

2021-06-12
Matthew 10.7-16

In her book: 'The Art of Gathering' author and professional facilitator Priya Parker writes:

'When we don't examine the deeper assumptions behind *why* we gather, we end up skipping too quickly to replicating old, staid formats of gathering. And we forgo the possibility of creating something memorable, even transformative.¹

Why do we come together?

What we do together when we are here and why it matters, are questions that you and I and most, if not all of our colleagues will be wrestling with in the coming months.

As vaccines continue to roll out and we begin to think about what life in our communities will look like as we learn to live *with* COVID in the world, rather than what we have been doing, which is to stay in our homes trying to stay *away* from it.

Why does what we do together in and as church, matter?

How does it make the world around us better?

And why should people get out of their pajamas and put their coffee in a travel mug and make their way to us? To our churches?

What will they learn?

What will they practice together?

What are the words you will use?

What songs will you sing?

What is at the heart of what you are hoping they will take away from your time together?

I'm not for a moment suggesting that gathering in worship is the only thing that we do – but it's a big part of it and the ways that we do it can inform how and what we do for the rest of the week, and it can help to shape our communities and how we behave in them.

We, my friends – are gatherers of community. Whether we are calling people out into the world to do and to be or to come alongside, or we are calling them in to worship and practice – we are gathering people for the specific purpose of following the teachings of Jesus in the world.

'As you go (our Gospel for today tells us) proclaim the good news, "the Kingdom of heaven has come near'. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse...and cast out...

Don't take payment and give without expecting payment – and take with you only what you need – stay where you are welcome and don't stay where you are not.

The notes in my Bible calls this passage 'Missionary instructions'. Fitting for the Feast of St. Barnabas, who we are told travelled around with Paul preaching and teaching.

¹ Priya Parker, The Art of Gathering : How We Meet and Why it Matters (New York:Riverhead Books, 2018) 3

These are our rules for engagement.

We go where we are sent, and we take what we need and leave the rest.

We tell the stories of scripture, we unpack them (hopefully), we learn, we pray and we gather.

Which is why this past many months has been so tricky – because we have had to learn to gather without actually physically coming together.

And some of the folks that we used to gather with regularly, have stopped showing up or have started to look elsewhere – others, people who had never been with us before – have started to wonder if what we are doing, might be for them.

Many, if not most of us have had a bigger platform on which to show the world what we are about – thank you internet.

We have had time to assess and re-assess how we do what we do, and how we might be able to do it even better.

And now, we are having to think and plan again for new ways or maybe re-invigorate old ways, to come together again.

And I think this is the right time for us to be thinking very carefully about why and how we are planning to bring people back together.

And what difference it does and can make for us and for the world around us. What have we learned about church? About our communities and about the world that might change and strengthen our congregations and our gatherings?

Why am I talking about this at your ordination? Because friends, you are being ordained at such a weird time in the life of our church and the world.

But also, I think at a time when there is so much possibility.

In some ways the imagery that is offered up in the Gospel that we just read, speaks so beautifully to us today.

We are preparing to go out – *you* are preparing to go out. You have trained for this, discerned, prayed, done some schooling and now, as hands are laid upon you and prayers said over you, you are preparing to go into community, into the world.

And you go both the same as you came and also very different.

Into a church that formed you and is also very different.

I didn't get that right away, as with most things, it took me a while to catch on.

I didn't want to be different – but these roles of Deacon and Priest, these vows that you will take, these prayers that are said over you – they change you, maybe not all at once – but over time. That visible sign that you will wear around your neck in the form of a collar – it sets you apart, like it or not.

You are gatherers of community.

There is a lovely story about St. Barnabas that I found while I was looking around for what to say to you today.

I found it on the website for a St. Barnabas in Northolt, Middlesex in England.

And the story that they tell about him is this:

Barnabas was courageous in God's service

When Paul came to Jerusalem after his conversion, most of the Christians there wanted nothing to do with him for they had known him as a persecutor of Christians.

But Barnabas, guided by God was willing to take a calculated risk on Paul.

He sought Paul out, spoke with him, and having weighed him up, vouched for him.

We owe much of our New Testament to the work of Paul and in his preaching and evangelism he was used by God in the creation of many of the early Christian communities. Imagine if Barnabas had not been willing to obey God's call?

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Imagine, they ask, if Barnabas had not been willing to risk listening to God and vouching for Paul?

I mean, I have no idea if this is actually true, but I really like the story.

We are called to risk new things and new people and asking ourselves what we need to pay attention to and who and why.

As newly ordained members of our Church, you are in a great place to ask questions and to learn and to think about what is important for you to take with you and what is not.

Like the disciples that were sent out by Jesus, you should take only what you need and leave the rest. What he doesn't say, but what I am sure is what happened, at least it has been my experience – is that you will pick other things up that you do need along the way. And there are some things that you might have to go back for.

Don't forgo the possibility of starting something new, don't be afraid to risk creativity and never be afraid to ask if what you are bringing with you still makes sense. Our church is deep and wide and strong – our liturgy is beautiful and ancient and there is space for asking questions and for risking possibility.

As we prepare to re-plant our churches and re-imagine what worship together will look like. As we plan to go back to liturgies that are familiar with people that we love. I hope you and we will remember some of the lessons that the world has taught us this year. A lot has been revealed about what was working and what was not. We did not have it all right before we had to be sent home for our own safety and the safety of others.

There are things that we will need to do differently now both as members of society and as members of our churches.

² <https://www.stbarnabasnortholtpark.org.uk/whowasstbarnabas.htm>

And we, as gatherers of a specific kind of community – based on the teachings of Jesus – have a specific role to play in the world.

Our teachings about justice and love for our neighbours and sharing of resources can offer something important to the world.

Our liturgy which includes practices of learning, confession, forgiveness, a shared meal and blessing are important in a world that needs more of all of those things.

‘See I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.’ (v 16)

Don’t be afraid to ask questions, to be creative, to ask yourself and the communities that you serve why you are gathering and if what you are doing and what you want to do, matters and to whom.

You, Monte, Brynn, Amanda and Jose, are going to be serving a church that longs to go back to what was but that will need to risk new ways of being.

And will have to live in the tension of both of those things.

You are gatherers of community, and you will shape our church, and our church will shape you.

Ask questions, be wise, take risks, start new things, remember that you are beloved and chosen.

And that what we do together does matter for us and for the world we just have to be clear about what that is.

Amen.