

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Church God Blesses

Sunday, October 27

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I had a conversation with a member of the church recently about the new growth and excitement of the church. He asked me, “How do you explain it?” I told him it was one thing. Johns Creek UMC has done one simple thing to foster growth.

In order for a church to be vital, it only has to do one thing. In fact, this one thing is the deciding factor of whether a church lives or dies, grows or declines, moves forward or remains stuck. Sadly, many churches lose sight of this one thing and suffer the consequences. The good news is that our church is clearly doing this one thing.

What is this one thing? Well, it is communicated to us throughout scripture over and over again. It was the deciding factor of Israel’s history and the growth of the early church. You can trace its influence through the entire Bible. But today I want us to rediscover it through the wisdom of King Solomon, one of Israel’s most noted kings.

We always associate wisdom with King Solomon. He was wise. And we see his wisdom shine through in a very special scene from the history of Israel—a dedication service. In the scene we find that Solomon has built a magnificent Temple for worship. The people of God have gathered at the Temple, like us today, to seek God’s blessing and to ask God to pour His Spirit upon that House.

What’s great is that scripture records a big chunk of that dedication service. Contained in this written record is the one thing, the one deciding factor that will determine our future and continued growth as a church. We are about to find out the kind of church God blesses. Let’s take a closer look:

Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel

and spread out his hands ... He stood on the platform and then knelt down before the whole assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven. —2nd Chronicles 6:12–13

So King Solomon and the people of Israel are gathered at the Temple to dedicate it. They have just finished singing, “How Great Thou Art.” Not really. But Solomon kneels down and begins his prayer of dedication. And if you go back later and look at his prayer, it is a long one. You better be glad we do not pray this long in worship! He prays for just about everything under the sun, including the kitchen sink! He prayed that God would bless them and the Temple. He prayed that God’s presence would always be with them. He prayed that God would protect them, that God would help them in famine, war, distress. He prayed that God would help them get along and judge them fairly. He prayed for forgiveness. He prayed for God to send them rain in drought. He prayed for the foreigners who would enter their land ...

And finally, Solomon ended his exhaustive prayer of dedication with this:

“My God, may your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.” —2nd Chronicles 6:40

Do you think God heard the prayer Solomon offered? You are about to find out. Take a look at what occurs immediately after Solomon gives his prayer of dedication:

When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven ... and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it. When all the Israelites saw the

fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, “He is good; his love endures forever.”

–2nd Chronicles 7:1–3

Wow! What a scene! Don’t worry. I don’t believe God will send fire down on us, but I do hope God fires us up!

What did Solomon and the Israelites do to provoke such a powerful response from God? What did they do to get such a blessing from God?

They did the one thing necessary to bring God’s blessings beyond measure. It is right in the text. It is a bit subtle but it’s there. The first clue is that the text states that God’s glory was so powerful that the priests could not enter the Temple. That means this service of dedication was happening outside the Temple. No one had even entered the Temple yet. It says they knelt on the pavement and had their faces to the ground.

But the key is what Solomon did at the very beginning. The text says twice that Solomon spread out his hands to God and heaven. In two verses the text says that twice! What does that mean? Spreading out your hands is a sign of surrender and relinquishment of power.

Solomon and the Israelites were outside the Temple, not claiming any ownership of it. Solomon knelt down in prayer with his hands open, relinquishing power, control, and putting the Temple and everything that went with it in God’s hands. Solomon was saying, “We will not even enter the Temple until we have surrendered this space to you and placed it in your hands.” Wow.

And there it is. That’s the one thing. God’s glory came down like fire and blessed that Temple because they had put it all in God’s hands. Solomon literally surrendered the beautiful Temple and dedicated it all to God.

And in church we must do the same today if we want God to bless our church and empower us to

grow with his glory. So here is the one thing you can take to the bank:

“A Church that puts everything in God's hand will see God's hand in everything.”

James 4:10 states, “Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up.”

Now I know the word “humble” is not an appealing word. What does it mean to be humble really? It does not mean to think less of ourselves; it means living out of the reality that everything we have and everything we are is because of God. It means understanding that any success we achieve is the result of God’s power and will, not ours. Yes, we play a part, but if we forget the source of all of our blessings, we are in trouble. Humble means knowing that, apart from God, we can do nothing.

When a church dedicates everything to God, puts everything in his hands, and seeks his will in everything, God will bless that church beyond measure. A prayer of surrender gets an answer, and the church who prays it gets blessed.

I recently read about a preacher who was on a fancy cruise. During the cruise he was asked to lead a worship service. His sermon that day was on Answered Prayer. There was an agnostic who was present at the service. Later he was asked by his friends what he thought of the sermon. He answered, “I didn't believe a word of it.”

That same afternoon the pastor led a service for the captain and crew. Many of the listeners at his morning service went along, including the agnostic. He claimed he just wanted to hear “what the babblers had to say.”

Before starting for the service, the agnostic put two oranges in his pocket. On his way he passed an elderly woman sitting in her deck chair fast asleep. Her hands were open. In the spirit of fun, the agnostic put the two oranges in her outstretched palms.

After the meeting, he saw the old lady happily eating one of the oranges. “You seem to be enjoying that orange,” he remarked with a smile. “Yes, sir,”

she replied, “My Father is very good to me.” “Your father? Surely your father can’t be still alive!” “Praise God,” she replied, “He is very much alive.” “What do you mean?” pressed the agnostic. She explained, “I’ll tell you, sir. I have been seasick for days. I was asking God somehow to send me an orange to help me feel better. I suppose I fell asleep while I was praying. When I awoke, I found He had not only sent me one orange but two!”

The agnostic was speechless. A prayer of surrender always gets an answer. (source: *Our Daily Bread*)

It was true for Solomon as well. Solomon humbly knelt before God, spread out his hands to heaven, and gave it all to God.

A church that puts everything in God’s hand will see God’s hand in everything.

A prayer of surrender is what brought me to this church. Ministry was going very well at Pasadena, but I sensed God wanted me to do a new thing. So I said, “Lord I don’t know what it is, but you do. So, once again, I will go where you send me. You called me to preach and I know you will lead me.”

When I arrived, I was amazed at the people and resources of this church. I thought, “If these folks can just hand it all over to God, this place will grow like crazy.”

The bestselling author Robert Fulghum tells about meeting a young American traveler in the airport in Hong Kong. She was sitting next to him and looked tense and scared. Her backpack bore the scars and dirt of some hard traveling. It bulged with unique souvenirs of seeing the world.

Fulghum then noticed her starting to cry. He thought maybe she was sad about leaving a boyfriend or loved one behind. But then she began to sob a flood of tears. When Fulghum asked her what was wrong, she said she had lost her plane ticket and had run out of money. She had spent two days waiting in the airport with little to eat and too much pride to beg. Her plane was about to go and she had lost her ticket.

Fulghum and a nice older couple from Chicago dried her tears. They offered to take her to lunch and to talk to the airlines about some remedy. She stood up to go with them, turned around to pick up her belongings, and screamed. They thought something terrible had happened to her but no—it was her ticket. She found her ticket. She had been sitting on it for three hours! She had been sitting on her ticket the whole time!

Church, we are sitting on the ticket to vitality as a church. Are we going to keep sitting on it, or use it? What is this ticket? To simply put everything in God’s hands—to surrender everything we have and everything we are to God. I believe God is about to do a new thing in this church. I feel it in my bones.

This is a time for us to see if we really believe everything we profess to believe—if we really believe that God is with us and wants to do extraordinary things through us. God wants to birth something new in this church. Will we give God the reins?

Brandy and I asked God to take over when we were told we could not have children. We asked God for a second opinion! Our son Paul was born on April 20th, at 4:17pm. The moments leading up to the birth were very stressful, as you might imagine. Brandy’s water broke at 2:30am that morning. As we drove to the hospital her contractions got worse and worse. I was terrified. As I walked her into the hospital she was grabbing my hand so tight I thought she was going to squeeze it off!

When we got to our room, Brandy politely said to the nurses, “I need my epidural please!!” As she was waiting for her epidural I was trying to comfort her, holding her hand and caressing her forehead. She gave me this strange look. “What is it?” I asked. “Charley, you have a whitehead on your chin! We can’t have that. We will be taking pictures later!” “Really Brandy! That is what you are concerned about right now?”

Well, I had a front row seat to Baby Paul’s birth. It was the greatest miracle I have ever witnessed. When Paul came out of Brandy and I heard him cry,

I felt like it was “a cry from beyond.” And the moment they placed him on Brandy’s chest was the most precious thing I have ever seen. The whole event was the most mystical experience of my life. And it all began with a prayer of surrender to God.

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