

Message: “Will You Give Up Your Seat?”

Kimberli Lira’s husband Mel died after a two-year battle with cancer, leaving her with their young son and daughter. She writes, “My husband endured cycle after cycle of chemo. He was separated from his children many nights. He was hooked up to chemo for 24 hours at a time. He listened to the doctors tell him bad news after bad news. He was left paralyzed and unable to get out of bed. And he never said how much he appreciated the coffee bar at the church. Never once did he say he loved the lighting in the sanctuary. He didn’t boast of the graphics and props on the platform. He talked about Jesus. He quoted scriptures. He reminded me of sermons we had heard. And in the middle of the night he sang songs of praise and worship to God and he spent his time praying. Because nothing a church does to strategize to bring in members helps you in the time of the storm. It is only Jesus. ...

I scroll down my social media feed and I see churches with pictures of their coffee bars, concert like settings, graphics, trendy sermon series, and those don’t appeal to me. [*Note: Kimberli says she doesn’t mind them, but they aren’t what’s important.*] I want to see how Jesus has changed a person’s life. I want to see the power of prayer. I want to see how the Word of God can be applied to one’s life. I want to see how Jesus can help the hurting. I want to see how Jesus can heal the sick. I want to see how the broken heart was restored. I want to see how the mourners were comforted. I want to see how lives were restored. Rather than posting pictures of coffee bars, I would rather see testimonies of the power of God. I am thankful I attend a church that focuses on prayer and the word of God. I am thankful that in one of the darkest moments of my life I knew I could count on others to pray for me and with me.”¹

Kimberli concludes with these words, “Tell a person how God has changed your life. Show them the love of God through your actions. Demonstrate how God helped you through the darkest of storms.”²

¹ <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/300871-powerful-plea-churches-widow-need-new-coffee-bar.html>

² *Ibid*

What poignant, heartfelt and hopeful words these are. Kimberli and Mel give us a lesson on what it truly means to have faith in Jesus. It's being in a relationship that changes your life for the better. There's a depth and strength that carries you when others fail and you're alone.

That's a lesson that everyone who is part of any church – leaders and members, need to learn. It's an expression of our WHY here at Corona UMC. We believe Jesus' love changes lives for the better. Kimberli gives us good cues on the HOW as well: prayer, Bible study, small group and caring. The bottom line is this: rather than focusing on WHAT we do at church, let's remember WHY we come – to know Jesus, because only he makes our lives better ... or bearable ... we then we act. We invite others to know Jesus and share our story.

This lesson isn't new. It's been true for millennia. We need to own it. All we have to do is turn to the book of Jeremiah and read the passage for today (2:3-14). God tells the young prophet to say these words to the people, *“What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?”* (v5)

The people didn't just wander away from God, they intentionally turned away from God. They were playing politics with the superpowers of the day. They were following any practice that offered some spirituality.

It never occurred to them to say, *“Where's God, the God who got us out of jail, who took care of us through thick and thin, who helped us in the rough times, the dry times, the one who was with us in the cruel, difficult places we had to go?”* (v6, my paraphrase).

God gives us gardens, summer corn, fresh fruit, a wonderful land filled with good things. But we ignore, defile and pollute what God has given.

Even worse,

The people don't ask, “Where is God?”

The pastors don't ask, “Where is God?”

The teachers don't know anything about God. The leaders defy God.

The prophets preach about false gods.

And everyone chases empty dreams and silly schemes in the name of the god of self-interest (vv7-8).

God Almighty takes notice. God knows when we break our covenant, when we walk away from our relationship with Jesus. It breaks God's heart. What's worse is when we lead our children to act the same way.

Jeremiah uses an illustration to show us how shocking this is.

What country has ever traded in what it holds most dear for another thing? For example, America trades in liberty and freedom for consumption and better entertainment. Silly, right?

Yet that's how God feels. We've turned away from God for no good reason other than the relationship is inconvenient or uncomfortable. Jeremiah's words capture it well, "*Stand in shock, heavens, at what you see! Throw up your hands in disbelief – this can't be!*" (v12).

We've guilty of two sins: First, we've walked away from God, the source of life, living water. Living water is what feeds our spiritual life. It nourishes us and carries us when we need it. When we walk away from God, we starve our spirit. Second, we're trying to put our spiritual life and gifts into things that can't hold them. When you put all of your spiritual energy into something or someone who is not God, that person or thing can't hold your energy. It leaks out. The only safe, sure place to place our spiritual energy is with the source of that spiritual energy – God. Prayer is how we connect with God. That's how we charge our spiritual batteries for those days and times we feel disconnected.

Kimberli was seeking a faith with real, practical meaning in her life and the lives of her children. She wanted to see the power of prayer. She wanted to see how the Word of God can be applied to one's life. She wanted to see how Jesus can help the hurting, heal the sick and broken hearted, comfort the mourners and restore lives.

Let's face it: we want that too. The good news is that we can have it. It starts with us, with our attitude.

Let me tell you a story. Imagine going to a wedding. It's a beautiful day. The ceremony is nice. The couple is happy. Everything is going well, until you get to the reception. One of the guests, someone who's a little too full of themselves, enters the room, walks up to the head table and sits down. The rest of the tables fill up and everyone is wondering what's going on.

The host sees this situation, goes up to the person and asks them to move. They're sitting in the seats reserved for family. Unfortunately, the only seats left are in the back, by the kitchen door. It's embarrassing for the guests, the host, the family and the wedding party. This is a parable Jesus told (Luke 14:7-14).

This isn't a story about etiquette. It's a story about attitude. Jesus is teaching us the same thing that Paul later puts in writing, "*don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you*" (Romans 12:3, CEB).

What does this mean to us? First of all, faith isn't a guilt trip! Jesus is telling us to put our focus on God, not on wealth, power, status or relevance. It's not where you sit that matters. It's that you were invited to the party!

When we look for God in everything, we begin to see where the Holy Spirit really is. And it's not in casual relationships with our friends. They're good, but unless we ask where God is, neither you nor your friends will get anything spiritual from your relationship.

Jesus tells us that it would be better to reach out to those who are hurting, sick, alone, broken hearted, mourning or lost. When we do, we receive a blessing. When we do, it's a lifeline to those who are hurting. They're the Kimberli's of the world. They're the people on our prayer chain. It's the people we haven't seen in church for a while. It's the person God places on our heart in the middle of the day. It's the person we see sad at work or maybe at our child's school. They need someone to pray for them and be with them. They want to hear us share stories of lives changed, healing and comfort after a loss.

That's real life and real faith. That's what it means to follow Jesus and love others as he did.

Who do you need to call, visit or invite to dinner this week?

Jeremiah 2:4-13 (CEB)

Listen to the LORD's word, people of Judah,
all you families of the Israelite household.

This is what the LORD says:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me that made them wander so far? They pursued what was worthless and became worthless.

They didn't ask,

“Where's the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
who led us through the wilderness,
in a land of deserts and ravines,
in a land of drought and darkness,
in a land of no return, where no one survives?”

I brought you into a land of plenty, to enjoy its gifts and goodness, but you ruined my land; you disgraced my heritage.

The priests didn't ask, “Where's the LORD?”

Those responsible for the Instruction didn't know me; the leaders rebelled against me; the prophets spoke in the name of Baal, going after what has no value. That is why I will take you to court and charge even your descendants, declares the LORD.

Look to the west as far as the shores of Cyprus
and to the east as far as the land of Kedar.

Ask anyone there:

Has anything this odd ever taken place?

Has a nation switched gods, though they aren't really gods at all?

Yet my people have exchanged their glory for what has no value.

Be stunned at such a thing, you heavens; shudder and quake,
declares the LORD.

My people have committed two crimes:

They have forsaken me, the spring of living water.

And they have dug wells, broken wells that can't hold water.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 (CEB)

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to share a meal in the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees, they were watching him closely

When Jesus noticed how the guests sought out the best seats at the table, he told them a parable. “When someone invites you to a wedding celebration, don’t take your seat in the place of honor. Someone more highly regarded than you could have been invited by your host. The host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give your seat to this other person.’ Embarrassed, you will take your seat in the least important place. Instead, when you receive an invitation, go and sit in the least important place. When your host approaches you, he will say, ‘Friend, move up here to a better seat.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up.”

Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, “When you host a lunch or dinner, don’t invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind. And you will be blessed because they can’t repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected.”