

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
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Throwing Better Parties – Won't You Be My Neighbor
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Many years ago, the preacher by the name of Tony Campolo was speaking in Honolulu, Hawaii. If you've ever traveled through multiple time zones, you know the old body clock and get a little out of whack. And so Tony woke up at 3:00 in the morning, he's hungry, he finds a little greasy spoon near his hotel and he sits down at the counter, orders a donut and coffee. In walks a group of eight or nine women who had been working the streets and they start talking and there's no one else in the diner, so all Tony can do is over hear what they're saying. And one of the women mentions that it was her birthday the next day. Her name was Agnes she was turning 39 and she had never had a birthday party in her life. And something snapped in Tony Campolo and so those women left the diner and Tony said to the owner; 'Hey, are they regulars?' He said, they come in here every night about the same time. And Tony said, what do you say we decorate the place and throw a surprise party for Agnes tomorrow night here in the diner? Now the owner thought it was a great idea and said I'll bake the cake. The next night, Tony Campolo decorates this diner with streamers and balloons, a big sign that said, Happy Birthday, Agnes. The owner got word out on the street. So around 3:00 in the morning, almost every prostitute in Honolulu was in this diner. Tony Campolo said it was wall to wall prostitutes and me.

So Agnes walks in and everyone yells, Happy Birthday, Agnes and they start singing. The owner brings out the cake with candles. And then he says, cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake. And Agnes says I can't cut the cake, I've never had one. She said, let me go show my mom and then I'll come back and I'll cut the cake. Agnes walks out of the diner. There's this awkward silence, Tony Campolo isn't sure exactly what to do, so he says, what do you say we pray? And so he prays for Agnes and he prays for the women who are in the diner and when he finishes the owner leans over the counter and says, I didn't know you were a preacher. What kind of charts do you preach in? And Tony Campolo said, it was one of those moments when the Holy Spirit gives just the right words. He said, I preach in a church that throws parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning. Harry says, no, you don't, no, you don't. I would go to a church like that. Tony Campolo says, wouldn't we all?

You know, maybe it's your first time in church, maybe it's your first time in a long time. I'm not sure exactly what your expectations were when you walked in this weekend. But if we did a little word association test, and I said, church, I'm guessing that for most of us, the first thing that comes to mind is not a place that throws parties. That generally is not our first expectation. And yet it is a recurring theme in the Gospels. It is a recurring metaphor in the parables of Jesus. Do we need to do a better job of preaching the Gospel? I'm sure we do. But I wonder what would happen if we threw better parties. I think his kingdom would come a little closer.

We were getting ready to celebrate our 20th anniversary as a church a few years ago. And I remember we put together a little focus group because we wanted to figure out what should that night feel like. And so we asked that focus group to kind of throw out some words and simultaneously a couple of staff members, Mike Semel said reverent and Tiffany Duke said party

at the same time. Now, if you know Tiffany that should not be surprising at all, she likes to party. And we decided that, hey, those two words belong together. Let's make it a reverent party, and if you were there at our 20th celebration at Constitution Hall, was it not a reverent party? And honestly, I think that's what every weekend ought to feel like. From day one, our dream for this church has been that when people miss church, they actually miss church. Why? Because you missed the party. And that goes for everything we do. Listen It doesn't matter whether we're hosting a soccer camp for refugees like we did this week or our youth mission camp a couple of weeks ago? In fact, can I say this? I love our youth at National Community Church and that's okay, you can give it up for our youth that would be appropriate. And I love our youth pastors, Pastor Stephen and Pastor Brooke. And so this week, like, a lot of parents got an email announcing an all youth event on July 28th. And I've got to say, I love what it said. So I'm just gonna read it. It says we don't believe fun and Jesus are at odds. At NCC we confidently say we party harder. Well, all NCC, youth are coming together for what may historically redefine the word lit as we know it. Come on; mark your calendar, July 28th especially our incoming sixth graders. I love it. I think they, they get it. They get it.

Well, welcome to National Community Church this weekend. We continue our summer series; Won't You Be My Neighbor? We're talking about throwing a better party and you should have one of these and if you don't, I think we have one for you on the way out, you can turn to page 62 and you'll find some notes. And then in just a moment, we'll rendezvous in Luke 15. Let me kind of set the scene. It says,

"¹Tax collectors and notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ²This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!"

In other words, Jesus partied with the wrong people. According to the Pharisees, it says, sinners often came to listen to him teach. I find that fascinating and not just sinners, notorious sinners. This is like El Guapo, not just famous infamous, right? Notorious sinners. Generally speaking, it is religious people who go to church and irreligious people do not. And so in one sense, this seems a little backwards but maybe that's because we're wrong side out.

Let me ask two diagnostic questions upfront. I want you to jot these down. Who are you befriending and who are you offending? Who are you befriending, and who are you offending? If we are befriending religious people and offending irreligious people, then I think we've got Jesus backwards. We think we're following Jesus, but maybe we're following Pharisees. Here's what I know for sure; Jesus was a friend of sinners and Jesus offended Pharisees and I would say go thou and do likewise. But let me push the envelope a little bit. It was these non-religious people that seem to be drawn to Jesus and the Pharisees don't like it, especially the tax collectors. And the question is why? And here's the short answer. Palestine was under Roman rule, which meant the Jews had to give unto Caesar what was Caesar's, but the Roman Empire employed locals to collect those taxes. And those tax collectors were notorious for being cheaters and traitors. They were profiting off of their own people and everybody hated them and Jesus loved them. And so the Pharisees leveled this accusation against Jesus. They accused Jesus of being a friend of sinners. Can I get a good gasp? Yeah, amazing, right. Now, if you're taking notes, I want you to jot this down. A compliment from a fool is an insult and an insult from a fool is a compliment.

The Pharisees are trying to insult Jesus and Jesus just takes it as a compliment. What did he say? He said, it's not the righteous who need a doctor, but those who are sick. Jesus was someone who had a huge heart for people who were hurting, for the outcast, for the misfits, and that's why he ate with sinners and partied with publicans and touched lepers and celebrated Samaritans. He then drafted a tax collector to be one of his disciples, changes named Matthew. Matthew wrote a little book. It happens to be the first book in the New Testament, but how did all of that start? With the party at Matthew's house. Like it's amazing how many good things happen and start with a party.

Now, back to those questions. Who are you befriending? Jesus kind of stated his M O when he said "I came to seek and save the lost." What does that mean? Well, I think Jesus was about helping people find their way back to God. And that generally starts with befriending people who are far from God. Can I just say this? Jesus is not my agenda. Jesus is my life. When I relate to someone this isn't about some agenda that I have, this is about doing what Jesus did and that was loving people. And as I see it if people are hanging out with me, they're hanging out with Jesus. Why? Because I am in Christ and Christ is in me. It's like, a package deal. There's just no way around this. And so if you spend any amount of time with me, at some point you're going to get a little bit of Jesus. Why? Because he's not my agenda, he's my life, he's my identity, he's everything. So who are you befriending? I hope its some people who are far from God.

And then who are you offending? I live by a little maxim. You ready? Thou shalt offend Pharisees because that's what I see in the Gospels. Jesus could have healed any day of the week, but on multiple occasions he chose the Sabbath. Why? Because I think he knew it would just be a lot more fun. Why not kill two birds with one stone? Heal someone and confront the religiosity of the Pharisees at the same time.

Let me switch gears a Luke 15. Jesus tells three stories, one about a lost sheep, one about a lost coin, one about a lost son. And those three stories make one point and it's this; God has a huge heart for those who are outside the fold, outside the fence, outside the family, and that's why we say all the time like we exist for the people who aren't here yet. Like we exist to start parties in heaven. We exist to help people find their way back to God. See, this is the God who searches high and low for the lost sheep. This is the God who sweeps the house for the lost coin. This is the God who was waiting and watching for this lost son, and when he sees him, he runs full speed. And so that last one I want to unpack just a little bit.

You've probably heard this story. It's a story about a son that really disowned his father by asking for his inheritance, which is basically saying, I wish you were dead. He loses that inheritance pretty quickly. Ends up in a pig pen, which is rock bottom if you're a Kosher Jew. But he comes to his senses, he decides to go home, beg his father for forgiveness, and this is what happens. It says...

²⁰ *"while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him."*

And I love what happens next...

²¹ His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.

The father says,

²² *"Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet."*

Then he says,

²³ *"And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast,"*

Now, do you remember a few weeks ago I talked about ancient covenant? Do you remember this, that there was often an exchange of robes or rings or bells, articles of clothing exchange of blood even, and then commemorated with memorial meal. Do you see what's happening here? There's a robe and there's a ring and there are sandals. This is a father who is reestablishing covenant with his son. And I'm thinking to myself, I would have at least taken five minutes to give this kid a lecture. But the heart of the father throws a party and I think it's because he knew his son was repentant. But then it says this...

²⁴ *"So the party began."*

Oh man, I like that, I like that a lot. Now I have a friend named Bob Goff. Some of you remember when Bob spoke here at NCC a few years ago. Bob is kind of crazy and he would take that as an incredible compliment and also one of the most loving people I've met. A few years ago wrote this book called Love Does So Good. And then he came out with a little sequel, Everybody Always. I just read it. I highly recommend it. Going to tell you a story from that book, but let me kinda frame it first. One of the most memorable moments of my life was when Bob invited some friends up to his lodge in Canada. And so Parker and I flew to Seattle and we got on a boat and you have to, it's like many, many hours into the middle of nowhere and eventually we kind of come into this clearing and I can see a lodge off in the distance and then I see this boat, this flatbed boat coming towards us. And it's kind of curious because it's towing a couple of skiers who are like doing this thing. And then there's a fully uniform marching band on board the flatbed boat and a guy with a kilt playing bagpipes. I'm like, what is happening here? Well, this is Bob's way of welcoming people to his lodge? This is normal Bob. Okay. And whenever I read this story about the way the father is watching and waiting and ready to run and ready to throw this party. Man, I just, I think about this moment. I will never forget where someone welcomed me in a way that I...may we be so welcoming and so loving, may we be a church that throws parties for people. By the way, when we got ready to take the group picture at the end, it was summertime and the sun was out and Bob hid a snow machine behind us. So right before they snapped the picture, he made it snow. Who does that? Bob Goff does that. And then when it was time to leave, of course he ran down the dock waving and jumped into the channel fully clothed because that is what he does. And I think, you know, we may think that Bob is a little out there, but I think Bob is someone who maybe parties like Jesus, that maybe loves people like Jesus that maybe treats people like Jesus.

Now there's one story in particular in this book that I love because I want to bring it down to earth. Okay? Because I'm not saying you have to go out and rent a flatbed boat and a marching band. So let's bring this down to earth where most of us live, okay. So Bob travels about half a million miles every year, he's going here there and everywhere speaking and when you do that, it's kind of weird, but you actually get to know the TSA agents like you were in the security lines. And so, Bob recognized this one guy on one particular day and for whatever reason, like instead of handing him his ID he held out his hand and shook this agent's hand, like who does that? Right? And shakes his hand and says, I passed you a dozen times and I just wanted to thank you for the way that you treat each person in this line. It's really amazing. The way you treat people reminds me a lot of the way Jesus loved people. And this TSA agent looks up, tears in his eyes, steps out from behind that little desk and comes in for a hug, wraps his arms around Bob. Now here's the thing, Bob's pretty tall, this guy was really small. And so Bob said his head was basically resting on my chest. It was like a slow dance with hundreds of people in the security line saying, what the heck is going on? I love what Bob says in the book. This was the beginning of my friendship with Adrian three minutes at a time and he talked about how over the years, I mean, dozens of times they would just kinda catch up here and catch up there three minutes at a time and, and they became friends and then their families would spend holidays together. And I love this. Bob just says, we start by meeting people just three minutes at the time.

What was Bob doing? I think he was throwing a party. I think that's how the kingdom comes here. We love the people that are right in front of us that are right next to us. And that's by the way, the title of his book 'Everybody Always'. Like, that's how and who we should love. We love people when they least expect it and least deserve it. We throw parties for people who are outside the fold, outside the fence, outside the family. And you know what; I think we do a lot of that. We do it with second Saturday serve. We love to serve our city, to bless our city. I think we do it when we resettle our refugee friends and we're resettling I think 65 percent of the refugees and the DMV. We do it when we host camps week after week after week at the Dream Center. What are we doing? We're throwing parties for people. Why? Because that's what the love of Christ compels us to do that. And so here's your assignment this week. This is so simple. This is not above us, this is not beyond us. This week you are going to cross paths with someone in your assignment, throw a three minute party, that's it, love them, do something kind or encouraging, celebrate them somehow, some way.

Now I want to make sure that we get what this looks like. And so I have another friend, Josue, who's a part of this church, part of our prayer team here at NCC, also a managing partner at Founding Farmers. So we had lunch one day at one of his restaurants and it was amazing the food, but other stuff too, pretty incredible. But what I loved was as his pastor, watching him not just manage that restaurant, but pastor that restaurant. I watched him make eye contact with those servers and love on them and encourage them a couple minutes at a time. And then we walked through the kitchen and I watched him pastor these chefs and the kitchen staff and I was just like, ah, the Kingdom of Heaven is near, like, this is just someone doing what they do three minutes at a time. Come on, we can do this thing, we can do it.

So, the father in this story kills the fatted calf. Like, I mean, that's really weird language for us. Right? But you did that on the fourth of July. I know you did. You killed the fattened calf, right? And probably grilled out and we did the same and it was kind of fun. There was a little alley

party where we live and you know, not exactly fattened calf, but I did have a flank steak that had been marinating for 24 hours. That's what I'm talking about. And you know, I'm going to be honest. I wanted that entire flank steak to myself. I thought I'm going to eat half of this thing at least and we had like 20, 25 people over. And so like, I'm a little nervous about getting mine, you know what I mean? And so here's the deal, a friend from NCC, Justin Johnson was a carving up that flank steak and I just had this crazy idea and at first I thought, Lord, this cannot be from you, but I thought, what if we cut it up his finger food? And then I just get my maitre d on and then we serve an amuse bouche and we kinda bless all of our neighbors and back with some flank steak, you know, first class style. And listen, do not hold me in high regard for this because listen the better part of me said don't do it Mark, do you not do it. But you know what? It was one of those fun moments where I was reminded again, it's not the big stuff, it's the little stuff, it's just noticing this person, it's just seeing a situation, it's overhearing a conversation in a diner at 3:30 in the morning and taking responsibility for it. Saying, that's on me, that's on my watch, and watch this, and then you begin to love people the way that Jesus did.

Now, let me go back to this parable of the prodigal son. I wish the story ended here with the party. It does not. It's like a Marvel movie. There is a post credit scene and it's a significant subplot in this story. Verse 25 and we're gonna close with this. It says...

²⁵ *"Meanwhile, the elder brother was in the fields working. And when he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house,"*²⁶ *and he asked one of the servants what was going on.*
²⁷ *"Your brother is back," he was told, "and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return."*

It says...

²⁸ *"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in."*

He refused to party and his language reveals a lot.

Verse 29 *"All these years I've slaved for you"*

He says to his father, really? I thought you were a son, not a slave.

Our language reveals so much about what's happening up here and in here. I mean this is a kid that had an orphan mindset, but the father says, everything I have is yours, and then he said,

Verse 30, *"when this son of yours comes back from squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!"*

I think what you meant to say was my brother, not your son. There's something happening inside of this older brother and I'm afraid it's me. I'm afraid it's me. Three things; I think most of us would rather be right than righteous. There's a difference. I think it's the difference between holy and holier than thou. This older brother was self righteous.

Two - We tend to categorize other people's sin is worse than ours and that's what this older brother is doing. He sees the lust, he sees the greed in his brother, but he cannot see the pride and prejudice in his own heart.

And then three, I think really we want God to be merciful with us and just with others, and that's a problem because then we hold a grudge. We let a seed of bitterness get in our heart.

So the question this weekend is this, who are you in this story? Are you this younger brother? Are you the older brother? Are you religious or are you repentant? Listen, God could care less about religiosity. It's a turnoff. You cannot read the gospels and not see Jesus going after people that had all the trappings of religious but had a heart that was just in the wrong place. But I have some good news. First of all, I think we're all in the same boat. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But here's the good news,

Luke 15:10. It says, *"There is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents."*

Can I tell you what God's looking for this weekend? Someone with a repentant heart. Now that word repent, Greek word *metanoëó*, (Meta - change - *noeó* - mind). When it says that the younger brother came to his senses, there is a moment of repentance in his life. And I just feel like collectively across our campuses, I'm just wondering how many of us have played the older brother, a time or two. And I wonder if maybe we could repent of our religiosity and posture ourselves in a way that we love people the way that Jesus did, that we love people when they least expect it and least deserve it. We're not afraid to offend some Pharisees and you know what? When we do that, when we throw better parties, I'm going to tell you what's going to happen, his kingdom is going to come his will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for everybody within earshot of this message. God, I pray that we wouldn't just have ears to hear, but that we would also have a heart to receive. God, we would take a long look in the mirror, I wonder if there are some people that maybe we aren't offering grace to them the way that you've offered grace to us, and there's some pride and prejudice. Or maybe God, we want people, we want to give the lecture rather than throw the party. God, I pray that you would help us to be a people that are befriending those who are far from God, not afraid to offend some of the religious types so that truly we can become more and more like you. And so God, I pray for those people this week that will cross our paths, people that are hurting, people that feel like they're outside the fence, outside the fold, outside the family. God, I pray that even if it's just a three minute party, that Lord, we would bring hope and love and grace and joy to someone's life for three minutes. And if we all do that, it's going to be a good week in the Metro DC area because your kingdom's going to come to that end, we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.