

“Practicing Our Faith: Throw Parties”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

August 15, 2021

Have you missed parties? Our younger son Ben was born on March 10th, which meant that the party celebrating his third birthday that weekend was one of the earliest casualties of the pandemic. I remember the rush of that week. The gathering had been set for the weekend, and we held out as long as we could. You remember those early days with not enough information to make decisions, caution coexisting with uncertainty. Later, reflecting with some of the friends who had been invited to the party, they described how they—the invited guests—shared our struggle all along, how they were discussing the decision they would have to make if the party was not cancelled, a decision about whether or not to come. The parent of one of Ben’s buddies spoke for many of us when she said, “It was a tough call. I mean, who doesn’t love a three-year-old’s birthday party?”

I’ve missed parties. I’ve missed what one author recently called, “Collective effervescence.” And it is so exciting to have the joy of collective effervescence in our midst yet again, on the chancel as we celebrate baptisms and outside as we celebrate the fellowship of Christian community. I can’t wait for the party we’re hosting on September 12th—an outdoor picnic here at Second that I pray will celebrate the joyful return of many who have not been with us for some time.

You see, built right in to the life of the Christian community—as in the life of a three year old—is the power of parties. Indeed, one of the aspects of Second Church’s identity that drew me here was this congregation’s capacity for celebration, the genuine pleasure you find in coming together to enjoy one another. It’s what we do in the Christian community. We share meals and fellowship. We recognize milestones for individuals and communities. Whether

we’re supporting a mission partner in the city or observing an anniversary, whether we’re dedicating our gifts to the church or honoring the achievements of our young people, or just breaking bread for the fun of it, Second is a church that celebrates regularly and well, a church that believes that Jesus Christ came so that we might have life abundant. In my experience, churches that celebrate that abundance are healthier, more vibrant congregations.

My mentor in ministry, Joanna Adams, taught me that Christian communities should seize literally any opportunity afforded them to celebrate. When I began my summer internship, the congregation we served together was just beginning to heal and grow after a rocky decade or so that saw the congregation’s membership dwindle to 87 faithful souls. Like rocket fuel, Joanna’s leadership and positive energy lifted life and hope back into that community. I’ll never forget early in my internship the time she stood in the pulpit of the sanctuary and announced with great joy and enthusiasm that the toilets in the restrooms had been replaced with brand new low-flow models. She invited the whole worshiping congregation to go check them out after worship. There was applause, and there was laughter. I’ve never forgotten that moment because it was as if the windows of the church had been opened and the spirit moved in that space again.

Sometimes, preachers and churches take ourselves too seriously. Sometimes we make a mistake and think our solemnity is reverence. Sometimes from the outside looking in, we can appear humorless or stiff. This is bad PR, but it’s also ironic. We are followers of Jesus, and there is one thing that we know about our Lord and Savior with absolute certainty. And that is this: He loved a good party.

In all four gospels, Jesus can be found enjoying the company of others at wedding banquets, dinner parties, receptions, fish fries, picnics, and social gatherings of every type. In fact, it is Jesus' propensity to enjoy such gatherings that gets him in trouble with the religious folks. Too much partying with the wrong people (sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans, Gentiles, women, outsiders). Too much partying on the wrong day (the Sabbath). Too much partying in the wrong places (at wells where only women belonged, in Samaritan towns, in homes where a law-abiding Jew didn't belong). Jesus knew the power of parties.

The gospel of Luke gives us the most robust picture of Jesus' active social life. In fact, most of chapters fourteen and fifteen is centered on the theme of parties. It all begins here at the beginning of chapter fourteen when Jesus accepts the invitation of a Pharisee leader to have dinner in his home. Now, some of you might be thinking that's a bit odd. Weren't the Pharisees opposed to Jesus? Weren't they his enemies? The actual picture in scripture is far more complex than this broad generalization. You see, the Pharisees were Jesus' neighbors. They were fellow members of the Jewish community in Nazareth. Jesus spent lots of time with Pharisees. And so, we should not be surprised that he is having dinner with them. In fact, today's passage is the third dinner invitation that Jesus accepts from a Pharisee. Neither, however, should we be surprised that Luke says those Pharisees were watching him closely. By this point in the story, Jesus has proven both willing and even eager to violate the boundaries and stretch the limits of social convention and legal custom, two things the Pharisees cared deeply about. Of course they were wondering that night if he might do it again. They were watching him closely to see how far he would walk up to that line.

Well, Jesus is also watching his dinner companions, and he notices something that bothers him. As the guests arrive, he notices that they're taking the places of greatest honor. In the First Century, the culture of honor and shame reigned. In that culture, dining

in someone's home was a political symbol as well as a social grace. The arrangement of the guests at the table was the best indication of who possessed the greatest honor, usually indicated by proximity to the host. We do it differently, but we must be honest and say the symbols are still there. Honor and shame are still a currency of the realm. Jesus watches as the guests scramble for seats at the head table as quickly as they can, and Jesus being Jesus can't help but bring it up.

What follows are lessons on party etiquette from Jesus, and they are a far cry from Emily Post, Miss Manners, or your cotillion class. First, he addresses the guests.

Lesson One: Make room. Whether or not you know Brad Yarger, chances are you have seen the man in action. Brad is the head usher at Second Presbyterian Church. Brad is an organized man, a detail-oriented man, a stick-to-the plan man, and a patient man. Those are all very important gifts in his role as head usher, especially if it happens to be Christmas Eve or Easter. On those days, and others as well, I have seen Brad convince worshipers to scoot in, squish together, make a new friend, give up the aisle, and make room for one more worshiper in that pew. Jesus says when you are invited to a party, you should be ready to make room for someone else.

Lesson Two: Honor the stranger. Not only should we make room for those who come after us, but we should save the best spots for those who show up last, the ones we don't already know. Always assume, Jesus says, that the person who is not yet at the party is the most important person coming to the party. It's a difficult lesson for the church. It's a powerful lesson for the community of faith. Listen to this: *The most important people are the ones who aren't here yet.* They deserve the place of honor. They deserve the place of honor even if they are ten minutes late, if they make too much noise, if they scribble in their bulletins, or don't know the creeds and hymns, or raise their hands in worship, or bring a cup of coffee, or wear shorts...or diapers. Sometimes we joke about having "assigned seats" in the sanctuary and perhaps being a little miffed when someone unknowingly takes

“our” pew. It’s fine for a chuckle, but as a practice of hospitality, it’s a major miss. Jesus says the person who hasn’t yet walked through those doors is the most important person who’s coming. Jesus says the stranger deserves the seat of honor. Jesus says if we humble ourselves, we will be exalted, and our community will be blessed.

The final lesson in Jesus’ party etiquette is directed not at the guests but at the host. It’s about the invitation list, and it’s a little sensitive. Jesus knows the customs of party invitations, and not much has changed from his time to ours. “Honey, they had us over for dinner, so we really need to invite them soon.” We tend to include those most like us, those who can reciprocate our hospitality. We don’t do it out of malicious intent or mean-spirited desire, but it’s easier, more comfortable for guest and host alike, if we are all basically the same. More comfortable, yes, but not more faithful. Jesus says that here, in the community of faith, when we have a party we should invite precisely the ones who cannot return the favor, the ones who are on the outside looking in. He says something interesting: that doing this will bring a blessing to them and to us. I think we know what he means. When we extend the invitation to those beyond our comfort zone, our perspective is expanded. We come to understand the truth of evangelism: “One beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.”

Nearly three years ago this summer, Second’s staff and elders adopted an identity statement. It’s a description of who we are, but perhaps more of who we feel called by God to become. It is deceptive in its simplicity and challenging in its call. *We are called to be a welcoming community of faith where Jesus Christ transforms lives.* Since that time we’ve attempted to measure our faithfulness—our fruitfulness—against this gospel standard. Are we equipping people to be genuine and enthusiastic in their invitation and welcome? Does our guest list include all people? Are we making room for the unexpected guest, are we honoring the stranger with the place of honor? Are we seeking to become together an authentic community of faith,

where stories are valued even if they are different from our stories?

I think this identity statement points us in the direction of the parties Jesus describes. The best thing about a good party is how it builds anticipation for the next one. As soon as we reluctantly canceled Ben’s party in 2020 we began making plans for his fourth birthday party. We wanted to celebrate in a big way. We weren’t able to. And now, we are looking ahead to number five next March. I think Ben’s guest list is five pages long. The theme changes weekly. Anticipation will build for six more months.

I often hear from members of this congregation, those who are my age and seeking the kind of community that they were raised in: a church that will offer friendship and faith formation for the whole family. When I hear that, I always think about my friend Karen Kent. Karen grew up in the church. As she grew, she observed that her parents’ closest friends and their deepest community of support were all part of that congregation, that Presbyterian church they attended. She found that as she grew up, she felt at home there, and she noticed how her faith in Christ took root among those people. She knew that when her father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, it would be her church community that wrapped their arms around her mother and her sisters and Karen herself. When Karen’s own children were in elementary school, she looked around and she didn’t see enough children in the church. She began to invite their friends to church. Sometimes Karen would come into the sanctuary on a Sunday morning followed by half a dozen children from other families. You see, the rule was if you spent Saturday night at a sleepover at the Kent house, you came to church the next morning. Pack your clothes. Eventually, gradually, slowly, we saw their parents on Sunday mornings. Karen explained that she wanted what her parents had. She wanted it for her family and for her friends—a community of belonging, a congregation of support, a place of nourishment and worship. Karen’s daughter Kathryn caught that same vision. As a fifth-grader, she invited all of her friends to come to

church. One evening we were at the shelter for those experiencing homelessness downtown, and I noticed that Kathryn and all of her fifth grade friends were there volunteering together. Kathryn is now an elder in the church and a senior in college, and many of those friends and many of their families have found a church home in that community. In turn, they have extended the invitation to their neighbors and friends as well. They have followed the rules. Make Room. Honor the Stranger. Expand the Invitation List.

That's what it means to party like Jesus. Not to be too rigid or legalistic or dour. To party like Jesus means finding a little extra room at the table. To party like Jesus means sometimes giving someone else your prime spot. Sometimes to party like Jesus means inviting those who would never make your list of preferred guests. Sometimes to party like Jesus means accepting the invitation of another and making the effort to show up in their lives. When Jesus throws a party, it's the humble who are exalted. When Jesus throws a party, the outsiders are given priority. When Jesus throws a party, all of God's people have a place. Even you. After all, it wouldn't be the same without you. For God's sake, don't miss the party. Amen.