

# **The Empty Chair**

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The Church: The greatest gift

*We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands." Psalm 76*

I have three chairs set up here this morning.

The chair in the middle represents you and me – our place in the family of God – the church.

The chair to the right is a reminder that somebody came before me. Somebody invited me here.

Somebody made a place for me...in my case it was my Mom and Dad. They brought me to church for the first time when I was just an infant

For some of you though, the first time you came to church you were an adult and you sat way in the back so that you could run out in case things got a little weird.

Somewhere along the line, in all that, you met God, and you knew that you knew that he was alive and real.

And for some of you by the time you got to WVPC you were what some call a “lifer”.

You were in it for good. You had been doing church since you were a little kid, and you were hooked!

But whatever your background, not one of us in this room came to faith by ourselves. I want you to picture this line of chairs...one after the other...stretching out as far as the eye can see...all the way back to Jesus.

Generations have gone before us friends

Telling each other the good news of the gospel...and sometimes it gets distorted...and sometimes people forced it down peoples throats in terrible ways, and abused it, and did it all wrong...but because the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is real, none of those abuses from our long history snuffed it out.

The news of salvation in Jesus Christ is real, and alive, and powerful.

He still heals broken hearts and sets captives free, and forgives sins and changes lives.

That’s the reality. No matter what the world says...There is A Redeemer

And that is good news...

That's why church is so amazing. Jesus told his friends, and they told their friends, the friends of the friends of Jesus told their friends...and there's this long line of witnesses... and not a single generation got skipped...and it all comes down right to the chair where I sit and where you sit.

The Bible says we are "surrounded by a cloud of witnesses" – those who have gone before...sometimes I think they are spiritually coaching us on! Saying "You can do it. God is real, he loves you...keep at it...don't give up on love. Hang in there with the forgiveness stuff. Keep going with the prayers...keep the generosity flowing...its all worth it..." You see...

I sit here in this place, in this church, and I know Jesus because somebody told me about him. Somebody who came before me bore witness to the fact that God was alive and that he was real and that I could know him personally. Someone who prayed for me before I got here, someone who loved me into the kingdom, someone who didn't give up on me when I was messing up....How important this was for me!

Turn to the person next to you, and for the next two minutes just tell that person next to you who it was that told you about Jesus for the first time...

We all had somebody tell us about Jesus once. Otherwise we wouldn't be here.

Now, turn your gaze to this chair right here.

Friends, there are people still to come...

This chair represents the next generation. ..the next group of people coming on in here...

So chair #1 is the past, chair #2 (you and I) are the present, and chair #3 is the future.

Friends...

I want us to be a three chair church...not a church of just the past although history is important; but some churches get stuck there...

I used to work in a church like that...it was called "Old First Church...the church that founded Newark"

They were pretty part about that...even though Newark NJ was recently voted the worst city in America to live in...I agree

It stinks over there...the air smells like burning rubber

But they had a beautifully building and the *deadly benefit* of being endowed...so they never worried about money...they were a historical landmark...in that city of soot

But there were only about 50 people in their congregation cause they were shrinking...

They didn't care...they were the church that founded Newark NJ, and they had all the money they needed!

When I tried to get them to open the doors for the homeless who were sleeping on the steps every night they asked me "Why would we do that?"

I said, "Because I think Jesus would do that."

And I tried and tried...but it just wasn't a priority...

What mattered was their history...not the growth of the congregation, not service to the poor...

So they were stuck here....in chair #1...stuck in their past...

And then there is this chair...the here and now chair.  
The chair that represents the present moment.  
And the present is a good thing...but if I am unwilling to think about this chair here next to it...  
If I am unwilling to invest in the future...because I won't get out of my comfort zone in the present...then I am not serving the church as an active member, as we've been discussing for the past five weeks.  
I am not invested really in the mission of WVPC "To know Christ and make him known."  
I am just here because its convenient for me...and I like it well enough...

Since it benefits me...  
That's being stuck in the present..without a vision  
I am not saying that history is not important  
And I am not saying that there aren't seasons in our lives when we do need to sit and just receive...cause sometimes we are struggling so much that we don't have it to give.

However, the trajectory of a healthy church, is one that points toward the future. That has an understanding of where it is going and why.

A church that is geared , because of the rich history of the past, and because of the goodness of God in the present, - it is geared towards the future of bringing people to sit in these chairs...of sharing Jesus with the next group of folks/with the next generation

I want us to be a church that is ALL IN... to making a way for someone to sit here!

Remember, you and I are not here by accident.  
We are not sitting in chair #2 because we just stumbled upon the gospel randomly.  
It happened probably because a group of people somewhere back there made an intentional decision to be ALL IN for the task of making Christ known to us; at a camp, at a youth group, at a Bible study, at work, at home doing devotionals or whatever we did.

A group of folks back there in chair #1 made a conscious choice; they said...we will be intentional about this...

"We will work. We will pray. We will serve. We will dream. We will give. We will sacrifice. We will persevere.  
This is just too important...we want to do for the next generation, what somebody did for us. Knowing Christ has changed our lives so dramatically...that we want others to know about this God too and how wonderful he is."

So folks, at the congregational meeting right after this, you are going to hear from our session members about the future vision for WVPC.

And I know with the move to ECO its been hard, and we've had huge staff transitions in the midst of all this that has kind of thrown me for a loop...I am sure you know that it has been very difficult for me this year, as well as I know for you.

I was so grateful for Todd's sermon on praying for your leaders because friends since you have been doing that I have felt your prayers.

The other day I knew and sensed the Holy Spirit's presence and I thought ...what is this? I haven't felt this in awhile...that presence is familiar to me...I recognize that One...I've known him and experienced him before...thank you for praying for this for me. Its working...

It took me awhile though to realize that it was your prayers buoying me up...encouraging me.

And in that encouragement came this promise to me for this church and it is this- *that the best is yet to come.*

This is not me being pollyanish, or living in denial of the losses we have experienced. I know them better than anyone. They are very real.

Rather, this is me, your Pastor, to the best of my ability discerning the promise of the Holy Spirit for this place...for this chair...I want you to be encouraged too...

God is on the move. There is much good that will happen here at WVPC in the next three years, and I feel called to stay with you to help make it happen.

Be encouraged. The best is yet to come.

You want to know what makes a church great? Its when the people in the church care more about this chair...because they are so excited about the gospel...this chair that represents the future...where we are going...than they do about preserving their own chair of the present.

I can sit in this chair and be very comfortable, but unless I begin to start filling this chair (chair #3) I'm not doing for the next generation what someone else did for me who sat here (in chair #1)...who paved the way for me to know about Jesus.

Think about someone in your family who you may worried about in terms of their connection to God.

Maybe it's a spouse, or a child, or a friend, or a parent.

And you pray, "*Lord please bring someone into their life who knows you. Bring someone into their life who can help them to understand that you love them and that you care.*"

Now, did you ever think that *You* might be the answer to someone elses prayers for their loved one?

*You* might be that person, that God has put in their path, to answer a prayer of someone who loves them who is just longing that they come to Christ?

Maybe that person who is being prayed for, who needs to know God, is someone you work with.

Maybe it's a neighbor who you just kind of are acquainted with

Maybe its someone you socialize with...you square dance with or play cards with, but you never really have talked about spiritual things with them.

Maybe its someone on the PTA, or who volunteers with you in good causes, but faith in God has never really come up....

Nobody gets to this chair unless someone is intentional about inviting them...nobody

So you say...okay...okay. I get this chair thing. But I have no idea what to say to someone at the office, in the neighborhood, on the PTA...

Andy Stanley (I listen to him a lot because he has some good wisdom) has this great three point guide about when to invite to someone to church...and here are the three little nuggets...for you to chew on and remember...because these three situations are times to invite people to church...

When you hear #1: That someone is **1. NOT IN A CHURCH** (just got here, don't have a home church yet, not sure where to go, sort of busy but maybe for the kids sake we'll start)

When you hear #2: someone tell you that **2. NOT GOING WELL** (in our marriage, with our kids, health is failing)

When you hear #3: someone tell you that **3. NOT PREPARED FOR SOMETHING** (we just moved here, we're having a baby, my spouse is looking for a job, my parents are far away...they are overwhelmed etc)

You can respond by inviting them Stanley says, because they will probably appreciate that you did even if they don't go. What might you say? I am not trying to tell you what to say, but this is a way to respond with your vision toward this chair....You could say...

***Really? Well maybe we could go to church together this Sunday! (Lets practice!)***

*Friends, this is not being pushy, manipulative or intrusive. This is simply an invitation as you respond to someone who is expressing a need.*

*They may not know it, but their need is spiritual, and you are giving them the opportunity to join you in worship.*

*One of the hardest things to do is to walk into a church for the first time and not know anyone! That's why we need to invite...otherwise this chair isn't going to get filled.*

Friends, I want you to know that there are so many needs in this community, I just read about the fact that there is a tremendous feeling of isolation right here in Cupertino, from individuals and families who come here from other countries to work in high tech but who leave their culture, families and friends behind. Moreso with women then men, but its for both.

And they come in here, and they know no one, and they are placed in high pressure situations that some of you understand who work in these places...and its hard...

And I've been thinking a lot about the strengths of WVPC...and I think the strength here is that we are a caring community – like a family.

We are intergenerational benefitting and learning from all ages,

We are compassionate with a great heart for service, and a great heart for mission.

We also love to eat (I'm not sure how that fits in, but though I'd mention it).

And I've also been thinking about the fact that APPLE is moving in a mile or so down the street from us. All these people are coming in...and I know there's a lot of controversy about that in the community.

Like it or not, they are coming...and there is no way we can compete with their technology, and their buildings, and their resources. No way.

But maybe, just maybe, as we look at this chair here...maybe we could offer them something real...

Like a community of faith who would pray for them

Like a family church to take the place of a family they left behind

Like a place to come where there is no pressure, or quotas, or deadlines to meet, no competition and fear of layoffs and demotions; where they can sit and worship and connect with others, have authentic friendships, good times, and find out about a God who loves them.

I know Apple and Google and everyone who wants success from their employees build community too inside their organization

But not in terms of meeting that spiritual hunger for meaning and purpose that is in each one of us that God longs to fill.

**Look** at this chair...Remember it this week and in the weeks to come

**Listen** in your conversations with people for the clues that there might be an opening, or a spiritual hunger in someone...**1. Not in church 2. Things aren't going well 3.**

**Overwhelmed**

**Love** people enough to recognize the spiritual hunger in them...r love people enough to do what someone else did for you. Practice saying **"Really? (as you respond to scenarios 1,2,or 3) Well maybe we could go to church together this Sunday."**

Pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. And fill this chair.