

Sunday, July 11, 2021

May I come in...to the Work Room?

(Message 5; Series: *My Heart, Christ's Home*)

(Psalm 78:1-8)

Scripture: Psalm 78:1-8

*My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth.
2I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things
from of old—
3things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us.
4We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next
generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the
wonders he has done.
5He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he
commanded our ancestors to teach their children,
6so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
7Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but
would keep his commands.
8They would not be like their ancestors—a stubborn and
rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits
were not faithful to him.*

Message:

The Church is an amazing institution - over the last 2000 years, the steeper the challenge, the higher the price, the greater the persecution, the more the Church has grown; the Church is at its best when the world is at its worst...

In China, e.g., there are over 1.3 billion people. In a country that officially and passionately promotes atheism, there currently over 100 million Christians. A researcher at Purdue University suggests that will double in ten years and may reach as high as 250 million. Not one of them has become a Christian because it is comfortable and convenient, because it's not.

And yet, I wonder if it isn't harder to be a Christian in Cutlerville than it is in China.

Robert Munger, in *My Heart, Christ's Home*, pictures Jesus asking to see our "**workroom**" - and apologetically, we lead him into him our well-furnished workroom. He notices our amenities: our padded chairs and sofa,

our tool chest filled with the latest power tools, our cutting-edge technology, our air-conditioning, and our abundant resources. He asks, “*What are you doing with your life for the **Kingdom of God?***” (And there is the **Mission** question!) We show him a few of the “toys” we’ve thrown together.

“Is this the sort of thing you are **doing** for **others** in your Christian life?”

“*Lord, that’s the best I can do. I know it isn’t much*” (Actually, I feel quite embarrassed).

“Would you like to do better?”

“*You know I would!*”

“Then invite my Spirit to come in and work in and through you. Let go and let me do the work!”

It’s not our **ability** God is interested in; it is our **availability**. If we give Christ’s Spirit control of our workroom, we become the tools in his hand. He invites us to come out of the drawer, off from the shelf, and down from the pegboard. If we do, he promises we’ll be amazed at what he can do through us.

The Psalmist gives us a picture of what this might look like. Imagine three chairs where the **middle** chair represents **our** (your) **place** in the family of God. This is where you and I sit. When you first came to this church, there was a chair (or bench) for you.

You may still remember where you were when you gave your life to Christ, received a word of needed encouragement, found answers to your confusion, or had someone offer a word of welcome.

You may have sat in the same chair for years; you may even be a bit offended if someone else sat in it (My grandfather once asked someone sitting in “his seat” to move).

Then there is this chair to the right. This chair reminds us that some have been here **before** me. Someone took me, invited me, made a place for me, was praying for me, and welcomed me. My parents brought me to church at an early age; I was baptized as an infant.

Many of you first came in a similar way; or maybe you first came as a student or as an adult; maybe you married in; maybe a friend or co-worker invited you.

None of us just came to sit in this middle chair all by ourselves; this chair represents a whole line of chairs that stretch all the way back to Jesus.

See Jesus told his friends, they told theirs; they told their friends - often at a significant cost - it has never been comfortable or convenient. Not a single generation got missed - right down to the chair you and I now sit in.

Then there is the chair on the left. These are the people to come, the **next generation** - reaching them to present “*everyone mature in Christ.*”

In **Colossians 1:28**, Paul writes, *“He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.*

The Psalmist wrote (**78:4,7**), *“We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done then they’ll put their trust in God.”*

This is the mission; it is the main thing; it is what the church was born to do. We supposed to keep the main thing the main thing.

Three chairs...past, present and future...

A lot of churches are just **two chair** churches.

There are churches that have recently started up and are creatively reaching the next generation. That’s a great thing, but they don’t have the blessing of a 65-year legacy (or a 160-year denominational heritage) to pass along like we do.

There are churches with a great past where God has done some amazing things, but they’re no longer relevant; they are not making more or better disciples; they are slowly dying. Many churches are ignoring the importance of the third chair; they don’t have a future.

This church has a great past, and we can have an even greater future if we’re willing to be a three-chair church! We can be a three-chair church!

That is why we’re here. We get to be a **Christ**-centered, **Jesus**-loving, **Spirit**-led Church that cares about each other and the world. We can be a Church focused on faith formation, worship, and outreach; a church shaped by the **Scriptures**, empowered by **prayer**, and inspired by God’s **Spirit**.

We can be a Church that is deeply committed to engaging **God’s plan** to intentionally **pass** the **Gospel** and the faith of our fathers and mothers on to the next chair.

We’re here today not because the *faith* was accidentally passed on to us. No, a group of people (sitting in the first chair) made an intentional decision: we will work: we will pray...serve, share, dream, give, sacrifice, persevere, and pay the price so you and I could hear the Gospel and sit in this middle chair.

When the people in a church care more about the chair that represents the future than they care about the chair they are sitting in, then you will have a great church.

The question is, will we/you do for the next generation what the previous generation did for us/you and pull out all the stops so as we move to the first chair, they can take up residence on the middle chair? How do we do that? We turn our workroom over to Jesus and embrace the five “B’s.”

BE INVITING

The Gospel gets passed on one person at a time (It's been this way since Jesus). You are here because at some point, someone you knew said to you, "Let me tell you about Jesus. Let me tell you about God's grace. Let me tell you about Church." Maybe they invited you; maybe, if it was your parents, they just took you along.

So here is this empty chair. Who in your life would God like to be sitting there?

Maybe a name comes to mind instantly; maybe it is one of your children or grandchildren; maybe a sibling, niece or nephew; maybe a friend, co-worker or one of your neighbors.

Do you have someone in your life whose spiritual well-being you are concerned about and praying for? Does anyone have that (show of hands).

I know how this works. When there's someone you really love who is far from God, you start praying desperately: "*God, put someone in their life who knows you and cares about them to invite them to a church...*" "*God, may they fall in love with someone who loves you...*" You want someone to step up.

Meanwhile, you could be the answer to someone's prayer simply by stepping up and inviting someone you know (and have a relationship with) to come to a worship service.

A church changes when the people in it start caring more about the chair of the future than about keeping the chair they're sitting in comfortable.

Most of us come to church week after week for worship; we like it; it was tough when we couldn't be here for months at a time during this pandemic; for many, coming to weekly worship seems to meet their needs.

And then, you invited someone – a co-worker or a neighbor - who doesn't know Jesus and suddenly you start to see everything differently. You start looking at your church through their eyes.

You pray on the way to church: "*Today, Lord, may people be more friendly than usual and not complain as much; in the service, may the music touch their heart; may the message today be way, way, way better than it usually is!*"

When you look through the eyes of someone who needs Jesus, everything **changes**; we realize someone's eternity could hang in the balance. Years ago, someone said to me Sunday morning as I was preparing to preach, "*I have a friend I've been praying for and inviting to church for years, but she's never come; she's here this morning, don't blow it!*"

That is so cool! You know she is praying for you; she is praying for the message; she is praying for a move of the Holy Spirit.

When there is someone we care about, someone we're praying for, someone we're inviting, God works!

Let me tell you when people are likely most open to God: when people are getting married, going through a divorce; having a baby, just moved to a new area, just lost a job or just found one, are dealing with addiction, entering recovery, going through a loss and grieving, having financial difficulties or having family problems (so lots of times).

Let me tell you how **simple** it is to BE INVITING: "*Hey, you ought to come to my church this week.*" (Should we practice?) Or, this month, you could invite someone you know and care about to the food truck (no hot dogs ☺), or puzzle-making, or the film, "Wonder."

A few years ago, Pew Research Report: "*Christians are leaving the faith in droves, and the trend isn't slowing down. In the last seven years, (the number of) people in the United States who call themselves followers of Jesus has dropped over ten percent. Not only is the Church not growing, but every year one percent are dropping out.*"

That's not okay. These are our **children** and **grandchildren**, our friends, neighbors and co-workers; these are people we care about whose eternal destiny is in jeopardy.

It's true. The church has ebbed and flowed for 2000 years; God isn't nervous about this. Worldwide, the church is growing rapidly. But this is our part of the world and where we are, churches are dying because they are primarily focused only on the middle chair.

When was the last time you said to someone you know, "You should come to my church?" Be inviting. People need to know Jesus; there's no one who doesn't need God. Surveys continue to tell us the #1 reason people come to church is... because someone **invited** them!

BE CONNECTING

People might come to church because they have been invited, but they stay because of the relationships they build, because they get connected. In spite of networking, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, email, instant messaging, Facebook, Linked-in (and who knows what else), people are **lonelier** today than ever before.

I mentioned to you some time ago, that physical and spiritual isolation is **lethal**. I mentioned connected people live significantly longer; I said join a

small group (a.s.a.p!). I told you our new Small Group recruiting motto was going to be, "Join or Die."

We have some small groups here currently; we're working on more. If you've been a Jesus follower for a little while, you should consider leading a small group; you will grow the most if you lead. If you'd like to be a leader or join a small group as a member, call the office or talk to Laura.

And for those of you already in a small group, it is important to have (intentionally set out) an empty chair and ask, "*Who does **God want** to be sitting in this chair?*"

We need this to be a three-chair church; God wants this to be a three-chair church. If you're older, ask God for a person you can pour yourself into; if you're younger, ask God for a person who could mentor you (all office-bearers and staff members have committed to both mentor and be mentored...)

And after worship today, instead of connecting with the same-o-same-o's you always talk to, consider connecting with someone you don't know so well - maybe a guest or visitor.

Be inviting, be connecting and third, be generous.

BE GENEROUS

If this is your church, if you know Jesus, and if you want to make a difference, you need to be fully and **financially invested in this ministry and mission.**

We approved a budget a few weeks ago that supports missionaries around the world, Christian Colleges and a seminary, chaplaincies, Campus Ministries, Disability ministries, social justice and hunger awareness.

At Covenant, your sacrificial giving provides these worship experiences, care, faith formation opportunities for children and students, adult discipleship, community engagements, and benevolence to those who are struggling.

Everything you have has come from God. And, you can't take any of it with you, you just get to use it, steward it, care for it during your lifetime. All God requires is that we return the first ten percent (i.e., a tithe) of everything we receive back to him. Technically, we might say, we don't give it to him, we just return it (because it already belongs to him). But God says, "Test me." Give your first ten percent and test me to bless you. Try it for ninety days (three months) (A church, I know, offered a money back guarantee - if God didn't bless you in those ninety days, they would return all the money you'd given in those ninety days; not one person asked.)

God wants us to be generous because he is generous. God calls us to be generous to others – in his name – with the time, talent, testimony, and treasures he has entrusted to us. They all belong to him; not to us!

If we really want to reach people for Jesus, fill this third chair, we need everyone on board and all-in; asking people to give is one important way to get on board.

BE SERVING

Be serving is another way. The third chair doesn't automatically just fill itself. It takes an intentional and concerted effort.

Church is not a spectator sport; everyone is on the team and everyone on the team plays all the time. We need to get out of the **bleachers** and off the sideline and onto the **playing field**; we need to roll up our sleeves, discover and deploy our spiritual gifts; we need to make ourselves available...

You could hold a baby, greet a guest, lead a small group, work with students, join a worship team, offer a prayer or hand out candy...

You could come Wednesday night, eat at one of the food trucks and mingle. The following week join the jigsaw puzzle competition. These Wednesday night activities aren't just to provide some thing for bored people to do in the summer; they are to build Christ's Church. And when people start stepping up and serving, God starts working . . .

A church becomes *great* when people say, "*I care so much about filling that third chair I am willing to do **whatever it takes.***"

We have children who need to be loved; we have students who need someone to cheer them on, we have adults who could just use a friend. Imagine if we had fifty Kids Hope mentors, as well as student mentors and prayer partners.

We live in a community (and in a world) that desperately needs to hear about Jesus. The next generation needs someone to step up and make the sacrifices our *fore-parents* made and tell them how much Jesus loves them.

The Psalmist writes: "*We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord...Then they would put their trust in God...*" "**Playing** on the **field**, we'll experience God in ways we never will in the **bleachers** or on the **sidelines**.

BE PRAYING

The stakes, friends, are high, sky high. Who will be sitting in that (third) chair? Will the next generation come to **know God**? Will your **grandchildren**? How about their grandchildren?

Jesus concludes a teaching on prayer in **Luke (18:8)**, asking: “*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*”

Will you be part of a movement of **prayer** that ushers in **revival**; part of a move of God’s Spirit that transforms lives? Will you be part of a movement that pushes us out of our comfort zone to proclaim a message of love, a Gospel of Good News, a life-changing relationship with Jesus? Will you be part of a movement to tell our children, grandchildren, and friends and from there all around the world about Jesus? Will you be a disciple of Jesus? These are the questions of discipleship. The Psalmist reminds us these are not options or choices; these are the things a follower of God and a disciple of Jesus does.

Followers of Jesus depend on His Spirit, go where the Spirit sends, and earnestly pray for the lost. Jesus called us to pray for the harvest of lost souls in Matthew 9:37-38 - “*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*” God is calling for all believers to be fully devoted laborers and harvesters in his work room - right down to the tips of our toes.

Actually, the **best** is yet to come. God will pour out greater **blessings** than we can even imagine. (Hopefully these things we’ve talked about this morning will sound very familiar to you. They are actually the Five “G’s” we’ve been talking about – in a slightly different order: Grace, Group, Giving, Gifting, and Growth).

Don’t be discouraged that you can’t do everything; but do what you can, give who you are to God; it is not our ability that’s important, it’s our availability.

If you are willing to turn the workroom of your heart over to God, you will not only be blessed, but you will also be a blessing to the next generation, to Christ’s Church and to His world.

Prayer (Sing) “Into my Heart”