**The Invitation – Week 3 - Include**

**Introduction: Empty Chair**

(TP starts with empty chair on stage). I want to start off this morning asking you a really easy question that I assume you will answer correctly. You ready? Ok, what is this? (TP points to the empty chair). That’s right, it’s a chair☺ Some of you might be seeing abstract art, and I can really appreciate that, but obviously it’s a chair. And what are chairs for? A chair is most fulfilling its purpose in life when it is being sat in. A chair that is not being sat in is not fulfilling its purpose. The sight of an empty chair is just sad, isn’t it? In fact, I tear up a little whenever I see a perfectly good chair sitting out on a curb for the garbage pickup. I want to pull over and adopt that chair, take it home and help it fulfill its calling by sitting in it. An empty chair is just wrong! No one wants that. In fact, some people even go to great lengths to make sure there are no empty chairs.

For example, did you know that each year at the Oscars, hundreds of seats are filled by regular people like you and me because the producers don’t want the camera catching empty chairs? “Chair fillers” stand on the sides and the moment an invited guest leaves their seat, the “chair filler” moves quickly to sit in it until they return. It’s described as a high stakes game of musical chairs. The whole point is to avoid the message of an empty chair. Anyone here interested in sitting near an A-lister at next year’s show?

If you are hosting an event…

We all have been in situations where an empty chair is not a good thing. Just think about a wedding reception you’ve been to where the dreaded empty chair represents wasted preparation and money on the part of the host, drawing the ire of the bride☺ No one wants their name card sitting all by itself out on that table.

We’ve even created apps to help fill empty chairs, whether it’s a last minute seat on a plane or at a game that needs to be filled.

~~Why do we go to such lengths to fill empty chairs?~~ Because there’s something that’s missed when it comes to an empty chair. The person who sits in that chair has an experience that they otherwise would not have had, and the host knows that the experience is worth preparing a seat for that person. Every chair matters!

**Series Recap**

We’re in week 3 of our series, “The Invitation”. This series is preparing us for a special day next week called Show Up Sunday. In preparation for this day, we are challenging one another to invite 5 friends, neighbors, coworkers, or family members to join us on that day; to fill these empty chairs! Fill out the card. Add “Jesus makes our life better…” statement from the first two messages somewhere in here.

Think with me for a moment about the empty chair nearest you. What do you see? More elbow room? An unobstructed view? Somewhere to put your stuff? An empty chair is never just an empty chair. It’s an opportunity.

…An opportunity for a student to find friendship during a season of loneliness.

…An opportunity for a couple struggling in their marriage to find hope.

…An opportunity for someone we love to find their way back to God.

If the chair remains empty, then it’s a missed opportunity. That’s why it’s never just an empty chair. That chair represents an opportunity for someone to have an life-changing experience. You and I can do something about that empty chair. Here’s the truth: a simple invitation can turn an empty chair into a full life!

**Word: Luke 14:16-24**

Jesus told a story that involved an invitation called “The Parable of the Great Banquet”, but I think it could also be called “The Parable of the Empty Chairs.”

To set the scene for us, Jesus is at a banquet at the house of a prominent Pharisee, so it’s safe to assume that there were some VIP’s who were also there. And these VIP’s definitely thought of themselves as such, because Jesus notices that they are jockeying for the best seats. Now no one wants to sit close to the bathroom at a banquet, but I can just imagine these guys having no problem pushing someone aside to get to the best seats. No one wants to be stuck on the opposite end of the potato casserole, right?

Banquets were a huge part of the culture of Jesus’ day. Being invited to a one was significant not only because you now had plans for the weekend, but it meant that you were now included in the community. You enjoyed a new status. It meant that you belonged. These types of gatherings were primary indicators of social status. Getting that coveted invitation meant that you were in the “IN” crowd!

It’s similar to the feeling we get when we receive that all-important wedding invitation today, maybe where the CEO of your company or a prominent person in the community invites you to a wedding. EVERYONE who is ANYONE is going to be there! It’s an honor to be included! We’ve all also felt the sting of NOT receiving that coveted invitation and having to just live vicariously through the pics we see posted on social media. It’s a little difficult to eat that delicious wedding cake virtually, isn’t it?

So in the middle of this banquet, Jesus decides to tell a story about a banquet:

***Jesus replied with this story: “A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. 17When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, ‘Come, the banquet is ready.’ But they all began making excuses. One said, ‘I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’***

***21“The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, ‘Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ After the servant had done this, he reported, ‘There is still room for more.’ So his master said, ‘Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.’” (Luke 14:16-24 NLT)***

So a man prepares a great feast. Now I don’t know about you, but when I think of great feasts I’m thinking of prime rib, asparagus, homemade mashed potatoes, cornbread, and probably peach pie☺ I’m not sure what this host prepared, but it was awesome and he spent a lot of time planning and preparing it! And the original guests were not invited last minute. In this culture, when you threw a banquet you would actually send out two invitations: one way in advance and one the day of. So it’s not like anyone could use the “oh I didn’t see the invite” excuse.

This banquet was not just an ordinary banquet though. Jesus is using the banquet as a metaphor for the kingdom of God. God as the host is extending an invitation to come and be a part of this banquet that signifies inclusion into a new kind of community. He wants every chair to be filled because a filled chair means a full life. And the host in the parable is not happy when he starts getting the excuses rolling in….

* “I’ve just bought a field”
* “I’ve just bought oxen”
* “I just got married”

This last excuse doesn’t make ANY sense because what this person doesn’t understand is that getting invited to this banquet means a FREE date night! Seriously!

The “IN” crowd turns down the invitation with the excuses, so the host says “go out and invite the “OUT” crowd”, and they come flooding in. Everyone is invited, because this banquet is not about being exclusive, but inclusive. The Kingdom of God is radically inclusive. (Maybe add that a misconception of our faith is that it is exclusive). God is serious about inviting everyone to this new kind of community He’s creating, regardless of their status. This banquet doesn’t have a limited number of seats. God wants every seat to be filled:

***“…so that the house will be full.” (vs. 23)***

God wants the house to be full because he wants lives to be full!

Think for a moment about the 5 people you’re inviting to Show Up Sunday. What would it mean for them to fill the empty chairs? Is there anyone that you’ve overlooked? Maybe you need to add a 6th, 7th, or 8th person that reflects God’s desire that everyone be included. Imagine if those people you’re planning to invite are here in two weeks and begin to experience God’s grace in amazing ways. Imagine if they were included in God’s banquet.

**Every Week - A Banquet/Feast**

Every weekend, God prepares this banquet right here at COMMUNITY. It’s a…

* A banquet of **God’s Word**.
* A banquet of **God’s music**.
* A banquet of God’s **presence**.
* A banquet of **grace and hope**.

We even have a kid table at this banquet – Not like the kid table you were relegated to at family gatherings. This kid table is called Kids’ City for children and StuCo for students. And these are banquets specifically designed with your kids in mind.

Every weekend these banquets require **hours and hours of creative planning, rehearsal, and prayer**. It’s designed to bring love, joy, and life to all who participate. The sole purpose of these banquets is to help people find their way back to God. And…every weekend thousands of people join us across 10 locations in Chicagoland.

But here’s the sad part: hundreds of thousands of people have yet to experience this banquet. They may be too busy, or for whatever reason not interested. But our host - God, can’t bear the thought of his banquet being wasted. And so he sends **us** – his servants, out to ask people to join us because his banquet is for **all people**:

* Young and old.
* Rich and poor.
* Republican and Democrat.
* Coke *and* Pepsi Drinkers.
* Cubs fans, Bears fans, even Sox fans . . . but probably **not** Packers fans.
* It is for “every nation, tribe, people, and language.” (Revelation 7:9).

This banquet can be life-changing for everyone, and so I need to start taking the open seats around me personally... And it is true that what we experience here on weekends is only one part of Community. Church is not a **place** or an **event**. It is a **movement of people**. But our weekend Celebrations are still the most frequent first-step for people finding their way back to God. So I would love for you to join me and begin to feel deep down that – “Someone is missing out on this banquet!” And then dare to ask God, “Who do you want me to include?”

How many of you have ever had the experience of sitting in a celebration service and when it is done, you thought: “Oh, I wish so-and-so would have been here with me.” We all have! -- That empty chair near you is an **opportunity** for someone to taste the goodness of God.

Last week I got a text from a friend telling me that Molly’s Cupcakes is opening up in Naperville. Yes, the very best the city has to offer is now coming to the suburbs. The original Molly’s is just a few blocks from where I live. They won Cupcake Wars on Food Network. So whenever I talk to someone who has just moved into the neighborhood I tell them they have to check out Molly’s. And whenever someone comes to visit us, we take them to Molly’s because we love Molly’s cupcakes and I don’t want anyone to miss out on Molly’s!

Frends, Molly’s Cupcakes are amazing, but we have something here so much better, and much more life-changing than Molly’s Cupcakes. And simply put - we need to include as many people as we can in what we already know is one of the best things that has ever happened to us!

**Challenge**

I want to challenge us in two ways coming out of Jesus’ story:

**First**, **we all need to take our own seat at the banquet**. We live in a world that provides countless of reasons to do something other than be here each Sunday. Many times we find ourselves making excuses like the people in the story. And even though our lives are full and there are multiple opportunities pulling at us every day, we have to make the **intentional decision** to take our seat at the table.

God can’t do much with an empty chair, but each time we take a seat, we open ourselves to the good stuff that God wants for us. And I know many of you have made very intentional efforts to be here consistently.

* A while back my friend **Matt** was in a band, and he changed his rehearsal schedule so he can be here every Sunday he is in town.
* **Chris and Lori**. . . When we first started LPOT, we asked people to commit to coming for six weeks straight. Chris and Lori took that challenge seriously . . . and they will tell you, it was a game-changer.

**We gotta take OUR seat at the table.**

Here is the **second** takeaway: **God is sending us out to invite others in**! He wants every seat filled! I love what theologian NT Wright says about this:

***“It isn’t enough to say that we ourselves are the people dragged in from the country lanes to our surprise, to enjoy God’s party. That may be true; but party guests are then expected to become party hosts in their turn.”*** (*NT Wright in Luke for Everyone).*

Our small group had an outing last week. We decided to go to Pritzker Pavilion for one of the free concerts in the park. At first it wasn’t clear who was hosting this outing. And because of that, it was also unclear as to who all was going or if anyone was going to show up at all. I wanted to go, and I wanted a bunch of people there, so I decided to host it. And it was amazing how that little mind-shift changed so much for me. I became personally responsible for making sure we had a bunch of people show up at the concert. I knew it was going to be a great time, and I didn’t want anyone to miss out!

Far too many of us are so caught up in being **guests** at God’s banquet, we forget that we need to become **hosts**. And when I’m a host, I take it personally when there are empty chairs! Maybe need another sentence or two…this is good!

**Conclusion**

(Sit in chair) I remember sitting in a chair much like this one as a child and being shown God’s love by some great **children’s ministry leaders** who taught me the amazing stories of people like Abraham, Esther, David, Peter, Paul, and Mary.

I was sitting in a chair like this when I decided to **go public with my faith**. I had to stand up from my chair and walk down the aisle of my home church and was baptized.

I remember sitting in a chair in a church building less than a mile from here **where I met my wife for the first time** (she wasn’t my wife yet). I didn’t hear a word that was spoken that night, I was far too distracted by this totally good-looking woman in my row.

I remember sitting in an empty chair in a cafeteria at Naperville Central High School before Community’s first services were ever held, praying that God would fill those seats. I didn’t know any of you then, but I was praying for you to show up before you ever came.

Please hear this: We are not saying that sitting in this chair is the only way to find your way back to God.  But it is ***a*** way.  And it’s a great way any one of us can help someone get started on that journey. So, let’s not let a single chair sit empty! Let’s not let anything God has prepared go to waste.

A simple invitation can turn an empty chair into a full life!

Imagine somebody on your list sitting in one of those seats.

* Picture them nodding their head when they hear something that speaks to their heart.
* Imagine them feeling something they’ve never felt as the band leads in worship
* Think of what it would be like for them to begin to feel God’s love taking a hold of their life.

An empty chair is never just an empty chair.  A simple invitation can turn an empty chair into a full life!

Let’s pray.

**Communion Idea**

Every week at Community we invite you to come to the table of communion. When we do this we are doing something that Christ-followers have been doing for centuries all over the world. In the second chapter of Acts we read these words: “***They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*** *(Acts 2:42).*

This is a great opportunity for me to remember that I come to this table with millions of people all over the world who put their trust in the one who invites us to this table: Jesus. The one whose body was broken and blood was shed for me and for you.

When I receive the invitation to come to this table, I remember that…

* When I needed the love and forgiveness of Jesus, he invited me to his table.
* When I needed to be reconciled to him because of all the stuff I let get between me and him, he invited me to his table.
* When I needed to find my way back to God in Jesus, he invited me to his table.

And today, when I still need him more than anything else – and in spite of all my doubts and shortcomings, he still invites me to this table.