

Welcome Forward

October 3, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Luke 14: 1, 7-14

A few weeks ago, over Labor Day, I had the privilege of being invited to officiate a wedding for two friends just outside of Bozeman, Montana. Yes, I was worried about Covid, but they took every precaution and I'm so glad I went. Never having been there before, I was blown away by the landscape and even more by the skyscapes, and the rivers that ran through it all. The wedding itself was held on the bride's father's 160-acre farm just below the Bridger Mountains and alongside the East Gallatin river. The couple and their friends had worked for days to create a stunning open-air chapel to seat 75 mostly local friends and family. They mowed and cleared a long aisle and a wide-open gathering space right in the middle of a wheat field. Of the close to 150 weddings I've officiated, this was one of the most beautiful and intentional. Homespun yet elegant, hootenanny fun yet grounded in the power of ritual that included a profound land acknowledgment honoring ancestors and indigenous persons. As if all that's not enough, the Bride's downhome, Midwestern dad happened to own a 1972 single engine plane that he kept at the farm. And though you wouldn't know it passing it by, turns out there was a small grassy airstrip on the land as well. Well, they decided to mow their wedding aisle right up to the airstrip. As a surprise to everyone but a few of us, the bride and her dad appeared by way of the plane that had taxied its way from the distant farmhouse out to the wheat field. As a bluegrass band of friends fiddled the processional, the plane pulled up, they stepped out, and the dad proudly walked his daughter down the aisle. But wait...there's more. At the end of the ceremony, after the kiss, the band kicked in again, and now the bride and groom who strolled the aisle together, hand in hand. This time, the brother of the bride was waiting in the plane still parked at the end of the aisle. He fired up it and sure enough, the couple stepped into the plane which did a quick loop down the run way before taking off, turning right over our heads, flying off over the river and towards the sun-drenched mountains in the distance. They eventually made it to the reception, which was also awesome, but man that plane - what a bold and adventurous way to take off into their shared love and future together!

Weddings and banquets and indoor and outdoor gatherings and re-gatherings like what we've been doing here have been on my mind ever since! I've wondered anew not only about how we gather as a new and different hybrid community, but also why we gather and where it will lead us? What can we learn when we come together, and here I don't mean to privilege in-person over online, but to consider how we include everyone. For as many of you as are gathered here, there are at least as many joining from home. Now that we've welcomed back so many of you, it's time to start saying as well, welcome forward! Welcome forward into this new and unknown

future of being a hybrid community, gathered by the spirit as always, but now regathered by the spirit, and in some ways reconstituted. There's an invitation to be all the more expansive, bold and adventurous as we wonder and reimagine what staying connected means for us in these strange and challenging times! I was grateful to find our reading for today in which Jesus shares a teaching about how we should gather! He even says, here in essence an in Matthew's version of this story explicitly, that the kin-dom of heaven is like a wedding! Boy did I get that vibe in Montana.

Here's the thing: throughout the bible, wedding banquets and ritual meals, whether sabbath or Seder, take on a "character of anticipation."¹ A celebration or meal is an occasion to remember what matters but also to hope for what's to come, together. Biblical feasts are often presented as foretastes of God's future reign of love and mercy and healing and justice. Jesus knew this, and he knew when a meal was falling short of the chance to practice for that heavenly banquet! He knew the importance and the hard work and shared labor of preparing and inviting, of hosting and including so that everyone would feel honored! When invited, you don't just show up and sit anywhere. Jesus says in verse 10, "but when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you."

Later at the reception in Bozeman, the couple further blew us all away even further. They had taken the time to place deeply personal handwritten notes in small envelopes at each of our places to tell us what we meant to them and why they were that each of us was there. Nice touch, right? But wait...there's more! At one point, I noticed the groom behind the makeshift bar pouring wine with the hired help, and not just for himself! Confused, I went up to him for a top-off asked him why he was serving and not being served on this day of all days! He surprised me when he said "I used to work here at this very hall when I was at MSU. I'm just enjoying some solidarity with the others who are working!" I'm telling ya - this wedding was like a parable, not the other way around! I was immediately reminded of meals at our Friday Cafe or in our Shelter. Like those gatherings, it was a love feast where you couldn't tell who was host or guest, who was guest or friend, or who was friend or family. Talk about a foretaste! This wedding, even with an airplane, lacked pretense and so was all the more inviting and inclusive. And the setting, on that wide-open land and that huge sky, only added to the utterly expansive quality and feel of the gathering.

I think God's realm is like that - an expansive place, a lush banquet that never runs out of seating, a chance to gather with friends and strangers where extroverts willingly make space, shy folks wondrously take space, and everyone's God-given dignity is unmistakably, and equally shining through! Does this imaginary remind you of anything?

¹ *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, edited by John Barton and John Muddiman, Oxford Press, c. 2001 p. 946.

I wonder if this could be one of things we are learning from Covid and all of our social distancing about how we gather as a church. Seemingly everything we do requires more space if not more time for preparation and processing and thoughtfulness about who is included. I mean when have we ever been so intentional about gathering! What a moment to welcome us, and everyone else, not back but forward, together, into a more mindful awareness of how we share space, make space and take space at the table!

Those of you at home may not know this yet but we've installed one of two large screens here. The second should be here next week. This way, we can see what you are seeing, and eventually we look forward to seeing you if you want! Parents, kids awaiting vaccines, people joining us from Montana, let us know if you want to be a liturgist or a reader, we'd love to make it happen! Send us your photos again of your communion plates so we can celebrate all the more with you, for you are us and we are excited to be able to connect us all the more!

I know what some of you thinking especially after this week's headlines from Washington. Maybe when it comes to crossing wedding aisles in wheat fields or faux-reaching across the aisles or the internet at church, but what about those grand political canyons that are separating us now, keeping us miles apart on covid responses and key policy measures! Do we have to invite them too? My answer is twofold. First, yes! And second, who says you or we should be doing the inviting in the first place? At this table, God in Christ is the host, not us, who gathers us all in! And who says we aren't lame! Ask my kids, they say I can be very lame! More deeply, who says we aren't blind?

The wondrous point of our passage is that these kinds of gatherings and banquet have infinite seating! Our vision is impaired when we think too narrowly in human terms about what's possible when we gather. Like in Psalm 23 that we'll sing at the end of the service, God gives us meadows and still waters and banquets beside our foes! Church walls or wedding halls can't contain it. When we gather, we gather in God's wide-open abiding presence which spans all time and space. Why? To receive God's grace and to share God's welcome with the world! And all of this as sign of what's to come! What a hopeful and joyful thought!

If you are still having a hard time believing that life is ever going to get better, that our country or our planet are somehow beyond saving, despite our best efforts, then feast your hearts and your souls and your imaginations on the meal that God hosts every time we gather at this table. It's not only locally sourced, but infinitely sourced, and you can join us by dining-in or staying-at-home. Receive the invitation to gather with us at this table, wherever you are seated, and be fed by this taste and foretaste of beauty and belonging and love for everyone!

To bring this home to us all the more, and perhaps especially those of you who are joining from your kitchen tables, I close with a poem written by Joy Harjo, member of the Muskogee Nation and US Poet Laureate. It's called Perhaps the World End Here!

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So, it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

What a gift to be invited, again and again, to share a wide open table, whether you are sitting at a desk, or watching on a device under a tree somewhere, or here in the first pew, we are all invited to sit at God's kitchen table, laughing, weeping, wondering about what impact our presence can have, remembering and hoping, trusting in faith that this is just a taste, just a sweet bite of the goodness and beauty and love that is ours, now and in the future, whatever it may hold! By God's grace, may we continue to set this table ever wider, may it be a symbol of radical inclusion and of that great banquet in the big sky bidding us and welcoming us forward even now. Amen!