

March 20, 2022
Isaiah 55:1-9

Lent 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Open Invitation”

“Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”

One of the many decisions that engaged couples need to make when planning a wedding is who they will invite to the celebration. Guest lists are usually determined by many factors: being a family member, a close friend of the bride and groom, or someone who has played a major role in the couple’s lives. Finances are also a determining factor in the number of guests that will be invited; if the couple has a limited budget, tough decisions need to be made as to who to invite and who to regrettably leave off the guest list. Sometimes invitations are sent out of courtesy, with the expectation that the person will decline the invitation; such a strategy can backfire if this person unexpectedly accepts the invitation. In the end, the guest list for all weddings is limited: some people are invited, while others are not invited.

Invitations by their very nature are exclusive; they determine who is to be included and who is to be excluded. Finances may be a factor in limiting an invitation list, but other criteria may include persons who have a particular interest in the event, or persons who have been major supporters of the group issuing the invitation, or persons who are being honoured or rewarded for outstanding efforts. There are times when limiting the list of invited guests is appropriate; but there are other times when such exclusive lists serve to keep other persons out that may benefit from being a part of the invited group. Keeping certain persons out of the “in-group” can be a hurtful experience for the person who finds themselves standing outside the door, not invited to join in what is happening for those who are invited to what is happening on the inside.

The words from today’s first lesson come at the end of a section of Isaiah that is addressed to the exiled community of Israel in Babylon who has lived in this land since the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The fall of the Holy City was a devastating experience in the history of Israel; not only had they lost their homes and their freedom, but they had also lost the land that had been given to their ancestor Abraham as a key aspect of the covenant that God established with them; without this “promised land,” their very identity as God’s people was in doubt. Throughout their Babylonian Exile, the people of Israel struggled with both their identity as the people of God and with the question of whether God had abandoned them, whether God no

longer was present now that they had been removed from the land of their inheritance. It is to these exiled, doubt-filled people that the words of the prophet are proclaimed, calling on the Jewish people with words of comfort and assurance: *“Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”* (Isaiah 40:1-2). God proclaims that the people have not been abandoned, that God has heard their cries of lamentation and will come to their aid: *“Do not fear ... I will help you, says the LORD; your redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.”* (41:14). The Lord continues to assure God’s people that they need not fear, *“for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you ... for your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation.”* (43:5, 14). The word of God assures the exiled people that *“for a brief period I abandoned you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I have compassion for you, says the LORD, your redeemer.”* (54:7-8).

Up to this point, the Word of the Lord has been spoken exclusively to the people of Israel, the children of the covenant who had enjoyed a privileged status as God’s holy people. But toward the end of his proclamation to the Babylonian exiles, the prophet suddenly speaks not only to this one group of people but to all people, proclaiming a covenant that God establishes to all people: *“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!”* (55:1). The invitation is not limited to people of social standing or to people who possess the proper credentials or invitations; the only requirement is hunger and thirst. The prophet boldly proclaims that the aspect of the Davidic covenant concerning the nations has been enlarged to encompass all people. The sure love for David, expressed in God’s promises to him with respect to the nations, is now the purview of all people who incline their ears and listen to God’s Holy Word; *“the everlasting covenant was not to be expanded beyond the privileged elite to embrace the entire community of those obedient to God’s Word.”* (Paul Hanson).

In antiquity, banqueting was arranged to celebrate the completion of a new temple, for upon the temple rested the hopes of prosperity for the whole land. This banquet to which the prophet invites all people who hunger and thirst is greater than the banquets that do not satisfy; this is why the prophet asks, *“why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?”* (55:2). The Lord alone offers that which truly satisfies, which is the salvation that the Lord offers that is life in all its abundance, both physical and spiritual; *“the blessings of the LORD’s covenant include both a joyous spiritual relationship with God and a*

fullness of physical life that include a return to the Lord of Israel.” (Gary Light). The covenant promises of blessing, security, and peace are encapsulated in the phrase *“my steadfast, sure love for David”* (55:3), which are now proclaimed to all who are now invited to *“listen, so that you may live.”* The prophet who at first had spoken exclusively to the people of Israel is now proclaiming the Word of God to all people: *“See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.”* (55:4-5). The invitation to the table of the Lord that had once been extended only to a chosen few is now an open invitation to all who desire to *“come, buy wine and milk without money and without price,”* to all who heed the prophet’s invitation to *“incline your ear and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”* The prophet’s open invitation to all people is now emphasized in the call to *“seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near”* (55:6). It is a call to sincere repentance and to return and reliance upon the Lord; all are called to *“return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”* (55:7). The prophet offers a gracious invitation to a caring, personal relationship with the Lord; it is an urgent invitation that will later be echoed by Paul in his words to the Corinthians: *“See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”* (2 Corinthians 6:2). The prophet calls on the people to *“return”* (repent) for the Lord desires to display mercy and *“will abundantly pardon.”* The Lord freely forgives because God is merciful; *“the people can ‘seek the LORD’ because God is already seeking them.”* (Light). The people are called to open their minds to God’s thoughts and commit themselves to God’s ways, to trust in the Lord who is *“gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”* (Joel 2:13).

- *“With mercy and forgiveness, God goes beyond justice, he subsumes it and exceeds it in a higher event in which we experience love, which is at the root of true justice ... God never tires of forgiving, it is we who get tired of asking him for forgiveness. Why does God never tire of forgiving us? Because he is God, because he is mercy, and because mercy is the first attribute of God. The name of God is mercy.”* – Pope Francis.

For those who may have difficulty grasping the gracious nature of God’s merciful love and how God might open this invitation to all people, the prophet reminds the people that God’s ways and human ways are not necessarily the same: *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my*

thoughts than your thoughts.” (55:8-9). In drawing this distinction between divine and human attributes, the prophet is stating that it is the desire of the Lord to share the abundance of God’s blessings with all who would join the community of faith. *“A divine fellowship is formed in which God’s servants can fully participate in God’s plans. The invitation has been given. Why settle for anything less?”* (Light). The open invitation to share in the abundance of God’s blessings is a theme that is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who we worship as “Lord of all.” His birth is celebrated by the choirs of angels who fill the skies outside of Bethlehem with shouts of *“glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people”* (Luke 2:14). As his parents present their newborn son in the Jerusalem Temple in fulfillment of the commandments of the Torah, they are greeted by Simeon who sings out in praise of God’s faithfulness, proclaiming *“Master, you are now dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”* (Luke 2:29-32). At his Last Supper, our Lord institutes the sacrament of Holy Communion, proclaiming that his body and blood are given and shed *“for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.”* Following his resurrection, the risen Lord appears to his disciples and commissions them to *“go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19). On the day of Pentecost, the apostles are empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel in all the languages of the people gathered in Jerusalem so that *“in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”* (Acts 2:11). The mission of the church that begins on the day of Pentecost continues to fulfill our Lord’s Will that *“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8) so that *“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”* (Romans 10:13).

Invitations are inherently exclusive since they distinguish between the invited and the uninvited; but there is no exclusivity in our Lord’s invitation to all people to return to the Lord and share in the abundance of God’s blessings which God desires all people to share. The Gospel is an open invitation to all people to become God’s beloved children, to share in the goodness of God’s creation, to know that Jesus Christ is Lord of all, to know that *“there’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea.”* But unfortunately, the open invitation has often been subverted when churches see themselves as exclusive gatherings, as communities in which one is admitted by invitation only, where walls are constructed, and people are kept on the outside from an assembly where all should know that they are welcome. The call of repentance in Lent is a call to the church to acknowledge its tendency to look inward,

to cater to the “in crowd” instead of being the embodiment of the love of Christ in which all are welcome to share in goodness of God’s steadfast love. God’s invitation is open to all, and God’s people need to be ambassadors of this gracious love in making certain that nothing stands in the way of anyone who desires to accept this invitation to become a follower of the one who died and rose again so that all that believe in him might have everlasting life.

- “I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is ‘the God of all grace,’ in the apostle Peter’s words. And grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God’s family.” – Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Open invitations are not always possible in many gatherings; we may not be able to afford the cost of accommodating such a large crowd, and we may not have the space to adequately welcome such numbers. But open invitations are at the heart of the work of the Church of Jesus Christ, where all are welcome to come into the Lord’s presence, to know that they are God’s beloved children, and to share in the goodness of God’s creation and the blessings of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who “*came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” (John 10:10). The invitation that brought us into the community of God’s beloved children is an invitation that is open to all who would seek the Lord and would desire to follow our Redeemer; may we endeavour to “*build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live ... let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: **all are welcome in this place!***” (ELW Hymn 641).

Amen.