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The Life of the Party

John 2

I'm not here to humble brag about how lonely and isolated I've kept myself since we got acquainted with Covid. But my activities in public have been very limited for the past two years and I thought I'd reflect a bit on where we've been and how far we've come. I remember in the summer of 2020 I went backpacking in the Great Smokey Mountain National Park. I saw rattlesnakes and copperheads. We had to take precautions to keep bears out of our campsites. I arrived at one backcountry shelter to find it had been ransacked by wild pigs. But the most daring moment of the whole adventure was using the public restrooms at Newfound Gap. We would eat takeout from local restaurants, but with very few exceptions we've avoided any kind of indoor dining. We've passed on concerts, delayed museum trips to New York City, and shared in the disappointment of our friends who have put off their weddings. But things are starting to shift for us now. We celebrated our four year wedding anniversary last week; we took a big leap of faith - and went out to eat. Jackson also celebrated a birthday recently, which was the first time we've had more than three people over to our house in a very long time. We even booked a flight to Los Angeles later this spring to celebrate a friend's wedding. We're starting to feel so much freer attending events and doing things in public. Covid doesn't seem to be holding back UNC basketball games very much. Or performances at the DPAC.

Big events are on my mind, of course, because we spend so much time reflecting on what events are worth the risk of attending. And my goodness doesn't

it feel good to just go out and do things, and to enjoy being in public unselfconsciously. It's remarkable to me that the first of Jesus's signs in the Gospel of John takes place at a wedding. Think about that. We meet Jesus for the first time not in some stuffy synagogue, not out and about teaching as he's so often portrayed, not on a mountaintop in prayer - but in community and in revelry. He doesn't just attend the wedding. He becomes the life of the party. Yes, this is the famous scene in which Jesus turns water into wine. John presents this as the first miracle of Jesus. His first miracle is not to heal someone who is sick. Not to cast out a demon that has someone possessed. His first miracle is to bless the gathering. Gathering is good. Still it's noteworthy that this isn't just any party: it's a wedding, a significant moment in the life of a family and a celebration that brings the whole community together. So this miracle is a blessing of the community. We need community. Gathering in community is good.

We have the freedom to go most anywhere now and undertake most any activities without restriction. But we're also conscious that we have a responsibility to the welfare of others, and that our choices have an impact on others and on public health. It's important for us to be mindful that our privileges may afford us more choices than some of our neighbors. Surely many of us here benefit immensely from our access to good public health information, from the security of having medical care available, and from a wealth of resources that afford us more choices. Not everyone is as privileged as we are. Many people are living with a poverty of choices, and many are unprotected from the adverse consequences of their choices. So our freedom comes with responsibility to act with concern for the more vulnerable. The Apostle Paul puts it this way to the Corinthian Church - "But take care that these liberties of yours do not become a stumbling block to others."

So there are two imperatives: to celebrate, with joy, and live into the goodness of community and to act with care and love for all who participate in

community. We are sometimes drawn to judgments that offer simple convictions in the midst of these two imperatives. Some who feel that the best thing may be to abstain entirely from gathering in community until the coast is clear, but of course that seems both impractical and harsh, and driven by fear rather than love. I'm sure we've all heard others argue that it's now safe enough and the hazards have largely passed, and so since the cost of isolation is so high we should learn to live with the risks. That sounds realistic to me, but it's also rather exclusive and inattentive to the needs of some among us.

Maybe you read or heard about a polarizing article in the New York Times last week, written by a Texas pastor named Tish Harrison Warren. Online opportunities for worship are a pale imitation of the real thing that we can find only in embodied community together, she explained, in a forceful argument for insisting that people just come back to church. Readers reacted strongly. Those who wish for church to be normal again felt they had seen the Promised Land. And there is much in her remarks that I agree with personally. But the essay was easy to criticize, too, because it did not acknowledge the communities that benefit from access to their worship community. And it offered so little nuance about the aims of worship and the purpose of the church. This is not what we need.

What's important for us now is to have more mature conversations about what we can offer as a gathered community and how we can make our community as accessible and inclusive as possible. The Gospel gives us both of these imperatives: to offer the love and fellowship of a community blessed by the love of Jesus who won't miss your wedding; and to form communities in ways that meaningfully value the humanity of everyone present. I've really enjoyed the small worship services we've shared together since Omicron came about, and I'm hopeful that the coming weeks will make it more comfortable for more people to join us in worship. I'm certainly going to encourage and invite everyone in our

congregation to come back to church. I do think it's really important for us to be here, gathered and blessed in community, a visible sign of the Body of Christ in the world. I'm also really grateful for the leadership of the Church Council and the Trustees, which have recently made it possible for us to install livestreaming technology so that we don't have to make a binary choice between gathering or not. Sharing what we do in person with those online makes our community life more accessible, and acknowledges the complexities of being a community in such a time as this.

So let us be more than people with strong opinions. Let us not be embittered by the loneliness of this season. Rather, come, let us make a genuine heartfelt invitation for all of God's people to assemble in a physical and joyful community. And let's make it possible for everyone to participate. Amen.