

# *“Party Etiquette”*

**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

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From the Pulpit

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## “Party Etiquette”

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With gratitude for sermon group colleagues who gifted me their words and insight for help with this sermon. I use with permission. The spoken word of preaching does not always come with appropriate prose and punctuation

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A friend in the book group I belong to loves to host us on her back porch. It's common for her to volunteer first. She is a good and gracious host. Before we arrive, she prepares a light supper. She sets out the plates and napkins and glasses. The Chocolate — don't forget the chocolate. Her string lights on the porch are always on. When we arrive it is such a hospitable place that we all have the opportunity to relax and rest, no matter what our days or weeks have been. She has the spiritual gift of hospitality.

Two weeks ago, she brought us all back together on her back porch. Everything in its place. She greeted us with the same welcome and hospitality we have become used to.

While we were catching up and enjoy the warm evening, she shares the news that she will be accepting a new job out of state and would be leaving in a few months. Of course, we were caught off guard.

All of us used the rest of the time encouraging her to reconsider and stay in Columbus. One person reminded her that she doesn't handle

change well am moving wouldn't be a good idea. Another suggested that she could still mess up her final interview.

We were only kidding (a little) when we suggested that our prayer would be for her come to her senses!

When she returns from the kitchen she brings us gift bags! I mean, drop the news about leaving your good friends in Columbus, and then give gifts. Party favors! Talk about unique Party Etiquette.

She knew that party gifts would take the edge off the bad news she just dolled out. She must have selected each item with us in mind. Some bags included:

A coffee mug with an empowering feminist phrase on it.

A holiday scented candle and A cross necklace.

Others bags contained...

French Onion Soup Mix. A cheese ball mix. And a quirky refrigerator magnet.

A box of cornbread mix. And a spatula and a pair socks with cat faces on them.

A half used spray bottle of Clorox bathroom cleaner and a used bottle of Fabreeze.

A partial bag of Fragrant Epsom Salts, a used bottle of hand lotion and another scented candle with a butane lighter.

I kid you not, I walked away with a bottle of isopropyl alcohol, a coffee mug, and a therapeutic exercise ball.

Sometimes we need passages like today's text to remind us to slow down. When the world is moving too fast, it's ok to slow down.

Sometimes it's good to be reminded that Jesus, in his own special way, has a unique skill in party etiquette.

In this morning's reading, Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place and rest a while."

How does that invitation sound to you? Are you in need of rest? Most of us are. Especially now. We have been carrying so much during the last year and a half. It's time to put down that which we have been carrying. But even in summer, this season in which everything is supposed to slow down, rest can be elusive.

Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place and rest a while."

What surroundings help you rest? Do you have a favorite spot? Do you head to the woods or do you prefer to be by the water? Where do you get your best rest? In your home? On vacation? When you are alone or when you are with others?

This past week, I've been thinking a lot about rest. It's not the same thing as sleep, although sleep is an important part of it. And it doesn't necessarily mean the absence of activity. Some of my most restful days are days spent doing something I love with people I love – swimming, hiking, walking.

There is a restorative quality to rest. It's a time to let go and regroup, get some perspective, remember who we are, what's important, what matters, what lasts.

Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place and rest a while."

This invitation is offered just after Jesus sends his disciples into the world two-by-two, vulnerable, no extra cloak or extra food, just the

power to proclaim repentance and forgiveness, to cast out demons and to heal. The disciples are fresh back from this first foray into ministry, back with stories to tell. And tired. Tired enough that Jesus thinks they need a rest, away from the throngs of people coming and going, clamoring for attention and help.<sup>1</sup>

The disciples are in need of rest. Jesus sees that need and responds to it. It's a lovely moment between Jesus and the disciples.

A lovely moment that does not last.

When Jesus arrives at that deserted place with his tired disciples, he sees a great crowd and he has compassion for them. Rest time is over before it has even begun.

Really Jesus? You won't give the disciples what you promised, a little time off? A chance to debrief and regroup? Really, Jesus? I wonder what Jesus is modeling here?

I'm a firm believer that, no matter what kind of work we do, whether we do that work in or outside the home, it's our responsibility to take care of ourselves. To make sure we get sufficient sleep. To exercise regularly. To take appropriate time off. To use our vacation days. Taking care of ourselves in this way is one of the best gifts we give our families, our friends, our co-workers. And, when we maintain a discipline of self-care, we are actually more effective in our work. A lot more effective.

Jesus wants to rest with the disciples – he wants that for them. And then, well, stuff happens. Life gets in the way. The crowd arrives and Jesus can feel their need, their ache, their longing, their unfocused desire to connect with something that will help them feel more

whole. He is moved by compassion, and he responds out of that compassion.

I am struck by many things in this story. First, by the fact that it is a story about how to respond when we are worn out and over-extended. When our work and our life has taken us to a place where we have no more to give. When we are tired. When we try to take a little time off and we discover that we just can't do it. People keep showing up with their needs. It is a story about what to do when everything is worn out except our compassion.

And it is a story about what to do in such a situation. When we know that we are supposed to do something, when we want to do something but what exactly? Form a committee? Volunteer more hours? Just work harder?

Nope. That's not the way forward, according to Jesus. The verses that are left out of the lectionary reading today are about the time when Jesus told the disciples not to send the gathered community way, but instead to feed them. It's the passage of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus suggests using good party etiquette and give them something to eat and maybe even more important a place to rest.

Jesus' response is: Let's eat. Let's take time for a meal. Let's sit down and eat. All of us. Those in need of compassion and those offering compassion, if such distinctions can be made or even matter. Let's sit down and eat together.

It's not the response I was anticipating. But it rings true. Eating is the great equalizer. We all need to do it. And there is nothing quite like a shared meal to bring a group of people together. It may be the only

place where certain differences can be overlooked and/or bridged. Eating is, an opportunity to rest and renew.

Eating is an opportunity to rest and renew. But what Jesus really wants us to do is eat together.

One of the things that have made the last year so challenging – the absence of shared meals, the solitary nature of eating. It's one of the things that makes this current season so good – the opportunity to gather once again at tables with others.

Even as we have been regularly celebrating communion in our online worship service, and as we have returned to in-person worship as well, it has been good and helpful to join at the table together once again. Communion is meant to be shared.

Because eating together is a good thing.

I am aware that some of us have a complicated relationship to food. I'm thinking of those among us experiencing eating disorders, compulsive eating, or other problematic relationships with food. I hope that you can translate this story and Jesus' invitation to eat together into rituals of nurture and sustenance that are safe and healthy for you.

Back to our story and the meal that Jesus shares. The same verbs that appear in this story also appear in the story of Jesus in the upper room with his disciples the night before he dies, the words we remember and claim and celebrate when we gather at the table. The sequence is the same: Gather. Receive. Bless. Break. Give.

First Jesus gathers the people into community, in groups which somehow manage to find the fertile ground of community in a deserted place. First, he gathers them into the life of community.

Second, Jesus receives. He accepts what is given, what is right there in front of him. He receives the exhaustion of the disciples, receives the hopes and longings of the people, receives the five loaves and two fish they are able to scare up, receives the day and the life and the flock God has given him. He receives.

Then, he looks up to heaven and he blesses. He stops to say thank you to God. He blesses. He stops to survey all around him - all that belongs to God. The light in the people's eyes, the green of the fertile patch of community, the blue of the sea, the smell of the air. He stops to survey them all and to bless them. To claim this time and this place for God.

He blesses and then he breaks. He breaks the bread. He does not hoard or guard. He does not insist upon only that which is perfect or whole or unblemished. He does not play it safe or stand back and admire it. No, he breaks it. He takes a perfectly good loaf of bread, a perfectly good afternoon with his disciples, a perfectly good life as a carpenter from Nazareth. And he breaks it. Breaks it into pieces.

And finally, he gives. Gives to his disciples to give to his sheep scattered in groups on the green grass. In a time when everyone is tired. When it is clear there is not enough. When there is more to do than there are hands to do it. When the disciples are preached and taught and healed out---he gives and gives again.

Gather. Receive. Bless. Break. Give.

That's the story of the feeding of the five thousand.

That's the story of communion. That's the story of every shared meal.

That's the story of a life of faith, the work of love.

We gather, we receive, we bless, we break, and we give. We eat.

The messier life gets the more important meals become. So, when life is going off the rails, when you are exhausted, when you don't know what to do next, EAT, preferably with others.

Gather. Receive. Bless. Break. Give.

That is our work, the work of love.

Amen.

<sup>1</sup> I have borrowed heavily from Amy Miracle's July 4, 2021 sermon, "Let's Eat!" She is the Pastor at Broad Street Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio. Used with permission.

