

Message: Is your life empty or full?

Today’s sermon is going to be interactive.

I’m going to ask some questions and give you a chance to share with one another. I invite you to move so you’re near someone else.

Please join me as we invite the Holy Spirit into our hearts at this time.

Here’s my first question: if there was one person you could spend time with today, who would it be? *Please share the name of that person with the person near you.* You know the expression “absence makes the heart grow fonder.”¹ We most often think of it in terms of people we love. Many of us miss the closeness of a relationship. Some miss a spouse. Some miss one or both parents. Some miss family members. Our separation from them may be by distance or state of being. We’re all separated from loved ones by death.

For our graduates, while you may not believe it right now, there will be a time when you’ll look back and miss your high school friends. That’s what the “good old days” are.

Absence applies to our lives in other ways. The phrase has a broader meaning: whatever we lack the most, we desire the most. If our bank account is absent of funds, we find ourselves desiring more money. If our car is absent of fuel, we find ourselves wishing for a full tank or friends when we’re on side of the road. When we’re taking a final exam and the answers are absent from our mind, we may find ourselves wishing we’d spent more hours studying or for the teacher to grade on a curve.

Absence is a synonym for emptiness, but there’s an important difference. When we look at a glass that’s filled halfway with water, we don’t usually think “water is absent (or present) in that glass.”

What do we say? Look, the glass is half-empty (or –full, depending on your point of view). Emptiness implies that a void exists. In the case of a glass, it’s made to hold a specific number of ounces of liquid. Anything less means the glass is only partially full. The gas tank of our car operates on the same principle. The unfilled capacity of an object is what’s implied when we think of emptiness.

¹ <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/absence-makes-the-heart-grow-fonder.html>

So what does it mean when we say we have an empty heart?

We could say it has to do with the volume of blood, the rhythm and pace of our heartbeat and other anatomical facts. But that’s not what we mean. When we say we have an empty heart, we’re experiencing two things: absence and a void; unmet capacity. There’s an absence in our heart and there’s a void that needs to be filled. We long for presence, the attention of another, in our heart. On top of that, our heart is made to grow, increasing our capacity to pay attention to and care for others. When we’re lonely, afraid or filled with sorrow, we’re missing both. That’s why our heart aches.

I heard a story yesterday that touched my heart. One of the persons who attended a mission area team meeting told us how busy their schedule was. They didn’t realize how much work was taking away from their family until one of their young children came and said, “I feel empty inside because you’ve been gone.” The child was missing the love and attention of the parent.

Absence can lead to emptiness.

This leads me to my second question: What do you feel when you get up each morning? Sometimes we get up filled with energy and life, ready for whatever the day may bring. We wake up with a passion for living, no matter what our situation may be. On other days, we’re tired when we open our eyes. We’re not sure if we can get out of bed, how to deal with our anxiety or how to cope with one more set back. When we’re missing the passion and energy of life, we aren’t sure if we can face the challenges of the day. Some days we feel empty inside.

Physically, we’re the same. Our heart has the same capacity. We’re alive and, as some of our friends say, “on the top side of the grass.” Most likely, our status hasn’t changed dramatically overnight. We have relationships, bank accounts, responsibilities and issues.

What’s different? Let me re-phrase the question: **Who is present?**

The presence of the Spirit of God makes a big difference in our life. God’s Spirit gives us life and breath. God’s Spirit provides for our needs. God’s Spirit prompts us and nudges us toward healthy things in life, consciously and subconsciously. God’s Spirit gives us good things.

God’s Spirit gives purpose and meaning to our lives.

When God’s Spirit is present, our lives change. Things will be difficult at some point. We’ll still suffer and face hardship. We’ll experience anxiety, fear and sorrow. We’ll also experience peace, hope and joy. Paul’s letter to people struggling with loss shows us the way, *“We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed”* (2 Corinthians 4:7-9). God’s Spirit fills us with a power and energy from a source that can never run dry, in a stream that never stops, filling us with a hope that never dies. That’s good news!

How do we experience God’s presence? It’s simple. Believe in Jesus and do what he says. Jesus tells us what to do to live a full life, a life filled with passion and energy for living. He said, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength”* (Mark 12:30). There’s nothing else we can do. There’s no task we can perform. There’s nothing we can give. There’s no one we know. There’s nothing we can offer to God to earn God’s love. All we can do is accept it.

Grace is receiving what we can not earn and do not deserve.

God’s grace is given to us freely. It’s a sign of God’s love for us. Jesus tells us to love God in return. That makes sense. To love God is to trust God. And, when we trust God, we have the strength to get up when the days are tough, knowing God’s Spirit is with us. When we love God, we’re filled with a passion to live life to the fullest way possible.

That’s what it means to be a disciple. A disciple is someone who follows Christ. Disciples aren’t fans, ready to cheer and enjoy things when it’s easy or convenient, but falling away when something more attractive comes along. Those who follow Jesus have a passion for life. They seem to have an inner light that fills them and helps them to be at peace even when things are at their worst.

Do you follow Jesus? Before you answer, keep in mind what it means.

Following Jesus isn't just learning about Jesus. It's about becoming like Jesus. The grace of Christ is freely given, but it comes at a great cost: we have to go “all in” with our life. We can't hold anything back.

Jesus' words are challenging, “*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Mark 8:34; Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:24; John 12:25). Following Jesus means we have to sacrifice our pride. We have to give up our me-first attitude and behavior. That means putting Christ and others first in all things.

Following Jesus isn't easy or obvious. If it was easy, we'd all stand up, do the ritual and be done. We could head out to do whatever we want, free and clear. The steps to take on the way to eternal life would be well lit and obvious at all times. But that's not the way it is. There's no arrow on the ground showing us the way. If we think it should be, that's superficial faith. We're looking for cheap grace; grace that doesn't require us to live with intention or purpose. It's like eating junk food: it seems filling at the time, but we're left feeling out of sorts and unsatisfied the next day. Real faith is satisfying. It fills our heart. God is present. We know God's giving us attention. We feel good inside. Our spirit is whole. We want to be filled again and again.

God wants us to follow Jesus and to share the faith, love and hope we have with others. God gives us all gifts, so we can be successful in what Jesus calls us to do. Best of all, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us follow Jesus and live a passion-filled life every day.

At the beginning of the sermon, I promised we'd spend some time interacting with each other.

One of the ways we can grow spiritually is to share our lives when we come together. I invite you now to turn to the person next to you and briefly share with them the answer to this question:

“How have you followed Jesus this week?”

Thank you for sharing. I know it may have been uncomfortable. It gets easier with time. And there are blessings. When we share our experiences of Jesus with others, it helps us to look for ways God is present in our lives. We begin to anticipate the ways we can share God's love with others. That's a blessing, for it gives us hope.

One way to start each day is by turning to God and saying,

“I love you, Lord! Watch over my family. Lead me and show me ways to share your love with others today. Amen.”

Let us pray:

Lord, help me to be the person you want me to be today. Take away the desires that shouldn't be there, and help me be single-minded in my focus and my pursuit of you. Help me to follow you and be changed by your love so I want to serve others with that same love. Lord, you are the source of true satisfaction and contentment. Guide me and help me to make wise decisions as I live my life for you. Show me how to share your love so I don't waste what you give, but freely and willingly give it to others. Bless us when we live generously. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

John 14:15-21 (NRSV)

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”