

“The Invitation List”

I am so excited to be here. I brought something to show you! It's an invitation to a fabulous meal! I just know that it is going to be a great celebration! Here's what it says, I'll read it to you... Listen. “You (that's me) are invited to a party to be held this Friday, at 5:00 pm. There will be plenty of delicious food, fun, and fellowship! (Woo hoo!) (pause) Did any of you receive this invitation? You didn't? Well, I wonder why you were left out! How does it make you feel to know that you were not included on this invitation list or that you are not invited to this great celebration! Does it hurt your feelings? Are some of you wondering why I got this invitation and you didn't? It isn't a very good feeling to be left out, is it?

Jesus had been invited to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal. The guests on that invitation list had come and were watching Jesus carefully. Just who was this man, Jesus? Some had heard that he had stood up in the temple, read the Holy Scripture found in Isaiah, proclaimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, that He, Jesus was anointed to bring good news to the poor, recover the sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. And then, he had the nerve to sit down and say, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!” There were also stories of healing the sick, calling out demons, and he seemed to want to be with those persons no one else wanted to be around them. The outcasts! Now, Jesus was also watching these invited guests at this meal. He had noticed how each one of them was choosing their own places of honor. Of course, in a teachable moment, Jesus told a parable addressing how we are to find our seats when we are invited to a meal. We are to go and sit in the lowest places. Jesus reminded them that those who exalt themselves will be humbled and

those who humble themselves will be exalted. For some, these were strange words to hear by this dinner guest, named Jesus. Immediately, Jesus turned to the host, the one who had given him his invitation to this meal and shared these words, “when you give a luncheon or dinner, don’t just invited your friends, your brothers, your relatives, or your rich neighbors, in case they can return the favor and invite you to their homes. But, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.” The outcasts of society, those who could never repay you! You will be blessed in God’s timing for including them in your invitation list. Truly, our own invitation lists could be very different if we really hear Jesus’ Words.

Hearing these words from Jesus, have we ever had to decide who we would invite to our own celebration? As I recalled my own gatherings and parties that I have planned during the past years and hearing God’s Holy Word, my first thoughts were of Spiderman! Yes, Spiderman! The Spiderman party that my son, Josh and I planned many years ago for his 7th birthday party. As a young, single mom, I tried to be “all that I could be” in the area of both parents. So every year, I planned great birthday celebrations that always had a theme! The first year, Winnie the Pooh, the second year was the year of Cookie Monster, and each year, I planned the party and who was to be invited. But the 7th birthday party would be quite different. Josh was in the 1st grade and he wanted to have his say of who would come to the party. Funds were limited and because of the location, the skating rink could only provide for 20 invitees. There were 35 in his classroom and that did not include family and all the cousins. So we sat down, and started to decide who would be invited to this Spiderman birthday party. Well, at the age of 7, Josh decided that no girls would be invited, at 7, all girls are yucky! Yes,

that opinion did change. But, there was Brandy, yes, she was girl, (the names have been changed to protect the innocent), but she was a great dodge ball player and he couldn't leave her out. Then, there was Johnny, he sometimes had trouble having extra money for ice cream at recess so it would be hard for him to bring a really nice present, but he always shared his crayons with him, and what about Jim, he wasn't nice sometimes, but he did let him borrow lunch money one day when his mom (me) forgot to give it to him. Oh my! And as we went through the possible invitation list, there seem to be no way to limit or even want to limit our invitation list. What were we to do? We wanted to invite everyone; everyone was special in their own way, no matter what the circumstances.

In each of our own personal lives, have there been times, when we were or felt we were excluded by the world and others? Do any of us understand what it means to be judged by others and not included? Because of my own crippled life, my own blindness, my lameness, and my own spiritual poverty, there have been times in my life that I felt left out and would not have been invited to anything by others? There has been a time of drugs and alcohol in which I was searching for God and it wasn't popular to have me as your friend. After my husband had been murdered, I was very angry at God and everyone else too. I was trying to fill that pain and hurt with everything, but God. I turned to those things that I thought would fill in that space left by a broken heart. I had been drunk for 2 years and on this faithful night, I was drunk again. Family and friends didn't know what to do with me. But, someone, who loved Jesus, listened to God's voice and saw through my circumstances. She knew that I was hurting and could not give back, but I needed to know that I had a place at God's table. She stepped out in

faith and dialed my number. The phone rang and I was yes, drunk. A small, frail voice on the other end of the line said, "Dava, this is sister Earsley from the church where you grew up and you have been on my heart today. I'm on the vacation bible school committee and I am calling to see if you will help as an assistant teacher for VBS. It was at that instant, with that invitation of love that I knew without a doubt that God loved me and wanted me to be His guest at his table forever. All are invited to come to the table of love and that included me no matter what my circumstance. It was at that moment, that I said yes! And from that day forward, I made a promise to God that I would go where God wanted me to go and share God's love for all people. No judgments! As I hung up the phone, I dropped to my knees and asked God to forgive me and help me to be the person that he created and knows that I can be. God works in mysterious ways. I have not had a drink or drug since that night. I know it does not happen that way for everyone, but this is my journey that God has entrusted to me. After I hung up the phone that night, I thought, there is no way that this church family will allow me to assist in that vacation bible school; they know what I have done. The whole town knew my sin. But, Josh was a little boy who needed to know this wonderful man named Jesus, so I resolved within myself that if they would not let me help, he could stay and I would still be true to my promise to God. I will go where you want me to go and do what you are calling me to do. As I arrived at the church that night, I was all dressed up and everyone else had on their jeans, I felt out of place. Then, this precious lady came to greet me. She had a sad look on her face. I was prepared for whatever she said and if I couldn't help, I would understand. "Dava, I have some bad news. It's ok I replied, Josh can stay and I'll pick him up later. She had a

puzzled look on her face. Oh, well, she said, “you remember that I needed for you to be an assistant teacher. Well, the teacher is sick and we need you to teach this class.” Oh my goodness! In that moment, I have never been so glad that my parents had brought me to church and taught me those precious bible stories. The journey began and it continues. I was invited by God through this precious servant of God to come to God’s table accepted where I was at the time and allowing God’s transforming power to help me live for Him. As I stand before you this evening, I am invited to share God’s love even as an outcast. I believe God’s invitation to the table is for all people. Jesus told us what the greatest commandments are that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

How do we carry out this love as the Body of Christ, as Christ’s church?

As the church, we are to be the hands, the feet, and the mouth of Jesus. Jesus told the host of that meal he attended “invite those who cannot repay you.” Christ has given us something for which none of us can repay. He gave willingly his life, death, and resurrection for our sin. Then he asks us to keep giving like he gives. When I was invited to preach at Annual Conference, I knew from the start that I was to first share and be true to God’s word, to share a portion of my story that God has entrusted to me, and to share what God is doing in the precious congregation that I serve as pastor, First Church of the Brethren-Roanoke. This year, First Church is 120 years old, so you might say that we are a traditional Church of the Brethren. But, I would say that we are probably the most non-traditional traditional church you may find. We are located in the northwest section of Roanoke; a high crime area, we are in “the hood”. The neighborhood! Several years ago,

this congregation had to make some difficult decisions, As a small, aging congregation they had to ask themselves are we going to move from this spot, possibly combine with another church, or do we stay here and find out what it is God is doing and wants us to do as we serve God and our neighbors? After much prayer and discernment, a decision was made, this is where we will serve God and serve our community. We were to go beyond the doors of the church, out into a community that needed to witness the love of Jesus. There are churches on every corner, but the presence of the Church of the Brethren in this community is needed. The church building is open almost every day of the week. It has opened its doors for a Hispanic ministry that meets for worship and bible study in the church. It is home for the public health organization Wic, which helps women and children have healthy lives. It is a “safe haven for the Roanoke School of math and science in case a disaster occurs in our neighborhood. It has hosted for several years the local Y.M.C.A. day camp program where children spend summers while parents work. It supports a local Girl Scout troop and performing company to allow children to share their gifts of music. It supports the “Pay It Forward fund” in honor of Paul and Kay Alwine, past ministers of this congregation that helps those in the neighborhood pay their rent, utilities, gas to get to work, and other needs. An emergency food pantry helps those whose food stamps don’t always last the full month. Most of our neighbors, those that God has asked First church to help and invite to God’s table have no way to repay. Through love, relationships, and serving, the church is getting out of the pews in remarkable ways, going out into the community and people are coming to know Christ. A small, aging congregation! (Whining) “What can we do? I hear churches complain. Our membership is falling, we are a small

congregation, duh, duh, duh,) these excuses just don't add up. Instead of focusing on the problems, disagreements and troubles, we should be the Church that Christ intends us to be. The Church that is serving God first and then serving others of which is serving God, and letting love drive everything we say and do. There is nothing small about anything that God does! Amen! There is a hurting, dying world of which we are a part that is waiting to be invited to God's table of love and everlasting life. We, the followers of Christ are the ones God, through Jesus Christ and the infilling of the Holy Spirit have been asked to invite others to the table just as we were invited. It is not our table, it is God's table! It is His invitation list and that list includes all people, whether we agree or disagree on issues. If we wait till we all agree on everything, we are going to miss what God is doing. We need to find out where God is working and get in the middle of it! The one thing that we must all agree is that we should first love God, love all God's people, and let God handle the rest. The invitation list is God's list, not ours, and God wants a full house at the table!

And how did the Spiderman birthday party turn out? Everyone was invited to the party. How did we do it? We moved the location! It was held at my dad's farm and when I told my son that I was preaching about the Spiderman party, my son said that it was the best birthday party he could ever remember! Maybe this solution can speak to us as we invite all people to God's table. If there is smallness in our thinking that determines or excludes those we invite, then may we see through God's eyes a new way of thinking and sharing that helps us to include all God's people and the vastness of God's love.

This invitation that I received, it isn't a real invitation! I made it up to help us reflect on how it feels to be left out. But, the real invitation,

God's invitation for all God's people to come to the table of God's kingdom through belief in Jesus Christ. It is real! We are all invited! May we accept that invitation of love and share that invitation with all God's people. Amen!