

Peppermint-Filled Piñatas

partying to expand our influence



I'm an outgoing guy, so you would think I'd have a knack for throwing generous parties. But generally, when you host a party, you have to feed your guests. Parties cost money. Giving in to my tightwad tendencies, last year I tried to figure out how to combine multiple holidays into one big party. There was Mother's Day, Father's Day, my daughter's birthday in June, the Fourth of July, my son's birthday in July, plus Memorial Day and Labor Day at the beginning and end of summer. Putting them into one sort of Summer Fest would save me a great deal of money, not to mention the time spent standing next to the grill. I tried to explain to Debbie that several of these holidays were manufactured by Hallmark and the federal government to increase consumer spending during the lagging summer months, but she refused to support my idea. In the end, I was able only to combine the kids' birthday parties.

During the preparations, Debbie sent me out to get candy for the piñata. (She didn't trust me with much else.) My kids love piñatas. At one recent party with a Tinkerbell piñata, our daughter, Trevi, the smallest and therefore first child in line,

timidly and sweetly picked up the stick and turned into a samurai warrior. With both hands wrapped around the pole, her face focused and contorted, she jumped off the ground, hitting Tinkerbelle's neck before the helpers even had a chance to raise the four-foot-tall piñata off the ground. My son (who had years earlier cried when we forced him to bludgeon Blue from the children's TV show *Blue's Clues*) shouted encouragement: "Knock her head off!"

When I had gone out shopping for the party, I figured that the act of breaking the piñata interested kids more than the actual prizes found inside. So I looked for a good deal. Much to my excitement, I found three bags containing a total of six hundred peppermints for only \$6. "These kids just want something sweet," I reasoned.

As soon as I came home, Debbie immediately stopped what she was doing and raced over to the store to buy "real candy." My wife never swears, but she seemed to consider yielding to the temptation in that moment.

a party theology

I learned a valuable lesson that day. Peppermints do not belong in piñatas. Still trying to get rid of hundreds of peppermints four months later, I discovered that kids don't really want them in their Halloween bags either. I thought kids cared more about smashing the piñata than about the contents of the piñata. I guess I had overlooked the dozens of times I had to hold back the kids in line who raced toward the candy falling out of the piñata, even as the blindfolded kid kept swinging the bat wildly. These kids couldn't care less about the danger; they wanted the

prizes! They loved hitting the piñata and eating the yummy candy strewn across the yard.

Too often in the church, we fall into the same trap I did. We ask others to exert a tremendous amount of effort, even though the results of these efforts remain less than desirable. We think others are willing to connect with us, even though what we offer is cheap and unsatisfying. We offer peppermints, when the world wants Gobstoppers, Airheads, and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. We offer something sweet to believe; they want a new life that helps change the world.

The world too often sees the invitation to connect to the church as irrelevant or at best as involving a cumbersome process. People have to learn our religious language, sing our songs, and discuss our topics. For those who make the effort to connect with us, we reward them with rules, traditions, and conditional acceptance, yet Jesus offered grace, forgiveness, and love. Rather than religion, Jesus offers relationship. As part of the body called the church, we need to strive to eliminate barriers that keep others from connecting with our community and connecting with Jesus.

In the end, no thanks to me, we hosted a great party, and I discovered that saving money is not as important as creating a fun place where my kids and our friends and neighbors can interact. By offering a peppermint-filled piñata, I was doing as little as possible to simply "get by" rather than spending the time and money needed to create an experience the kids would enjoy. I was willing to do just enough to meet minimal expectations. Thankfully, Debbie saved the moment with her generosity.

We can eliminate barriers and develop life-transforming relationships as we emphasize the importance of relationships by throwing more parties that follow Levi's example:¹

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Luke 5:27–32

After spending time healing people and teaching with insight, serving both the religious leaders and those who were broken, Jesus encountered a reviled tax collector. Perhaps as a result of Jesus' reputation or an intrinsic desire for something more, Levi (who was also known as Matthew) immediately responded to Jesus' invitation and got up to follow him. Levi's new relationship with Jesus created a desire to help his friends discover what he had discovered, so he threw a party for Jesus and invited the only friends a tax collector would have in those days—other tax collectors and sinners. He wanted them to meet the same Jesus who had changed his life.

Like Levi, we should throw parties for Jesus—parties *on behalf of* Jesus—by inviting those who are disconnected and lonely and who need a friend. We must create opportunities to serve and to love, and to introduce people to the living God

through our relationships. God is found through people. God's Spirit resides within those who follow him. Of course, God makes himself known in many different ways, through his creation, signs, visions, and the deep longings we feel inside, yet at the same time, he has created us as interactive and interconnected beings. God chooses to spread his message of love and hope through the lives of those who have experienced him. We meet God and introduce him to others in the context of our friendships.

oikos

Our parties should include our *oikos*—our families, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. In the New Testament, the Greek word *oikos* is often translated “house” or “household.” In our Western mind-set, we consider a “household” as simply parents and their children, yet a more accurate understanding would be one's entire sphere of influence. When someone chose to follow Christ, the person was rarely alone—the royal official, Cornelius, the Italian soldier, Lydia, and the synagogue ruler Crispus (see John 4:53; Acts 11:14; 16:15; 18:8) are just a few examples of people whose transformed lives led to the transformation of those they already knew, those within their “household.”

I used to think that sharing my faith involved telling someone I had never met before about Jesus. We have all heard inspiring stories about people who lead the person seated next to them to follow Christ just as the airplane pulls into the gate. We often equate the experience Philip had with the Ethiopian eunuch (see Acts 8:26–39) with modern-day evangelism. But this is the exception rather than the rule.

Levi reveals an even more effective and more challenging method: serving, loving, and sharing Christ with those we already know. It's relatively easy to share your faith with someone you will never see again, but it is extremely difficult to share with someone you will see again the next day. And it is even more difficult to share with someone who knows how we actually live our lives. An uncomfortable level of accountability comes once we share about our relationship with Jesus with someone we know.

Levi invited other tax collectors to his party because that was the world he knew. His party reminds us to become even more intentional and engaged with those we already know.

beyond *oikos* to *xenos*

Always being challenged toward greater generosity, we discover that Jesus not only wants us to become generous with those we know; he wants us to become generous with those we don't know.

Jesus, the consummate party planner, tells more about his type of parties in the gospel of Luke:

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

A party theology includes a host who not only gives generously to the guests but has a generous invitation list. We need to go out and seek the people who need a friend and those who want or even need a party. Inviting friends and family makes sense, but we must not overlook the ones who are *xenos* (out there) who need to be *oikos* (in here)—the ones no one else has invited. *Xenos* is the Greek word for “stranger,” “foreigner,” or “alien.” Discovering God’s heart for the stranger shows us that we must also love those outside of our *oikos* and embrace the *xenos*.

One of the most unique *xenos*-turned-*oikos* relationships I’ve observed involved Jason. After watching *ER* at our friends’ house (back when George Clooney was still operating on the small screen), I stopped to fill up our car with gas about 11:30 p.m. on the way home. Since this predated the “pay at the pump” option (and, of course, the outrageous gas prices), I walked inside to pay the thin white guy with multiple earrings and scraggly hair—Jason by name—who was working the night shift. Making superficial conversation, I asked him how he passed the time working the night shift. He responded with, “I’ve been reading through the Bible.”

Caught a bit off guard, I asked where he had been reading. “I started in Genesis, and now I’m reading in First Cronthans.” (Mispronouncing the word “Corinthians” should have been my clue that he was new to the Scriptures.) Intrigued and impressed that he had read so much, I asked him what he thought of his reading so far. He answered, “Well, there sure are a lot of [expletive] Israelite names.”

Once again, I was a bit stunned, and now I was almost positive all this was new to him. I asked him where he had gotten his Bible, hoping a friend of his was helping him understand

what he was reading, as well as helping him know more about a relationship with Jesus. "I stole it from my friend's dad." His answer finally confirmed my suspicions: he had not been in the habit of reading the Bible.

After introducing myself, I invited him to continue our conversation later in the week when he was off duty. I promised him that I would bring him a Bible, one that was easier to read, since he had been working his way through the King James Version. As we sat together a week or so later, I asked Jason if he believed in God. I will never forget his answer: "I never did, but now I know he is real because he is speaking to me through the Bible."

Jason, a stranger who worked at a gas station, soon became my friend. We talked a lot over the next several months. He was living with his girlfriend, who was pregnant with his child. His wife, with whom he had a daughter, was now living with another guy, and she was pregnant with the other guy's baby. Honestly, I didn't know how to help him. Should he divorce his wife to marry his girlfriend, or should he make things right with his wife? In the end, neither woman wanted him. They weren't interested in this new Jason.

Whenever I think of meeting Jason as a stranger and then seeing the transformation in his life, I cannot help but think of the verse that says, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). Granted, he would have been a fallen angel, but even so, meeting him and being allowed to play a small part in his life remain one of the most mystical and special experiences of my life.

Throughout the Scriptures, we discover God's heart for the stranger, the outcast, the foreigner. When choosing to bless

Abram, God promised, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and *all peoples on earth* will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:2–3, emphasis mine). God did not choose Abram for an exclusionary blessing, but in choosing Abram, he was choosing all of humanity, including those not yet within his covenant.

Later, within the Levitical laws, God’s grace to strangers seems quite remarkable: “When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:33–34).

God went so far as to establish Levitical cities and cities of refuge as places where strangers could find justice and mercy:

“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, select some towns to be your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee. They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that anyone accused of murder may not die before standing trial before the assembly. . . . These six towns will be a place of refuge for Israelites and for foreigners residing among them, so that anyone who has killed another accidentally can flee there.’”

Numbers 35:10–15

Furthermore, the accused “are to stay in that city until they have stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then they may go back to their own home in the town from which they fled” (Joshua 20:6). Strangers accused of murder were not only welcome

to live in these cities; they also had the freedom to return to their homes once they were found innocent and enough time had passed.

Even in ancient times, when “human rights” were never considered, God introduced a process that allowed even the most despicable people a chance to be seen as “innocent until proven guilty.” To a stranger accused of murder, the person to whom we would least likely desire to show mercy or kindness, God provides refuge. These cities of refuge, along with all cities of the Levites, offered compassion, justice, and mercy—even to the stranger.

When the Israelites asked God whether they should continue their fasting tradition, God concluded that he wanted something else from them: “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other’” (Zechariah 7:9–10). Sadly, the people refused to pay attention, which led to an ironic turn of events: they were soon dispersed and became strangers in strange lands (see verses 11–14).

Hospitality is lived out as we welcome and love strangers. The related word “hospice” originally referred to “a rest house for travelers” and conveys “a safe place.” Our homes, our businesses, and our churches should become safe places for strangers, where they can experience kindness and love.

Jesus parties

A party theology involves not only sending invitations but accepting invitations as well. Jesus seemed to have a negative

reputation among the religious leaders, who called him “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 11:19). His first miracle involved turning water into really good wine at a wedding party in Cana (see John 2). Jesus spent time speaking in synagogues and going to the temple in Jerusalem, but most of his best interactions took place in people’s homes and in places near the Sea of Galilee, as well as when he was just walking along the way. Jesus’ reputation came from his willingness to go to the places he was invited— the places where the best conversations could take place.

In the days when I served with a youth group in Seattle, Christy, a girl new to our community, invited us to her sixteenth birthday party—an invitation she issued in passing as she left an event one night, which made it seem almost like an afterthought. As the day approached, Debbie felt we should go, thinking it would be a great way to get to know Christy and her parents. Christy’s dad was the one who first took her to our youth events, much to the displeasure of her mom, who didn’t want Christy to have anything to do with church. Nonetheless, into this hostile environment we decided to enter. Filling our car with three teenagers, we drove to the skating rink and arrived just a few minutes late. Balloons, streamers, and cake decorated this festive moment. Though we assumed other guests were on the way, since the table was set for thirty people, we were still a bit surprised that when we walked in, we were the only people there besides Christy and her parents. Thirty minutes passed, and then an hour, but no one else showed up for the party. (Three kids did breeze in, but only to wish her a happy birthday on their way to another event.) I remember looking at Debbie in the middle of this party and

thanking her for insisting that we come and being so grateful that we had brought three other people with us.

By the end of the night, we all had a blast playing video games, falling on the ice as we skated around together, and eating cake. (Man, we had a lot of cake that night!) Most important, I will never forget the response of her family. A few weeks later, Julie, Christy's mom, the same mom who had harassed and berated her for coming to church, sat on the couch in the youth lounge, tears streaming down her face. Julie had decided to follow Christ. Curious about the reason for the dramatic turnaround, I asked Julie what had happened to move her from mocking Christy for her involvement at our church to now desiring this same relationship. Through her tears she looked at me and Debbie and revealed, "I changed my mind about God and Christians because you came to my daughter's party."

Stunned and silent, I thanked God that we had not missed this moment. In fact, it has changed the way we view invitations from those around us. If we receive an invitation from someone to see their school play and it happens to be the same night as our small group, not only do we miss the small group, but we also invite the small group to join us. We need to say no more often to our busyness so that we can create room for spontaneous adventures with others. We need to look for those who need a hug. We need to turn off our televisions and spend time in coffee shops. Ultimately, we need to reorient our lives so that we begin to invest in the people we already know and start investing in people who need a friend.