

“Open Invitation”
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Isaiah 55:1-9

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San Dimas Community Church, UCC

I once heard James Forbes, the famous preacher of the Riverside Church in New York City, preach on this text. He said that after pondering this passage over several days, he came to believe that the most important word of the entire text was the first word “Ho” which in this case means “pay attention, stop in your tracks, listen up, I have something important to say!” And what that important message was (and is) is that there is an open invitation extended by God to all creation to thrive and to have abundant life.

This invitation to thrive and thrive abundantly might seem obvious to us, but it was not so obvious to those hearing the words for the first time. The first hearers of these words were the people of Israel in exile: they were taken from their homeland to Babylon and they would remain there for 50 years. They longed for home. The prophet says to them, “even in this foreign land, even in the midst of sorrow and longing for home, God offers an open invitation to abundant life.”

God’s abundant life is not location-specific. The water of true life is available anywhere you open your heart to God. You don’t need to spend money on wine, milk, and bread, because true life, life that really matters, is available at no cost. The prophet takes the necessities of physical life and uses them as symbols of the intangible blessings of life in the Spirit, of God’s abundant life.

This is rather like what we do with communion. The morsel of bread and small amount of grape juice is a symbol to remind us that God invites us to life tied to Christ and community. Jesus didn’t celebrate Passover alone; it was a community celebration of God’s invitation to abundant life. What was coming down in the days to come for Jesus and his friends was not a pretty sight; but nevertheless, Jesus says “this is the bread of life and the cup of a new covenant, a new relationship; and I offer it to you now, no matter what may come.” Holy Communion would not make much sense celebrated by one person because it is the celebration of the community gathered in love for each other and love for the Holy One in our midst.

While religious threads of history understand the bread and cup in different ways, we believe it is the symbol of God’s “open invitation” for everyone to be included in the community of God’s love. That’s why children are invited, and people of all faiths are invited, and even the person who doesn’t understand what it is all about is invited. It is what we do together to say loud and clear to the world “Listen up, God intends for you to thrive in abundant life.”

Symbols are all around us. They are often instant reminders of what touches us deeply. For me daffodils are a symbol. The sight of them reminds me of my grandmother's house in the country of southwest Missouri where a wild path of daffodils sprung up every spring. When I see them, all the memories of grandmother and time spent in that old house flood my soul. For our daughters, just the mention of my peanut butter fudge brings to mind Christmas, special celebrations, and a warm kitchen. Symbols bring us to a moment in time that transcends ordinary time and space.

Holy Communion is our symbolic act of remembering our Judeo-Christian heritage and remembering that Jesus lived life in a community of friends gathered around him to hear and receive "beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life." Holy Communion is also our symbolic act for the future. By sharing the bread and cup, we show one another that together we face all that life brings, the joys and the sorrows, the sickness and health, the riches and the poverty; and together we will hold tight to each other through thick and thin.

And Holy Communion is the act of remembrance that says "Listen up, God cares for you!" From the first Passover meal of liberation when the Hebrews in Egypt were led out of slavery to freedom, to the Passover meal when Jesus reinterprets these symbols to mean freedom from "soul" slavery, these symbols connect us to the force for abundant life that flows and thrives throughout creation, even in the darkest places of the world or the dark abyss of the soul.

So today, when we sing "Circle of Friends" we sing the words: "laugh, cry, live, *thrive*," because we remember that we are called to life that is full and rich and meaningful and tethered to the very heart of God. We are "Part of the Family" of God, and we are to never, ever forget it!