I Introduction

Good morning. As you can see, I am not Brent Gilstrap. Brent and his family are away on vacation and he has asked me to fill in. It is an honor to be here. I truly mean it. Brent, for this current sermon series, has been asking us to give testimonies. I want to give my testimony through the scope of Ebenezer. I don’t mean for this to sound like an advertisement for Ebenezer, but if it does, what can I say; it’s a great place to worship. I can honestly say that the three most important days of my life happened here, in Ebenezer, at this altar.

**SALVATION / BAPTISIM**

In the summer of 1981, at the age of nine, I gave my life to Jesus. It was at a revival service. I have no idea who the guest preacher was, nor what the sermon was about, but I was moved enough to ask Jesus for forgiveness and for him to become my Lord and Savior, and for the first time Jesus became very real to me. Shortly afterwards, I was baptized and joined Ebenezer. I still remember what Pastor Mike McKnight said to me before the baptismal took place. He said, “Lee, these **vows** are as important as wedding vows.” I knew this was important.

**MARRIGE**

Nineteen years later, in August of 2000, Courtney and I were married in this church, on this very spot. Right here I took a **vow** before God to love and uphold this lady through good and bad. I’d made a lot of stupid decisions in my life up to that point and have made a million more since then, but marrying Courtney was one of the right decisions I did make.

**DEDICATION**

Lastly, about a year and a half ago, Courtney and I had Mason dedicated. In this very spot again, we made a **vow** to God as well as the church, to bring Mason up in a Christ centered environment, so that he will be equipped enough to grow to become a Godly man. I understand that I’m only a steward of Mason. We all belong to God. It’s my responsibility, as well as the church’s, to equip Mason and any other child here with the tools needed to become a follower of Jesus.

II. Lesson

Intro: When Brent asked me to fill in for him, I was shocked, terrified, and dumb-founded. I told him that I would have to get back to him. I knew what my answer would be, but it took some time to face the music. See, I pray daily for God to use me, to let me be a vessel to further his Kingdom. Yet, there I was trying to think of every possible way to refuse this opportunity that had been dumped into my lap. I accepted. If you never knew how much you appreciated Brent, you will after today’s service, that’s for sure.

Feeling the pressure, I tried to think of the one thing that united everyone despite our differences. Besides, I didn't want to bore you. So I decided to talk about food, or better yet, the event of eating. Everyone enjoys eating and having good company, to boot. Churchgoers and non-churchgoers, believers and non-believers, everyone one enjoys eating. A couple of weeks back we celebrated homecoming, and we had a covered dish afterwards. All had good spirits, and that's the way it should be when we gather in Jesus’s name. See, there are so many events from the Bible that took place around people getting together and having a meal. There’s the one where Jesus is eating with Matthew and his fellow tax collectors, the feeding of the five thousand, and our most Holy sacrament that we just took part in a few weeks back in our communion service, the last supper. Jesus spoke these words in:

**John 6:55-58** - 55For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. 57As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. 58This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”

Jesus said this prior to the last supper, speaking about his role as the giver of eternal life and of how people are to share in this life. Jesus asked his disciples to remember the events of that evening, not only the breaking of the bread,but also demonstrating the “principle for living a Christian life: the greatest are those who serve others.”

Some of our most memorable moments in life can be placed in a dining room surrounded by good food and friends. The most memorable meal for me happened about 18 years ago. In 1995 I met a man who was nearly 40 years older than I was. His name was Gary Hudson. Some of you may remember him. He was an artist, and a great one at that. We became close friends not long after we met. He was my mentor. Not only in art, but life as well. The best art education I ever received came free of charge.

After finishing up at UGA, I began working on a body of artwork to help me get into graduate school. I had a studio in Jefferson and in the evenings after work, I would go paint for a few hours. This particular evening I left the studio a little earlier than usual. It was hot. My studio didn't have heat or air, and if it was 100 degrees on the street, it was at least a 105 in my studio.

So, I headed out, and I thought I would swing by Gary’s house and give him a visit. He only lived maybe a quarter mile up the road on Lawrenceville Street. I noticed when I drove up, the garage door was down; it was usually up. There were a couple of cars in the driveway that I didn’t recognize, but I didn't think anything of it. Gary’s wife, Christie, is couture and her studio was upstairs. It was not uncommon for her to have clients over from time to time. I got out my truck, went to the door and rang the bell. Through the door window I could see Gary coming to let me in. As soon as I saw him, I knew I shouldn't have come over. Gary was dressed up and it was obvious that they were entertaining guests. Gary opened the door, and I asked if it was a bad time. He said no. They were having a small dinner party, and he asked if I would like to come in to join them. I refused, but after the third invite, I reluctantly accepted.

See, I had been surveying all day in the heat and after working in a hot studio for a few hours, I was filthy and probably smelled on top that. Nevertheless to say, I made my way in, walking behind Gary. I followed him into the dining room. I had never eaten in their dining room before, in their kitchen, yeah, plenty of times. Gary pulled up a chair for me beside him, and Christie went to the kitchen to fix my plate. There are two things you need to know about Christie’s cooking: first, whatever she cooks is absolutely delicious, and second, whatever she makes is unlike anything you’ll eat in Jackson County. Nothing against Jackson County food, believe me, but she always made something I never heard of, or if I had I’d never eaten. As I’m sitting, Gary introduces me to the guests sitting around the table who are appropriately dressed. He’s telling the guests all about me. He tells them about me graduating from UGA, and about my plans to go to graduate school. He even tells them that I’m a good artist. Accolade after accolade. He was sincere. You could see the pride welling up in him.

Here I sit, beside the host, about to eat a fine meal while I’m being treated as if I’m the reason for this occasion, and all I could think of is who am I, who am I to deserve this? I came there uninvited, and dirty. I did nothing to help prepare the meal. I didn't even bring anything. Who am I? I’ll tell you. I was Gary’s friend. See, Gary didn't care if I wasn't dressed appropriately or if I was dirty. He didn't care that I didn’t bring anything. He was just glad that I accepted his invitation and walked in the door. Jesus says in:

**Revelation 3: 20** - Behold, I stand at the door and knock. “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me”.

Believers, isn’t this how we first came to Jesus? We were reluctant. We were dirty with our sins. We don’t deserve the crumbs at the Father’s table or a sip of dirty water from a puddle at God’s feet, but we don’t get crumbs; we don’t get dirty water. We get Jesus. We get life. Not begrudgingly, but with delight. Jesus is the bread of life. We’re unworthy and deserve death, but we get life, abundant. Remember what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well? Jesus says in:

**John 4: 13-14** – “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

III. Closing

For those of you who are skeptics or do not believe that Jesus says who he claims to be, please hear me out. First and foremost, you are among my favorite people. You are the hard sell; you are the ones who look at every detail before deciding on anything and I love you for that. I get it. I understand your reluctance. Even the most seasoned Believer has moments of doubt. When Courtney and I lived in North Carolina the pastor of our church would frequently say, “doubt your doubts”. That always stuck with me. To the unbeliever, I chalenge you to read Jesus’ words and doubt your own doubts. Have an open mind and allow your hearts to soften and give you true freedom. Jesus is at the door waiting for you to accept his invitation.