

# “You Are Invited”

Isaiah 55:1-9 & Luke 13:1-9

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**Prayer for Understanding** God of fig trees and foxes, of today and tomorrow, we would like to ask that you scoop us up. Pick us up like a great gust of wind. Startle us awake like a first love. Light a fire in us like tomorrow depends on today. Do all of this to get our attention and then turn us toward you. We are a scattered people, God. The world is moving faster than we can keep up. So, we pray—scoop us up. Catch our eye. Open our ears. Capture our attention. We are here. We long to be close to you. Amen.

In 1997, I resigned my employment as a Dairy Nutrition Specialist and Regional Sales Manager. Leslie and I sold our house in Wisconsin. We packed all our belongings into a U-Haul and pulled our remaining car. Everything seemed to go wrong in the move including the U-Haul itself. We ended up in an old truck without air-conditioning, no power steering, and meager brakes. It barely made it over the mountains. We arrived in New Jersey much later than expected, just after dark, hot, exhausted, and hungry. I was stressed from fighting the wheel to keep the beast on the road. Leslie was stressed from navigating by map. We did not have a cell phone. I was terrified. Why did I quit my excellent job? We knew no one in New Jersey. We picked up the key to our seminary apartment. We were expecting to sleep on the floor.

We slowly drove around the block looking for the apartment. As we were getting out of the U-Haul, a complete stranger welcomed us. She spread the word through the seminary housing complex of our arrival. Soon we were enjoying food as our car was being unhitched and our U-Haul was being unloaded. We were graciously invited to join the seminary community.

God is eager to provide everyone with food, shelter, and companionship. The prophet Isaiah graciously invites everyone to the banquet of God’s abundant blessings. **Isaiah 55:1-9 NLT “Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk—it is all free! Why spend your money on food that does not give you strength? Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen to me, and you will eat what is good. You will enjoy the finest food. “Come to me with your ears wide open. Listen, and you will find life. I will make an everlasting covenant with you. I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David. See how I used David to display my power among the peoples. I made David a leader among the nations. You also will command nations you do not know, and peoples unknown to you will come running to obey, because I, the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, have made you glorious.” Seek the Lord while you can find God. Call on God now while God is near. Let the wicked change their ways and banish the very thought of doing wrong. Let them turn to the Lord that God may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for God will forgive generously. “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”**

God is pure grace. Everyone is invited. Everyone is offered a fresh start. Everyone is freely given drink and food that satisfies every thirst and hunger. Will you allow yourself to receive it?

God desires to bring abundance to our world of scarcity, peace to our violence, healing to our brokenness, joy to our fear. Will you accept God’s invitation?

Pastor Robert Farrar Capon preached: “If you like, you may refuse to believe you have been drawn into the eternal party. You cannot stop the party, though. You may try, if you like, to walk out on it, but it is the loneliest walk in the universe... Do not try to stay in hell. All of your hell will be at the party, sequestered in the nail print in the left hand of the Bridegroom at the Supper of the Lamb. Even your faith does not matter, except to your own enjoyment of what God does for you. You can trust or not trust, but it does not change God’s mind or alter the facts. As far as God’s concerned, you are home free forever. That is the deal. It would be a good idea to just accept it.”

As Jesus was teaching, some people were disputing that everyone is invited to God’s eternal celebration. They argued that some sinners are worse than others, therefore excluded. The gospel of Luke explains, **Luke**

**13:1-9 NLT “About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. “Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?” Jesus asked. “Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too.” Then Jesus told this story: “A person planted a fig tree in their vineyard and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but they were always disappointed. Finally, they said to the gardener, ‘I have waited three years, and there has not been a single fig! Cut it down. It is just taking up space in the garden.’ “The gardener answered, ‘Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I will give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. If we get figs next year, fine. If not, then you can cut it down.’”**

Repent means to turn. Repent from thinking you are not invited, turn to thinking I am invited to God’s eternal celebration. Repent from thinking anyone is not invited, turn to thinking all are invited.

To perish is to spoil, decay, and rot. A person becomes foul, their life diminishes, their life becomes empty, when they argue that God no longer loves certain people, that certain people are beyond the redeeming grace of God, that some people are evicted from their home with God for eternity, that some people are a waste of resources. This includes our self. We perish when we think negative thoughts about ourselves. We are to repent, to turn from negative thoughts about our self to positive thoughts celebrating that we belong to God’s family by God’s grace.

We live in a culture that usually determines one’s worth by what one produces, accomplishes, output, their status, their education, their views on issues, and on and on. When have you acted like the landowner expecting someone to produce? Everyone’s worth comes from being a beloved child of God. Grace is the free gift of God’s love for everyone. Everyone is equal, because God’s love for every person is perfect, whole complete.

The purpose of a fig tree is to produce figs. The owner was always disappointed because the tree did not produce a single fig. The owner told the gardener to cut the fig tree down. The gardener advocated for the tree; give the tree more time, I will give the tree special attention.

Jesus is our gardener. Jesus gives us more than one more chance, more than a year. Jesus gives us an infinite amount of chances, an endless amount of time. We are to give each other an infinite amount of chances as well. No one is able to produce enough fruit to satisfy the owner. Jesus gives us fruit to satisfy the owner. Even if we never produce any fruit, Jesus will provide all the fruit necessary to be worthy of a place in the vineyard.

The purpose of a human is to love God, love all people, and love self. Even if a person has no love for anyone, they are still loved by God. Likewise, we are to love everyone unconditionally. Every war, every broken relationship, is a result of a failure to love. Humanity creates hell by our failure to love. One creates hell for themselves when they fail to love self, love others, and love God. Heaven is being in perfect loving relationship with God, all people, and self. Jesus provides the love wherever our love is insufficient.

Jesus invites us to repent, to turn from hell to heaven, to turn from a perishing life to a life full to the brim. Licensed clinical psychologist Adia Gooden explains how to repent. Many people struggle with feelings of unworthiness. Adia clarifies, “Self-worth is not the same as self-esteem. Our self-esteem is derived from our abilities, accomplishments, social positions, and things we achieve. We can bolster our self-esteem by improving our skills or performance, and our self-esteem goes up and down depending on how we are doing in various aspects of our lives. In contrast, unconditional self-worth is distinct from our abilities and accomplishments. Self-worth is not about comparing ourselves to others; self-worth is not something that we can have more or less of. Unconditional self-worth is the sense that you deserve to be alive, to be loved and cared for. To take up space.”

“Some people try to cure their feelings of unworthiness by being productive, getting good grades, pleasing people, meeting expectations, being productive, perfectionism. If I can produce enough then I will be worthy. I will fit in. I will be chosen. I will be really happy. Some people try to cure their feelings of unworthiness with busyness. If I am doing all these things for others, for the world, for church, then I will be worthy, needed, appreciated. Some people try to cure their feelings of unworthiness with relationships. If I find someone to love me, then I will finally feel worthy and be complete, happy.”

Adia tried these approaches personally. None of them worked. Adia said, “Not the perfectionism, the busyness, the relationships — well, maybe some of it did for a moment. Right after starting a new relationship or getting a good grade, I felt worthy. But soon enough, my feelings of self-worth slipped away and I was onto pursuing the next thing. As soon as I reached the bar I had set for my worth, it was raised yet again. Have you ever experienced that? After several years of therapy, spiritual growth, and a PhD in clinical psychology, I have finally begun to cultivate an unconditional self-worth and shed the belief that “I’m not good enough.” I’m embracing myself — quirks and all — and this new path is liberating, enlivening and life-giving.”

“Unconditional self-worth is the sense that you deserve to be alive, to be loved and cared for, to take up space. I have sat with hundreds of people and when we explore their concerns and dig to the root, we often find that they are struggling with a deep sense of unworthiness. For many of us our self-worth is tied to our accomplishments and possessions. As soon as we fail or lose approval, we experience low self-worth. Unconditional self-worth is the antidote to low self-worth. It is a way out of self-criticism, shame, and unhealthy behavior. It is a way out of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. It is time for us to base our worth on the fact that we are human to cultivate a worth that persists even when life does not go as we hoped.” You are worthy because you are God’s precious, beloved child.

Adai often wonders: “What the world would look like if we all cultivated unconditional self-worth? What would you find the courage to do if you knew you were worthy? What would you dare to dream if your self-worth wasn’t at stake? What would you stop doing if you knew you were already worthy?” Adia believes, “people would resolve conflicts without violence and more people would dare to do amazing things, if our self-worth was not on the line, the world would look more peaceful for all of us.”

Remember the parable of the fig tree. Even if you fail to love in every way, even if you are unable to do anything, you are loved. You are worthy because you are God’s beloved child. You are worthy because you belong to God’s family. You are God’s most glorious creation of all the cosmos. You are invited to enjoy the abundance God is eager to give you. You are invited to joyfully savor love for eternity.

Often when one is struggling with their own self-worth, they seek to elevate themselves by putting others down. They compare themselves to others which causes them to perish. As self-worth falls, sometimes one engages in self destructive behavior, sometimes one gets angry with others, rejects those who live differently, sometimes they get stuck in the past. As self-worth falls sometimes one tries to control others, to change someone, to discount others, to threaten others, I will harm you if you do not do whatever that person values. They perish because without unconditional self-worth, it gets harder to forgive, be gracious, and appreciate diversity. Without unconditional self-worth, anything different is perceived as a threat to their self-worth. They perish as they try to meet the expectations of others and their own expectations. They perish as they try to earn their worth.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims you are invited to God’s eternal banquet. Jesus teaches even if you are unable to love, like the unfruitful fig tree, you still have a place in God’s family, you are still loved by God, you still will be glorified.

Jesus taught about our future glory when all is redeemed and Jesus taught that each of us can experience more heaven today by repenting; by turning from trying to earn worth by meeting expectations to being free in the truth that you have infinite unconditional worth because you are God’s child; by turning from judging to celebrating that everyone is a beloved member of God’s family; by turning from putting expectations on others to loving them just as they are.

Unconditional self-worth provides a paradox. When we stop trying to earn our worth by loving we suddenly love God, love self and love everyone. We love everyone because we honor their unconditional self-worth. Our love becomes gracious, free of conditions to our loving.

The world is starving for love right now. People are tired. Tired of politics, heartbroken from war, paralyzed by fear, overwhelmed by choices, distraught by conflicting voices, exhausted from covid, unsure of what’s next, nervous that treasured ways of living when never return, staggering from change. When we are tired, we tend to lash out, to criticize, to hate. When we are tired, we tend to retreat, to protect ourselves, to surround our self with like thinking people, to protect our stuff, to stop sharing. When we are tired, we tend to dump our frustrations on others, to complain instead of lovingly serving together to find solutions. When we are tired, we tend to doubt our unconditional self-worth, to doubt the unconditional self-worth of others and starting

demanding change, production, and results. When we are tired, we tend to fret about the future instead of living life abundantly in the present.

People are tired, really tired. People are hurting. Love. The Apostle Paul wrote, **1 Corinthians 13:4-8 NLT** “**Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and love keeps no record of being wronged. Love does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, love never loses faith, love is always hopeful, and love endures through every circumstance.**” Love is patient, kind, gentle, forgiving, hopeful, peaceful, joyful.

“What I Forgot”

*A poem by Sarah Speed*

Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree.  
No fruit here, just soaking up the sun,  
growing roots, turning green,  
stretching out my branches until I can hug the horizon.  
Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree,  
because she doesn't produce,  
and she's not exhausted,  
and she probably gets eight hours of sleep at night.  
And her branches, unlike my shoulders, are not heavy with work—  
pulled toward the ground, threatening to break.  
And her trunk, unlike my spine, is not fighting to stand tall while holding it all together.  
Sometimes I wish I was the fig tree  
because she knows what I forgot many years ago.  
You are still worthy even if you don't produce.

Like the fig tree, you are worthy. You are not a lost cause. You are not a waste of resources. You deserve audacious hope. You deserve to be nurtured. Like the gardener, you are invited to see others with audacious hope.

The gospel, the good news of God's redeeming grace for all people, is even when one is unable to repent, unable to love, unable to believe, even when one is unable to do anything they are still loved by God. Somehow, some way, eventually, everyone will be able to receive God's love, become full to the brim, inspired to love God, love self and love all people. Somehow, some way, eventually, we all will be celebrating together, dancing together, soaring together, savoring the glory of the eternal banquet. Amen