

New Location Celebration

Could you imagine having a party, inviting your closest friends, neighbors – and none of them showed up because they had better things to do?

A few of them might have had better offers, or maybe your party was at the same time as their favorite TV show, or some of them actually chose that very night to rearrange their sock drawer.

How would that make you feel? Here you spent all of this time, money and effort to have this great party, and those who you invited didn't show up.

So you decide to open your doors even more. You invite anyone and everyone to your party. It doesn't matter what their background is, it doesn't matter if they are in the same social class, it doesn't even matter if they have the exact same beliefs as you.

Then people come to your party – and feel welcomed and have a great time. It is a wonderful party - a life changing party. And those who were too busy to attend, well, they just missed out on the party of the year.

In the passage Dave just read for us, Jesus was equating heaven to a similar party. Many people are invited, but a lot of them are just too busy to come to the party.

I don't know what was wrong with them - Heaven must be a great place. In the other scripture that Dave read for us, Jesus told His Disciples that he was going to go ahead of them and prepare a room for them. So not just a dinner party, but you even get a free room.

Now that is my kind of party.

We are having a party today. We've invited our neighbors – all of them. We did a lot of marketing, sent out invitations, and now it is time for our party. But unlike heaven, you can't stay the night.

Now we have some strangers here with us now and I am sure even more will be joining us after the worship service. But exactly who is a stranger? Let's see what Forrest Gump has to say about strangers.

I agree with Forrest, a stranger is just someone we haven't met yet. So let me introduce myself again, My name is Mark Maddox and I am the Pastor here at Sanctuary United Methodist Church, and on behalf of our church I would like to truly welcome you here today. There – we aren't strangers anymore.

I just love the idea of parties. You can meet people who live right around the corner from you. Parties are a place where the friends and neighbors can come together and show love and friendship towards one another. Isn't it great?!

Just like church today. You might consider church a weekly party. Go to almost any church in America and you will see people talking with each other, going up and introducing themselves to complete strangers, and even putting their arm around someone to help comfort them.

That's what most of us think of when we visualize church. A place to go where everyone is accepted, loved, and truly welcomed.

Keeping that vision in your mind, let me share another story with you.

It is Sunday and a homeless man is walking up the street going to his corner where he sells the Sunday paper to try to make a dollar or two so he can buy himself a hot meal.

As he walking up that street he's walked a hundred times before he is all of a sudden hit with this melodious sound coming from somewhere.

He stopped walking and looked around. There on top of the little hill he saw it – a church that he had never seen before – almost as if God himself dropped it right in his path.

The sound of the congregation singing – and the words of that song – just was drawing him into that church.

So he goes to the door, quietly pushes it open, and he sneaks into the back pew where he takes off his hat, bows his head, and begins praying, like he hadn't in years.

As he is sitting there starting to pray his heart out, he notices a hand on his shoulder. He looks up and sees the face of an usher. The usher looks down at him and says, "Excuse me sir, you are going to have to leave."

To which the homeless man replies, "I'm not here to bother anyone, I am just here to find God." But the usher persisted and told him he had to leave.

So the homeless man goes out those church doors, sits down on the steps, tears rolling down his face, he prays some more, apologizing to God for being poor, for being such a failure.

About that time he felt a hand on his shoulder again. And again he looks up but this time he sees the face of Jesus looking back at him. And Jesus, with tears rolling out of his eyes, said to the homeless man, "It's okay, my son, I've been trying to get into that church for years."

Many churches say that they are welcoming, but does that mean we are welcoming only to people who look like us and dress like us? Or does that mean that we are welcoming to anyone who may walk through those doors?

That is a risk we took. We sent out postcards to the whole entire neighborhood – then, we placed an ad in the newspaper that went out to every home in Marana. What were we thinking?

We all need to ask ourselves, truly in our hearts, would we go out of our way to welcome someone to our church who was obviously homeless or drastically different from us?

In the story that Dave read for us, they invited the homeless, they invited the less desirables – and welcomed them with open arms. I pray that we will be a church that will welcome people that aren't exactly like us. If someone walks in to our church looking for God, will he find God in here, or out on the front door steps?

I like to think - for the most part - that we are a welcoming church – one that doesn't judge the value of people by the size of their wallets. But do we carry that into our personal lives as well?

After we leave here on Sunday and we see a homeless person selling papers on the side of the road up at Cortaro and Silverbell – Do we call him a bum? Or do we just pretend that he isn't there?

How about the people in front of us at the checkout stand in the grocery store – you know the ones – that hold up the whole line because they are using WIC vouchers for their milk and cheese, or using food stamps to buy formula for their baby. What goes through our minds when they hold up the line and tie up our busy lives?

Then I sit back and think, how many of my friends are one paycheck away from being homeless? Or how many people do I know that are an accident or illness away from declaring bankruptcy?

I think it is so important that we don't judge those that are less fortunate than us, because by a simple twist of fate, there are many of us that could be in the exact same situation.

You know, something I have learned over the past few years is that every person alive, no matter what their skin color, no matter if they are poor or rich, no matter if they are educated or not; every single person I have ever met has their own special story to share.

See, we are all humans – no matter what we look like or what we dress like. We are all part of God's creation.

Being welcoming to someone on Sunday is one thing – being welcoming to someone on Wednesday afternoon is something else.

We don't come to church to be Christians for one day a week – we come to church to help prepare us for the other 6 days.

I'm the first to admit that it isn't easy being welcoming and friendly to everyone I meet. It isn't always easy to be kind to drivers that cut you off while you are driving down the street.

It isn't easy saying "hi" and being friendly to that person who is obviously down on their luck or who is drastically different from us.

Living the life of a Christian isn't necessarily easy, but we aren't alone. God is with us throughout the week to help us through these situations – to help us see others the way he sees them, as beautiful parts of his creation - we just have to remember to turn towards Him and seek Him out.

You know, even those times where we think God isn't in our lives, or maybe we think God has turned His back on us – He is still there reaching out to us.

But maybe it has been so long since we looked for Him, or maybe we're angry with Him about something. No matter what it is, God is still there reaching out to us, wanting to be part of our lives.

He has prepared a room for us – and has set the table wanting us to show up – no matter who we are – he wants us at his table. He has sent us the invitation, it is up to us to accept it.

Most of the time when we get an invitation they want us to RSVP, right? Well, this week let's RSVP to God. I invite everyone to take some time out of our busy schedules this week and write God a letter.

If you have had a good life, I invite you to write a letter thanking God for all of the blessings; if you have had a hard life, I invite you to still find something to thank God for – I am sure there is something.

Then maybe spend a paragraph or two sharing your feelings with God. Tell him how you have felt about Him over the years. Maybe you have felt like you have had a great relationship, or maybe you felt that He left you when you needed Him the most. I invite you to write about this and be honest with your feelings.

Then I encourage you to write a paragraph about your friends and family and how much they mean to you.

Then finally, write a sentence on how delighted you would be to join Him at that special party he is having – and you would like to reserve a room as well.

I would like to leave you with a few letters that some children have written God.

Pastor: Mark Maddox

520- 207-6453

pastor@umcSanctuary.org

[**www.umcSanctuary.org**](http://www.umcSanctuary.org)