power of Jesus, they become powerful witnesses in the city of Jerusalem, then outwards into the

regions of Judea and Samaria and then outwards again to the very ends of the world. Let me ask you a question: Is this promise of an overflowing life just for the woman who came to the well or for that first group of Jesus followers? If it was, then welcome to a funeral. Let's just sing some sad songs, say a sad little prayer and go home... sadly. But if it's not, then get ready for the party!

I'm convinced that Acts 1:8 describes a pattern that God still uses to flow into you, first of all, so that He can then flow out of you and into the world. The top tier of the fountain up there represents Jerusalem which is about a personal relationship with God. Jesus is the spring of living water in your life. Everything depends upon a relationship with Him. So the first matter is to get filled with so much of His Spirit that you can't contain it. Next week's message is going to be about the ins and outs of having an authentic relationship with God. It's for anyone who's following Jesus today or even someone who's slightly interested in coming to know Him. Invite a friend to come and hear it with you.

The second tier of the fountain represents Judea which is about relationships with family and friends. Judea was a geographical region in Israel – like a state or a province. It was the place most of Jesus' first followers thought of as home. I know it can sound a little scary, but outflow begins at home – with the people you're closest to in your life. Pastor Glenn is going to help us focus on those relationships in two weeks.

The third tier of the fountain represents Samaria which is about the community around us, especially folk who are unlike us. They don't look like you, believe like you or act like you. In Jesus' day, most Jewish people – including Jesus' followers – avoided Samaria and wanted nothing to do with the folk who lived there. Samaria represents our community at large – even some parts of town or types of people that make us uncomfortable. In three weeks, Jared is going to help us explore what it might mean to reach out to our community. What would it be like to reach out to someone like that woman in the video clip we watched earlier who views churches and people in them with distrust and distaste?

The base of the fountain represents the ultimate destination: the ends of the earth. Four Sundays from now, I want to think with you about the kind of difference each Christian can continually make in the world. Here's a final scripture to consider: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' Let anyone who hears this say, 'Come.' Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life." (Revelation 22:17 NLT) I invite you to accept the living water Jesus offers. If you're thirsty in a spiritual sense today, the living water – the joy, the love and the outward-flowing power of the Holy Spirit – is there for the taking. Who's the "bride" in that verse? The church! The church is referred to as the bride of Christ in the Bible. So, together with the Holy Spirit, the church gets to invite more hungry and thirsty people to God's party.

I'm not going to tell you a closing story today. Instead, I'm going to invite you to a party. And I'm going to invite you to invite others to a party. It's happening next Sunday afternoon right here outside on our grounds from 4-6 pm. We call it our Community Block Party. There's going to be a car show... a chili cook-off... a bonfire for hot dogs... hayrides... lots of games and fun for the kids. Here's what I want you to do. Invite a friend to come, a neighbor, someone you go to school with or someone you work with. Or get creative! How about leaving it for your waiter and waitress wherever you eat out today along with a generous tip? If you're going to the store this afternoon, how about giving one to a fellow shopper? Let them know there will be drawing that day – four backpacks with school supplies and one \$25 Wal-mart gift card. If they seem interested, give them the info sheet along with three tickets attached . That's how they can win one of the free drawings. As you leave today, there will be someone standing at all the doors and we invite you to take at least one of these. Everyone can invite at least one person! If you will invite more, by all means, then take more! The Community Block Party is next Sunday, September 14 from 4-6 pm right here. Come to the party! Invite someone else to come to the party!

You may be seeking God for the first time this morning or you may have known and loved Him all of your life. Regardless, I invite you to pray this simple prayer with me right now on this first Sunday of our *Outflow* emphasis: "Jesus, here I am. Come and fill me with Your living water for the first time today or come and fill me again. Wash away my sins. Wash out of me all that is spiritually dead. May Your life flow out through me to all who are spiritually thirsty. In Your Name, Amen."