

A Full House

Luke 14:16–23 (NRSV)

Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. **17** At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ **18** But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’ **19** Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’ **20** Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’ **21** So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ **22** And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’ **23** Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.’

Introduction. Have you ever thrown a party? Did you want people to come to your party? Did you invite people to come?

Jesus told parable about a man who wanted friends and neighbors to join him for a big party he was throwing. Unfortunately he received few positive RSVP's. So he had his servant to extend the invitation to those who seldom if ever received invitations to the type of party he was hosting, street and the invisible people. Do you know why he extended the invitation beyond his familiar circle of associates? **He wanted his house to be filled for the banquet.**

When Matthew in his gospel shares this same parable, he tells it from the angle of this man throwing a party for his son who is getting married. He invites people to the wedding and reception.

While serving at FCUMC, Patty and I attended a memorable wedding reception of a multiple course sit down meal which was held at the Read House. We had access to every imaginable hors d'oeuvre, an unbelievable salad bar, multiple carving and cooking stations. The huge cake was too beautiful to serve. The flowers filled the serving table to the ceiling. I imagine the bride's parents invested well into the six figures for the event. They, too, wanted a full house to help them honor their daughter and celebrate with friends.

Jesus' story reminds us of the great hosting God who desires his house to be filled with people. Jesus story has an eschatological element – **when God throws the great banquet at the end of human history, he wants the table filled with people.** He wants heaven to be full so humans to enjoy his riches and honor his son.

I believe this parable also has a present message. **God wants his house filled in this present age – the place where His Son is honored and we experience tastes of his riches.** God wants this church to be filled. He desires this sanctuary and worship center to be full on Sundays and Thursdays, our classrooms filled with people for small groups. **He wants this place filled.**

Something Special Here.

I want to share with you for the next few moments from my heart. **I hope you realize we really have something very special here at OUMC.** This is a great church positioned to make a huge difference in this community and in the world. God has poured up us the vast richness of heaven.

In six decades of life, I have worshiped regularly in some 19 different churches as either pastor or worshiper as well as visiting dozens of other churches for worship. **In my experience we have as rich or richer and as meaningful worship as in any of those churches.** What happens here on Sunday mornings and Thursday evening is extraordinary. The services lift up Jesus and there is a sense of God presence and the moving of the Holy Spirit. The quality of worship is exceptional. Those who lead and serve in worship are sincere in their faith and commitment. Worship here is special – most churches do not experience what we do here.

Here at OUMC we have a genuine culture of outreach. This church is not locked inside these walls. We are engaged in our community through multiple ministries such as Family Promise, The Bethlehem Center, The Chambliss Center, The Samaritan Center. We are involved in community events. We invest lots of resources and energy to Recovery aimed only to serve those in our fold but beyond this fold. We reach out in love through Trunk or Treat, Eggstravaganza and VBS. We give \$10,000's to people in need. We are engaged in ministries beyond Chattanooga in places in the USA, India and Ecuador. We support the missions of our conference and district.

We are committed to our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ through not only our worship but also through engagement in small groups, especially our Sunday School and share groups. We have wonderful leaders of small groups who give much. Most groups have strong support among their core. We invest much into our children and youth.

OUMC is blessed with a wonderful staff and outstanding leaders. Your staff here is second to none. Each staff person is willing to work hard for the glory of God and to serve. Are we perfect – goodness no! We have lots to learn, but as best I can tell, none are here solely for a paycheck. Each staff feels a calling from God to serve. We have bright, devoted and deeply spiritual lay leaders in this congregation. They are willing to step out into the unknown when they deeply sense God is leading us. We truly have something special here. I could go on and fill an hour or more with the great blessing we have including a wonderful campus and facilities. I could share how God has blessed us with the resources to do the ministry He is calling us to do.

God wants this place to be filled – this place of worship, the classrooms, the small groups, the gym – with people who are honoring His Son, enjoying the blessings given and growing as disciples. I join God in that desire.

But I must tell you that when I stand before you and see empty seats it causes my heart to sink. When attendance drops below what is average, my heart flutters. While I know those gathered will be blessed, I know God wants this house to be filled. You see I know what is possible here. Knowing the number of people who are involved and claim connection to this church, we should be having 700 in worship rather than 500. If we were the 700 and living faithfully, we would soon be 1,000. Now while this is not about numbers and being large, it is about making disciples. God has set us in a place with resources to disciple that many people and beyond.

But we face an enormous challenge of filling this house in order to disciple folks. Our culture has drifted away from faithful participation in church. The demographics of our area show that around 30% of people are active in a church or place of worship. About 18% attend their place of worship each week. I guess we can say the positive thing is this is higher than Europe where church attendance is less than 10%.

When we look at our own house here at OUMC, we see something that is sobering. In a given week, we see less than 30% of our some 1200 members participating in worship or small groups. Many of our members have not worshiped here in 6 months, a year, 5 years or longer. Some we have no active record of attendance in 20 years. You see on a typical Sunday and Thursday we have about 530 people for worship. Around 150 of those are either children or youth who are not yet confessing members or are guests who have yet to join.

In recent weeks, I have become interested in a period of history, the Middle Ages, of which I knew very little. In my reading, I came across some interesting and disturbing information. Christianity took deep root in the Mediterranean and Middle East. Four hundred years after the time of Christ, it was the dominate religion of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Ethiopia and much of north Africa. The Church and Christianity was the dominate influencer in culture, education, politics and faith. In all of the places I mentioned, there were many churches and strong connections and oversight by Christian leadership. But in a span of 100 years during the 7-8th centuries, Christianity went from the majority faith to a minority faith. Today in those lands I mentioned is the place of lowest Christian density in the world. Some groups were able to hang on but they are very small.

You may think of a 100 years as a long time. But for me, it's not. I turn 60 this week. If I have the same genes as my parents, I expect to live into my 80's and possibly 90's. In a span of my life time, the dominant faith and witness fell to minority status.

Let me bring this closer home. During my years of ministry, two the church I served (Belamy's Chapel and Chatham Hill) are no longer in existence. They have been closed. When I was there, they were small (6-25 people) yet they were alive. Chatham Hill experienced great revival while I was there. God moved in a mighty way. The church grew from 7 to 25 in average attendance. Today it is 0. In Chattanooga, there are other UM churches which a few

decades ago were vibrant and had several hundred worshipers. Two of which you pass when you come out of Chattanooga on ML King Blvd – St. Andrews and St. James. These were vibrant churches. Another is found on Moore Road.

Staying alive and vital.

While there are many factors which contributed to the decline of Middle Eastern Christianity and the death of these churches, one antidote to decline and death is keeping the house filled with people. If people are not engaged, it is tough to be effective in our mission of making disciples. Empty churches wither and die.

It seems there are two keys to filling the house of God. Both very much involve you and me.

The first is our faithfulness in participating. If we were more regular and frequent in our attendance in worship and small group, it would make a huge difference in keeping the house full. Imagine if that 30% weekly attendance went up to 50% of members. We would have well over 750 people each week in worship without adding a single guest. But more importantly that filling the house is the impact faithful participation would have on all of us who participate more frequently. We would have more encounters with God, we would have stronger community around us to go through tough times, we would grow in our understanding of God and faith, we would be better equipped to live full and meaningful lives. The witness of our full house would have an impact on others.

Often on Saturdays, I pass by the Korean 7th Day church on Ooltewah-Ringgold Road. Do you know what I notice? The parking lot is always overflowing – people parked in the grass and along the drive to the street. I imagine something great is going on in that church.

What if those traveling south on I-75 on Sunday morning glanced toward our north parking lot and saw every space filled. What if those who drive through our lot saw every space in the east and north lot filled, cars parked at VandeWeile and over on Food City's lot. They would think, something is going on at OUMC. It would be a witness that would stir the curiosity of many to the degree they would come and see. They might come and experience a life transforming encounter with Jesus Christ.

The second key to filling the house is each of us inviting people to join us in worship and in our small group. People around us, in our families, in our neighborhood and in the general community need Jesus. So many people's lives are headed to bad places. So many lack meaningful and healthy relationships. So many long for meaning and purpose. Coming to know Jesus and connecting with Jesus' bride, the Church can change their lives.

Of those 70% of people in this community who are not connected with a local church, we can have an impact on many. Some of those people are folks who have attended church with you here but no longer attend. Others you encounter in your daily life at work, school, shopping at the park, at the doctor's office and in your neighborhood.

When God lays someone on your heart that you have missed, it is not primarily to tell the pastors or staff so they can do something. It is for you to pray for them and contact them.

The Dinner.

Jesus said, "There was a man who prepared a dinner and invited people come. He wanted his house to be filled with people." Today that One has spread the table and wants the house filled.