

## The Berkey Table: Who is Missing, Unseen and Invisible?

June 11, 2017

Isaiah 25:6-10a

This is a sermon in 3 parts.

### **Lament**

We don't always offer the welcome we want to. For various reasons, there are people and situations that we don't see or respond to: maybe we don't know how to respond, maybe we unintentionally avoid people or situations, maybe our mostly homogeneous appearance is the closed door. Hear these stories of being invisible and unseen, and stories of who is missing from our table. These are the stories of our sisters and brothers here at Berkey. They give voice to our lament for our blindness.

Voice 1: Not coming from the Mennonite community, when people play the "Mennonite game" I have felt excluded.

Voice 2: Understandably, new attendees who have kids or are college students are greeted with joy and continued enthusiasm. As a newcomer who fits neither category, the difference was palpable.

Voice 3: We have done a good job of welcoming the Goshen College students with meals and a great SS option. However, I think we have not yet figured out how to welcome back our "own" college students who are not attending Goshen College. There has been an effort, but we need to keep working on it.

Voice 4: My clients tell me they don't look good enough to go to church. They don't know what reception they would find. Many of them are traumatized and can be hard to deal with. This is not specific to Berkey but something for us to keep in mind as we figure out how to be welcoming to all---even the unlovely.

Voice 1: Berkey is pretty middle class, educated, liberal/progressive, pre-dominantly white, Mennonite. I would like to see more ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. In particular, more immigrant families. How are we practically engaging this population? It will take intentionality to broaden the demographic. Is it

possible? Is it desirable? How would we need to change? Are we willing, able to change?

Voice 2: My daughter is in the LGBTQ community and does not feel welcome here. This is a great sadness to me.

Voice 3: As an introvert I do not like the coffee time. I'm not great at chit-chat and suspect others feel the same.

Voice 4: Early on in my time at Berkey, during a potluck, I was unable to find a place to sit, since I had been towards the end of the line. Since then, I do not stay for potlucks.

Voice 1: Although not actively unwelcoming, I have noticed that those of no faith do not have as much support as perhaps they should. Perhaps it would be beneficial to have a series on why it's important to welcome those who don't currently believe. I have a close family member who is seriously questioning her faith, and there is no structured time for her to explore the possibilities. The community seems supportive, but the church largely ignores these people.

Voice 2: As a student at Goshen College, who was baptized and raised from birth at Berkey, I had always felt a part of the church family. When I entered college, that feeling shifted a bit. Other college students from new places were warmly embraced. When I attended services and Sunday school I was asked to introduce myself and offered a nametag. This felt odd as someone who has participated at Berkey and been a member for several years. I was not recognized, and instead, was treated like a new college student. Although this is a unique situation that does not affect many students, please remember the graduated students. Even if they are in college welcome them as the long-time members they are. Berkey is still a home for these people and coming back should feel like coming home.

Voice 3: As a single person it's easy to feel overlooked and unseen because of the lack of natural connections with others through kids, spouses, etc.

Voice 4: When my divorce became final, I shared this with the congregation, emphasizing that it was a period of grief. I even suggested ways that people could respond to me. While a few people reached out to me, I felt ignored by the

congregation at large. I compared this to if my spouse had died—there would have been an outpouring of support.

Voice 1: During children's time most specifically, but sometimes in worship more broadly, we often say things such as, "you can go back to your parents now", or "Your mom shows how much she loves you by making sure you have the food you need," or "God loves you even more than your mom and dad! That's pretty amazing, isn't it?" For a child who has lost one or more parents these assumptions, true though they are for most of the children in our congregation, can be a knife through the heart. Children of single parents, children being raised by grandparents, children in foster care....I know we want to speak love to them as well. Our language matters.

Voice 2: As a male who works with children I often find that other males, especially those who work in Mennonite sponsored organizations, disregard me. Conversations with them are only about their areas of interest.

Voice 3: Berkey does a good job at welcoming college students, through Sunday school class and meals. But, if one chooses to stay on at Berkey post-college, particularly if you are a single female, it seems one can feel like they have fallen through the gap. I know at least 3 young women who stopped attending Berkey over the last few years because they felt left out.

Voice 4: I feel invisible when another person interrupts a conversation I am having with one person. This feels rude and unwelcoming.

### **Confession**

These are our stories. As a body, we recognize that we have not always lived up to our vision of being hospitable. We recognize that our congregation is not as diverse as it could be, particularly racially, ethnically and socio-economically.

The Spiritual Leadership Team has been talking about this reality, in light of the demographics of Goshen, and has set a goal for our commissions and congregation to keep in mind as we engage in mission and ministry. Because 30% of Goshen's population is Latino, the SLT suggests our ministry in the community become more intercultural. Together, we want to open ourselves to the

intercultural connections that are at our doorstep, looking for opportunities to engage the diversity of Goshen and deepen our intercultural relationships.

We have heard the laments of this body; we have heard the intentions from leadership for this body. Let us hold these now, as we offer our silent prayers of confession.

*Silence*

God who hears and sees, we confess that our words, our intentions, our actions and our inactions don't always display your love and welcome. We offer you our laments and confessions for our shortcomings; we confess our desire to embody Christ's love and compassion. Receive our confessions. Love us in the midst of our failings. Forgive us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Assurance and Welcome at the Table**

Hear now, God's desire for us and our world:

Isaiah 25:6-10a

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

<sup>7</sup> And Yahweh will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

<sup>8</sup> Yahweh will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of God's people God will take away from all the earth,  
for the LORD has spoken.

<sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day,  
Lo, this is our God for whom we have waited, so that Yahweh might save us.  
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation.

<sup>10</sup> For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain.

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Our welcome is imperfect; God's welcome is complete. When we fail to see others, God sees them and us and invites us all to the table—a feast of rich foods for all people. At God's table, all are seen and known.

The table of our Lord is a table that gives us a glimpse of the world as God sees it; the kingdom that God is creating. In God's reign, the table is extended; there is enough food for all; there is enough room for everyone.

Today, we have a feast for everyone, child and adult alike. This is the feast spread before God's people; a symbol of God's salvation and care for all. We take our place at this table as a sign of our trust that God has swallowed up death; that the hand of God rests in this place; that this is the table of the God for whom we have waited and from whom our salvation comes.

Eating at this table is not only being mindful of others at the table and creating a space for others, but it is our yes as well, to once again be guests at God's table. The table is here for us; we have only to say yes, and take our place at the table.

At this table, everyone is welcome. Come with your questions and your confidence; come with your joys and your fears; come because you need to be in the presence of One whose love is unconditional.

(The following service is taken from Wild Goose Worship Group, *A Wee Worship Book*, p. 82-84)

For heaven is here, and earth, and the space is thin between them. Distance may divide, but Christ's promise unites those bounded by time, those blessed by eternity. Let heaven be glad; let the whole earth cry glory.

Heaven is here, and earth, and the God who made them is present. The Lamb, glorious on the throne, sits beside us; the Spirit of God, the Dove, makes her resting place among us.

God inhales the breath of our prayers and spreads a table for our satisfaction. Let the heaven be glad. Let the whole earth cry glory.

Blessing and honour and glory and power be to our God for ever. Amen.

Jesus was always the guest.

In the homes of Peter and Jairus, Martha and Mary, Joanna and Susanna, he was always the guest.

At the meal tables of the wealthy where he pled the case of the poor, he was always the guest.

But here, at this table, Christ is the host.

Those who wish to serve him must first be served by him,  
those who want to follow him must first be fed by him,  
those who would wash his feet must first let him make them clean.

For this is the table where God intends us to be nourished;  
this is the time when Christ can make us new.

So come, you who hunger and thirst  
for a deeper faith,  
for a better life,  
for a fairer, [more just] world.

Jesus Christ, who has sat at our tables,  
now invites us to be guests at his.

(adapted) Here at this table, you will find bread and fruit and drink. Through common food, Jesus made the connection between his relationship with God, and our relationship with each other and with God. As we come to this table, we do as Jesus did; we eat and drink with our sisters and brothers in Christ. Jesus has promised to be present every time we eat together; through common food and communion with each other, Christ can make us whole.

Let us offer our praise and thanks to God.

God, it is indeed right that we offer our thanksgivings to you, for you made us,  
And before us, you made the world we inhabit,  
And before the world, you made the eternal home in which, through Christ, we  
have a place.

All that is spectacular, all that is plain have their origin in you;  
All that is good, all who are loving point to you as their fulfillment.

And grateful as we are for the world we know and the universe that is beyond our knowing, we particularly praise you, whom eternity cannot contain, for coming to earth and entering time in Jesus.

For Jesus' life which informs our living, for his compassion which changes our hearts, for his clear speaking which contradicts our harmless generalities, for his disturbing presence, his innocent suffering, his fearless dying, his rising to life breathing forgiveness, we praise you and worship him.

Here too, our gratitude rises for the promise of the Holy Spirit, who even yet, even now, confronts us with your claims and attracts us to your goodness.

Blessed and holy are you, O God.

Send now your Spirit to settle on this feast before us and fill it with the fullness of Christ. And let that same Spirit rest on us, converting us from the patterns of this passing world, until we conform to the shape of Christ whose food we now share. Amen.

Come now to the table, either here at the front, or out in the foyer, all who are here, and receive from Christ's table food for your bodies and fellowship for your souls. You do not have to limit yourself to one item of food, but take what delights you. There are gluten free options. The juice is grape-free, with added carbonation so that we can be reminded of the activity of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

This is a celebration, so come joyfully; it might be a bit chaotic—life in the body of Christ can be messy. You don't have to come in single file; greet people who are around you. Pass the peace of Christ to others on your way to or from the table. For Christ is our peace and has broken down the barriers between old and young, strangers and friends, male and female. Christ binds us to each other through the nourishment we are receiving at this table.

So come to the table.

*Coming to the table.*

**Closing Prayer**

In deep gratitude for this moment, this meal, these people, we give ourselves to you, O God.

Take us out to live as changed people because we have shared Living Bread at this table and cannot remain the same. Ask much of us, expect much from us, enable much by us, encourage many through us.

May we live to your glory, both as inhabitants of earth and citizens of the commonwealth of heaven. Amen.