

“The Invitation”

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John 5.51-58

Proverbs 9.1-6

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Once upon a time there were these magical things called “parties.” Maybe you’ve heard of them before or can remember them. Before pandemic they were face to face gatherings that often included food and drink. People – human beings – were invited, anywhere from a few to a few hundred, celebrating a common purpose. Our parties and gatherings have changed and adapted because of COVID, but I still think that gatherings are important – virtual or in person – especially in faith communities.

We might not think of worship as a party – but we do gather and eat food and drink and celebrate the birth, the life, and the resurrection of Jesus. Our scripture passages talk about parties and gatherings today. The Proverbs passage offers a description of Wisdom personified. She is throwing the ultimate party. She has created a guest list that includes the simple. She has prepared the food, which includes meat and wine. She has arranged the venue, which is her very fabulous house. Wisdom has set the stage. She is the Martha Stewart of biblical feasts.

Wisdom also has an arch nemesis host known as the Foolish Woman. We don’t read in our scripture about her but she is described later in the passage as the opposite of Wisdom. In verse 13 she is loud, ignorant, and knows nothing – nor does she seek to know. She doesn’t spend time on a guest list or invitations or preparations. She is sitting from a high place at her house – perhaps her porch – and shouting at people as they pass. Verse eighteen tells us that the Foolish Woman’s way is not God’s way – it reads: “But they do not know that the dead are there,” referring to the ways of the Foolish woman.

Wisdom is, in fact, inviting all people – especially the foolish. Now, foolish here is not just someone who doesn’t know something. The Hebrew actually can be translated as “open-minded,” as well. So it might be someone who is ignorant, or uneducated about something, but it is someone who is willing to learn, willing to change, willing to be reformed. The simple person wants to live with wisdom and insight, putting aside immaturity, living abundantly. This is the invitation from Wisdom – to continue to learn so we can live in the abundance for which we were created.

Think about a party or gathering you have attended with family or friends. Imagine it. Why did you love it? Or, why did you dislike it? What stands out to you? When I came here in June to candidate before you, the Pastor Nominating Committee had a meal for me and my family. This was an example, in my mind, of a successful gathering. The expectations were set up ahead of time, knowing we could come and go as we pleased, it was casual, fun, the food was wonderful and the purpose was to welcome us, and the meal was successful in doing just that. As

author and facilitator Priya Parker writes: “A gathering is a social contract.”¹ To me, that gathering met its social contract.

I’ve been reading Parker’s book, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters*. This isn’t a theological book but it gives great insight to the work we do as a faith community. When we gather, there are unspoken and unwritten rules. Sometimes they are etiquette, sometimes they are expectations others hold, sometimes they are rituals or traditions that continue but no one knows why they exist. One unwritten rule for a gathering might be at a wedding, in which the guests are expected to bring a gift. Sometimes at gatherings our presence is a gift. When we come to worship, we might bring with us a variety of emotions or needs or gifts. I believe that one of our social contracts for worship is that you bring your authentic self, and I will bring mine, and we will work together.

Parker also writes that the host of gatherings sets boundaries, not to create oppressive rules, but to care for those who attend. I have been part of groups that have committed to putting away phones and technology for a certain period of time, and when everyone in the group has agreed to do that, the group is less distracted and more connected. Yet, it is something everyone has to agree to and not imposed upon them.² I love that your Spiritual Growth Team decided to poll you to see what you preferred for worship moving forward as the COVID cases in the county rise. I think we hold a shared interest in being together as a faith community and also being safe – and those values are important as we move forward.

The concept of the “generous host” is also something I think relates to faith communities.³ God, of course, is the most generous host, welcoming and inviting us into the life in the world. We are continuing our reading of the Gospel of John today, which might make us think about the sacrament of communion with all this discussion of bread. Our holy meal is certainly a celebration of nourishing our memories of Christ’s actions, and feeding our souls to empower us to act in the world. God, the Generous Host, has invited us to partake in that active faith, in that beautiful meal.

I miss having intinction for communion, where we dip the bread into the cup. I certainly understand that for health reasons we cannot do it, but I loved the invitation to come forward and see each other face to face. I always reminded people that when they rip off that bread, they need to take a large piece. Too many would just take a small piece, but I believe God is generous and we need all the Jesus we can get some weeks.

Jesus talks to the crowd in John 6 about the meal. This is a continuation of the conversations surrounding bread after the feeding of the multitudes and explaining that the bread was both physical and metaphorical. The people have many questions, they bring their anxieties and confusion to Jesus, who responds.

¹ Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 155.

² Parker, *Ibid.*, 83.

³ Parker, 105-106.

Jesus was great at welcoming everyone and also saying that if the mutually agreed upon rules were broken, being part of the community would be difficult. Jesus especially called out the rich or leaders who were oppressing and those who did not recognize the humanity of others. Jesus was loving, and sometimes that love meant protecting the guests at his table.

When we worship, we are committing to gathering. You are literally invited every week! God is perpetually inviting us into relationship with God and with one another. You might have noticed that you have a paper with bread and the words “You’re Invited” on it. Please pull that out now if you can. I have some questions before you – “What is God inviting you to do?” The second is, “What do you bring with you to gathering?” Third, “What do you need from gathering?”

You will quickly learn that I love participation in worship. I love preaching, but I also recognize that people learn not only through listening, but also through experience, visual, smell, and more. I am big on multi-sensory worship so that we can widen that table a little bit more as we gather. You are never required to participate. The extra sensory pieces and artistic alternatives are only there as aids to help with worship and encourage using different parts of our brain and faith sensory.

So, this paper is for you to think about these questions. You can fill them out now, or you can take them home, put them on your desk or your fridge as a daily reminder. If you want to share them, feel free. If you want it just to remind you, that’s ok, too. Just be thinking of these questions about how we gather, and what we bring each week – which might even change.

You are invited to be part of this journey. You are invited to be fully yourself, using the gifts God has given you. You are invited to participate fully in the abundant life God has offered. Thanks be to God. Amen.