

Have you ever thrown a party that nobody came to?

I did once.

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to house sit for a family friend who owned an old turn of the century home in the heart of a beautiful established neighbourhood in Southern Alberta.

It was a three story brick walk up on a street lined with old cotton wood trees. The houses crown mouldings led your eye to a beautiful oak staircase that wound its way through the houses cozy and inviting interior. It was far more refined then I was at the time - but I saw it as a chance to invite over some of my university friends to share a meal before our semesters got the better of us - and besides I had the home owners blessing.

I sent out Facebook invites to people I had connected with in class and made sure I talked to them personally before the night of the party. I even researched a meal fit to impress, googling how to set up the table with far more cutlery then the courses I had planned to serve. At last I sat back and waited for the guests to arrive.

Then nobody showed up.

When I checked my phone there were a few messages explaining why some of my friends hadn't come - but over all none of the responses stuck out to me as immediately pressing - so I assumed they didn't have the heart to tell me they had something better to do.

So I turned the celebration into a party for one.

I enjoyed the punch I had made, I ate the appetizers, then sat down on the back deck with my electronic guitar, turned the amp all the way up, and started playing and singing REM's "Everybody hurts" on my old banged up Stratocaster...
(if you know the words feel free to join in)

*"When your day is long
and the night,
the night is your's alone.
When you sure you've had enough
of this life, hang on.
Don't let yourself go
'cause everybody cries
and everybody hurts sometimes."*

... that is until one of the neighbours poked their head over the fence to ask if everything was okay? His words breaking into the solemn moment I had created to mark the loss of my grand plans...

So, I'll be the first to admit it's a blow to your pride when you try to throw a party and nobody seems to want comes to. And as I was too busy wallowing in self pity over the state of my plans failing - inviting anyone else over was the farthest thing from my mind – so I didn't invite the neighbor who had just checked in on me to share in meal I had prepared. I mean who could face that kind of potential rejection for a second time!

But this morning we hear Jesus telling a story about a land owner turned party planner who also threw a celebration no one seemed to want to attend. However, this party planner had a much different response when faced with a similar problem as mine. Instead of wallowing in self pity like I did – singing songs of sorrow from their back porch - this party planner rolled out the red carpet anyway - called to ensure the caterers were still coming, confirmed with the DJ, then asked their entourage to invite the whole neighbourhood to the banquet and celebrations that night!

As if that wasn't enough - when the newly invited guests had all arrived, they discovered that there was still room at the banquet to squeeze in even more tables to welcome more people – and so the party planner sent out the invitation to come join the banquet for the third time!

And instead of going back to try to convince those “A-listers” who had refused the first invitations to come – the party planner chose to specifically ask their entourage to make sure everyone had a chance to attend - especially those living at the neighbourhood's margins who were often left out from such events. Those who were homeless or down on there luck. Those who hadn't eaten three square meals in longer then they would like to remember. Those who had been ostracized for living with mental health concerns. Those who had survived a life of substance use. Those whose bodies were often judged for their disability over the many gifts they could share, or those who were rejected for being different for some reason or another - whether that was because of the color of their skin or an “ism” that separated them from others. Those were the honored guests the party planner had chosen to seek out with the last of their invitations that night.

But, this kind of offer would have been unheard of in first century Palestine. People who found themselves at the margins of society didn't get invitations to openly participate as members of the community. In fact, beyond not simply receiving invitations - they wouldn't get much support from the community at all – because society at that time had decided that if you were different for any noticeable reason you were “unholy” and were often ostracized from your family and thrown out of society itself.

So those left at the margins of Jesus world often only receive what little people would give them when they begged on the streets. And those who were the worst off, the most disfigured,

sick, or in pain were often sent out to live outside of the walls of the community itself. Walls that would be sealed and locked up at night to ensure the last and the least would be kept from finding their way back into the community under the cover of darkness.

Yet – it is these members of the society that the party planner sees and ensures are invited back in - not only inside the walls of the city – but within the community as honored guests at one of the most prestigious feasts and celebrations this community has ever seen!

And this is where this story of Jesus stops making as much sense to those of us who have spent any amount of time in this world – because we know from our own experience that parties like this simply don't happen.

Sure every now and again, there might be an outpouring of community kindness that makes the headlines of our nightly news or go viral across our social media platforms – but it certainly isn't something we see regularly in our time. Many of us don't go out of our way to invite others in. Perhaps its because we are so used to our level of comfort, privilege, or protective social conventions that we don't think of connecting with people outside our circle of close family and friends – never mind try to break down the barriers that come to separate us from those whose lives are different from our own.

And I don't think its just us in our world today who experienced this. Knowing what we do of first century Palestine – it would have been a great feat to invite such a crowd to the party to begin with. Many people wouldn't risk their prominent place in society by associating with those who had been deemed “unholy” – never mind join them for an elaborate feast and celebration where all were welcomed as equals.

Yet, this deep sense of inclusive welcome seems to be the very purpose of the story Jesus is trying to get us to hear. It isn't just some pie in the sky tale that is supposed to keep us warm as our summer days fade away. This story – a parable – is an invitation for us to imagine the community we live in, in a new and life giving way. A way that reflects God's greatest hope for both us and all creation.

And in hearing this story, we are given a chance to do just that. To imagine what it would be like if there wasn't a separation of those who have, from those who don't have enough. From those who are seen, to those who wonder if they will ever be seen. From those on the inside looking out and those on the outside looking in. And if we are brave enough, we might not simply stop at imagining a new world, but taking a chance at actively ushering in this new reality within our lives and community.

So this morning I'd like to share a video that Reis Cooper sent on to me this week – its not long but it really gets to the heart of this story – this parable - right in our midst – and maybe it will help you to imagine what it might mean if we simply opened a door, started a conversation, pulled up another seat, took a risk, or welcomed someone different then ourselves today.

http://players.brightcove.net/1241706627001/default_default/index.html?videoId=6021777904001

One of my pastoral colleagues once said *“the greatest spiritual discipline is not praying daily, reading the bible, or even making sure you recycle - the greatest spiritual discipline is just showing up...”*

So perhaps that’s the kind of community of faith we are being called to be.

A community that shows up with and for one another in our times of need. A community that will show up with welcome even if we aren’t sure if we will always get it right. A community that shows up to serve our friends and our neighbors whether we are here at church or out in the world. A community where we are always willing to pull up another chair, open another door, or learn how best to walk alongside one another because that is the hope God is calling us to embody to our broken world.

Because sometimes we can get caught up in trying to be strong, independent, healthy, and successful that we can't hear the invitation of God to be part of the whole body of Christ just beyond our door. And we forget that we too are actually hungry for God, for community, for wholeness, and connection to show up for us with our world.

Which is why this text is so important for us to hear and hold as we begin another busy fall. We need this reminder that all God asks of us is to keep showing up. To keep welcoming, including, supporting, and caring for one another – even if the world tells us its all for not – because we know that even the smallest of actions can change the world.

And so it is my prayer for us as a community of faith as we gather together this fall that we would not dwell on being strong, admirable, or independent in our lives and faith, but that God would use us just as we are. With our numerous gifts, strengths, needs and weaknesses to become a fuller vision of the body of Christ here at Holy Spirit and out within the world.

So as you go on from here, both prepared and unprepared for what awaits you, may you welcome others as God has you. May you find room in your hearts and your home to invite others in to be loved, and may you always know we have room for you, for everyone, here at Christ’s table. Amen.