

As most of you know, a couple of weeks ago, my sisters and I headed home to Michigan for my dad's 70th birthday, all of us, plus the nephews and the golden retriever niece made the trek across the Midwest to surprise my dad. That was the key, this was a surprise party, but on top of that, we realized that because the world has been what it's been lately, this was also Sebastian's first like actual *party*. We haven't done the big blowout family party thing since Covid. Our birthday parties are small and just us, and we're good with that, but Bash was totally enamored by the idea of a party. The biggest key to this party was...it was going to be at a bowling alley. The excitement was practically vibrating off of this kid, because my dad had gotten him and Felix bowling balls for Christmas last year, so all day Bash is just like, we're going to bowl! We're going to surprise Papa Toby and we're going to bowl and it's going to be fun and there will be cake and there will be fun and just all the things.

We walk in, and immediately Kristin and I assess, this isn't going to be good. The bowling alley has like twelve lanes, all of which are occupied, and Bash's eyes are just scanning the room like oh my gosh we're here, it is time for all the things. And I look at Kristin as we head back to the banquet room and I'm like, I do not think we're bowling. We had hardcore misunderstood the goal of this party. So, we get into the room and we sit

down, a good half hour before my dad is supposed to arrive and it takes all of ten minutes for reality to sink in to poor Bash. “Aren’t we going to bowl?” “Where’s Papa Toby?” and inevitably... “I’m bored!” In theory, a surprise party at a bowling alley sounds amazing to a six year old. In reality, a surprise party which means you have to wait an extended period of time for the person of honor to get there in the banquet room of a small bowling alley is immensely disappointing to said six year old.

Now, admittedly, everything ended up being great. My dad got there, the boys got to play pool, there was cake, all my dad’s friends fawned over the absolute cuteness of the six year old, he got to help my dad blow out his candles, and then got ice cream after and a few rounds of games at the ice cream parlor’s arcade, so all in all, a good time. However, in those initial moments, Sebastian was wondering if this was really an invitation he had wanted to accept because he had rolled in expecting a *party* and all he got was boredom.

I think it’s safe to say that we have hit no punches pulled Jesus in Matthew’s gospel. The Palm Sunday procession has happened, the Temple has been cleansed, the Pharisees are starting to circle tighter and tighter, and Jesus just doesn’t care anymore about saying anything with any degree of comfort. The days are quickly dwindling and Jesus knows that he has to get

everything he possibly can out, even if it comes out as harsh, frightening, or frankly downright confusing. Enter in, the parable of the wedding banquet.

On the face of it, it kind of makes sense, a king has put all this time, money, and effort into throwing an extravagant wedding banquet for his son. The invitations have gone out, the food is prepared, and he's ready to party. He's Sebastian being like we are going to bowl and have an amazing time and isn't this going to be great? And then...no one comes. Everyone has somewhere better to be. Excuses are made, there are more important things to attend to, this party just isn't all that important. You kind of sympathize with the king, like ouch, all that effort and no one cares, but then the king responds by burning the city to the ground and killing people and you're like, yikes dude, probably an overreaction.

But then he kind of course corrects, he throws the doors of the banquet hall open and says, everyone is welcome, everyone can come and eat and be filled. It doesn't matter who you are or what you have done, you have a place at the table. It sounds amazing, like this is what a party should be, and then someone rolls in with the wrong outfit on, which lets be real, how many people are wandering the streets prepared to be invited to a banquet, and he freaks out and throws him out. It is so weird that even the side notes in my Bible said that the meaning is confusing and uncertain. So

what are we supposed to do with this? Well, at first I didn't think there was anything to do with it, but then someone in Bible study said...maybe this is why no one wanted to come to the party in the first place. This is a guy that will burn your city down if you refuse him and then if you show up in the wrong outfit, he throws you out. Who wants to go to that party? And that's where this gospel goes from being confusing to being a call out that we, like the Pharisees, just don't want to hear.

If we face this parable head on, we realize that it has a lot to say about us as the church at every turn. We prepare and we plan and we think that what we have to offer to people is an amazing thing, come in and enjoy. And we have all the people in our heads that we *think* should be here, should be happy and ready to accept the invitation and then when they refuse or they say that they have other things to do or they make excuses for why they can't be here, well, we don't go so far as burning cities to the ground, but boy are we quick to demonize and condemn them for their reasons, for their refusal. We quickly go from, we want you hear, please come on in, to I can't believe that they are acting like this or doing this or doing that instead and our welcoming hearts turn pretty judgmental, pretty quickly.

So then, we take a step back, we reassess, we listen to the gospel and we say, ya know what, let's throw open the doors, we want *everyone* here.

The invitation, the gospel is for all so let's welcome everyone in, that's what Jesus calls us to do, go out and find the lost sheep, the lonely and forgotten, the ones the world has turned away from. We want to be inclusive and appreciative of the diversity God has created so let's just crack this thing wide open, get everyone in here. And then...someone shows up in the wrong clothes. Or someone walks in who is different. Or you realize that being welcoming, being inclusive means actually loving and honoring people for who they are *wholly and completely*. Or you realize that the church can't be a place where we can hide our bigotry and prejudice. Or you realize that it isn't enough to just say that you want those things but to actually live it, and well suddenly, we're tossing a lot of people out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth...and suddenly that statement from Bible study comes creeping back up...maybe that's why people don't want to come in the first place.

Last week, we named all these seeds we want to plant, but seeds can't grow if they aren't tended to seriously. We want fellowship, community, and togetherness, we need to show up, with and for one another, and when people come back, even if it's for one week, we welcome them exuberantly and leave all of our petty nitpicking behind. We want outreach and care for our neighbor, then we need to take seriously who our neighbors are, what

their needs are, and be willing to get our hands dirty for their sake. We want inclusivity and welcoming, then we have to mean it, we have to be willing to learn and grow and make mistakes in that learning and not just say we want to be welcoming because it sounds good, but because we genuinely want everyone to feel safe and at home here. In short...we have to be willing to throw a party people actually want to be at, and if people don't show up, we don't bad mouth them, and when people do show up, we don't critique who they are.

And honestly...at the end of the day...this isn't even our party we're throwing, it isn't our food, it isn't our anything...it's God's. We are the stewards of the banquet, but we certainly aren't the bouncers, and we forget that sometimes. God has prepared a feast, a party, a hoopla for all, and it's not up to us to say who can and can't come. It's up to us to say, we are so glad you are here, we see you, we love you, have a seat and be yourself.

There might be bowling, there might be cake, there might be nothing of what we expect, but at the end of the day, we have to remember, God welcomed us in...so it's time to leave the weeping and gnashing of teeth behind and throw a party of grace. **AMEN!!!**