

God's Invitation to Love

Matthew 11:16-19

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church in Camden, UCC; July 5, 2020

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"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Everyone loves a party! So goes the old saying. And what's usually not to love about being invited, at least that used to be the case in the "old days" before the pandemic. Our Gospel text for today prompts us to ask how we respond to existential invitations in our lives. *Invitation* is a fascinating word. It is derived from the verb *vito* which actually means *to shun* or *to avoid*. The prefix *in* reverses the meaning. To invite someone is to actively move beyond shunning or avoiding. It is to open to a relationship. Some definitions add the meaning of entering or offering a challenge.¹ In other words, an invitation offers the challenge to open toward one another regardless of the judgments and avoidances that have kept us from coming together.

Living through this pandemic leaves us carefully weighing every invitation that comes our way from meeting up with friends to returning to school, church or work.² This is especially true as infections rise during the roller coaster ride of re-openings and on-going pitting of best practices against personal liberties and political ambitions. This Fourth of July weekend always invites a celebration of national ideals. I suspect that many of us feel that this offers a particularly poignant invitation to reconsider who we are. It is time to ask again how we wish to grow into the great promise of equality and freedom for all upon which this nation was founded 244 years ago. It is an invitation to face the grievances and injustices that have been coming to the fore in recent months rather than avoiding them.

¹ <https://www.wordsense.eu>

² There are also many who have no real choice about returning to work to feed their families.

Our Gospel text offers an intriguing image that may also speak to our times. Jesus has been addressing the crowds about John the Baptist who challenged those who came out to the Jordan to be baptized to turn their lives around. Jesus praises John as being even greater than a prophet but adds that something new is now being ushered in through Jesus himself. He calls on everyone to pay attention to the times (Matthew 11:11-15). Then Jesus offers this critique: *“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’*

In the Jewish culture of his day, men were those who would play flutes at weddings while those invited danced with joy. It was the role of women to wail at funerals to acknowledge the depth of pain involved in people’s sufferings and losses. In Jesus’ example, we have children enacting the role of adults, reminding us of the ways our own behaviors shape the next generation, positively or negatively. Each side is so immersed in its own experience that one cannot participate in the experience of the other or affirm its meaning and value. Each ends up feeling ignored, perhaps even shunned or avoided, to go back to our definition of the word *invitation*. This speaks to how we struggle to embrace the complexities and paradoxes of life. Life is a cause for celebration and weddings are an image for the promise of new life arising out of a union as well. Death, struggle and suffering are also part and parcel of our lived experience. I wonder if Jesus is inviting us to be present to and honor both, to let one inform the other.

Jesus goes on to point out how many people so easily dismissed John the Baptist as being too harsh in his chosen asceticism (deprivations) and too focused on calling out suffering and wrongdoing. Too much wailing and not enough joy, some might have said. Some even said John had a demon (Mt 11:18). And Jesus, who celebrated at weddings and sought fellowship with people whom others shunned and avoided, like the tax collectors, was dismissed as a glutton and drunkard. Maybe some dismissed him as dancing too much and being oblivious to what they felt should be judged harshly. Jesus points out how quickly we seek refuge in our own judgments rather than deal with the actual challenge inherent in the invitation that is being offered to us. We look for a point we want to criticize and go no further. It is always easier to reduce another person, an issue or cause to something we can object to rather than letting

ourselves be challenged and transformed - a complex and often time-consuming and painful process. It is the way of the cross.

Jesus also challenges his listeners to move beyond a focus on words to actual deeds, saying: "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds (Mt 11:19)." Jesus did not just talk. He lived his life as an embodied invitation to a deeper and active love rooted in our mutual interdependence and origin in the one ground – God. Jesus sought intimacy, proximity, with others who struggled and were marginalized. Some were being shunned by their society for perceived or real misdeeds. Others were victims of injustice and oppression. Jesus even loved those who were blind to their own self-righteous judgments and arrogance that helped to keep systems of oppression in place. As one rooted in wisdom and embodying it, Jesus could love others amidst the contradictions and paradoxes of life. He was not afraid to suffer, and even die, with and for others. He also encouraged and modeled the power of resurrection and rejoicing in our shared lives.

What do we make of all this in light of the fact that we just observed Independence Day at a time when our country is so divided? Many enjoy waving the flag and showing pride in the life loving, creative and independent spirit and beauty of this country. We want to play the flute and dance. We are also now hearing more clearly the shouts of protest and the wailing over the repercussions still felt today from the injustices of slavery, the on-going ramifications of systemic and personal discrimination from employment to education to health care, and the public brutality against persons of color. We are learning about the way trauma is transferred in human bodies as well as our minds generation to generation. We are being forced to look at our biases in how we tell the history of this nation as statues are being dismantled.

The Declaration of Independence is full of noble aspirations and it is full of grievances against injustices by the British. I must admit I had completely forgotten about the long list of injustices named to justify the move toward independence. Ironically, it was written by white men of privilege who could see and articulate their own suffering but remained blind to the suffering they imposed on others based on the color of their skin, ethnicity or gender. For example, this Declaration mentions Native Americans only as brutal savages employed by the British, denying

their humanity. It also ignores the fact that its authors lived and profited on land taken away from Native tribes and worked by enslaved human beings. The slaves of Jefferson, the author of this bold statement, had no rights but were counted as 2/3rd of a human being merely to secure a higher population and representation count for whites in southern states. Women did not bear mention at all. "All men," that is white land owning males, "are created equal."

It is no wonder that black abolitionist Frederick Douglas had this to say in his 1852 speech entitled: "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro"³:

The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn...What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.

These are strong prophetic words that are still felt in many ways by fellow citizens of color today. Members of the Maine Youth Student Alliance led a march and held speeches yesterday in Camden to challenge us to see that the work of making our noble aspirations a reality is not done. They named the good in our aspirations but also refused to be satisfied until the promises become a reality for everyone.⁴ Here we had our younger generation taking charge and opting for solidarity with others who suffer. Scores of people laid face down with hands on their backs on the ground at the harbor for 8 minutes and 46 seconds to remember the slow killing of George Floyd. This embodied practice invited all participants to catch just a small taste

³ He originally gave the speech at a meeting of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society.
<https://time.com/5614930/frederick-douglass-fourth-of-july/>

⁴ Our young leaders named many things, including the disproportionate rates of incarceration of African American men and who profits in the marketplace (from privatized prisons to low wages for workers who are not provided needed protections during the pandemic).

what it is like to be dominated and rendered powerless by others. It is a powerful exercise! These young people realize that talking is not enough. We do have a learning curve ahead of us that will involve listening and talking but they remind us that we cannot stop there if we are to address the structural inequalities in our world. I was moved by the direct challenge to peers and elders to move beyond silence and passivity.

Since Jesus refused to ignore people on the margins and lived a life of solidarity. These themes and challenges are also a matter of faith. As Frederick Douglas named so clearly, prayers and sermons and hymns always run the risk of being another occasion for fraud and hypocrisy. We cannot close our ears to the mourning of those who continue to suffer as we seek to celebrate what is good and beautiful. Douglas foreshadowed the destruction of the Civil War in his day. Especially those of us who are identified as white and privileged have to decide whether we accept the invitation of our day to let the cries of our sisters and brothers of all colors change us. This will require still more changes in policies and laws. Most deeply, it will require a change of heart as we stop avoiding facing the demons of our collective past and present. Following Christ's invitation, let us endeavor to truly learn to see Christ in each other. May Christ's wisdom be vindicated by our collective deeds. Only then can our song, our dancing, also become authentic and mutual.