

“Horses on Parade XIV”

John Wilkinson

Third Presbyterian Church

September 7, 2014 (Rally Day)

Exodus 12:1-14 and Romans 13:8-14

Welcome to Rally Day, our version of Opening Day. It is perhaps my favorite Sunday of the year. The Buffalo Bills are undefeated. (Let's not talk about the Buckeyes.)

Around here, we are all in our places with bright shining faces. We have a brand spanking new, totally awesome, parking lot. Welcome, again, Mary Ann Rutkowski. Welcome back Chancel Choir; it's so nice to have you back where you belong. Welcome to Caroline Robinson, and to Melissa Zgouridi, Isaac Wenger and Cody Muller.

Welcome to many visitors who may be with us this morning. We are so grateful for your presence. Some of you were checking us out this summer – keep checking us out. Some of you are families with children looking for education programs. Some of you are newly empty-nested or newly back to the city. Some of you are new to town. We welcome you all. You've all come to the right place, as far as I am concerned. Get to know us. We'd love to hear your story and to tell you ours.

So welcome. You've heard that many of our programs really launch this week, so all of us, whether veteran or newbie, are invited to get involved and get connected. This is a Year of Invitation, as you've heard, and about which you will hear more, so consider this a standing invitation to deepen your faith, to share your gifts to enhance this community and to serve God who is calling us to transform and be transformed.

I hope you will join us outside on the East Avenue lawn for Rally Day fun. Thanks to members of the Congregational Fellowship Committee for preparing our hot dog meal, with a huge tent and tables for you to learn more about exciting stuff. Thanks to the Meigs Street Ramblers and Jeremy Peters for offering Dixieland jazz.

Rally Day will offer a surprise this time around. This summer, like many of you, I was invited to do the ALS ice bucket challenge but put it off...until now. I will make a contribution to ALS research, in the spirit of the original challenge, but Bonny and I will also make a contribution to Third Church tutoring programs and Third Church hunger programs.

But it didn't seem fair to hoard this opportunity all to myself. So I invited my colleagues on the program staff to share the experience, and they all said yes – Jane for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Mary Ann for CURE Childhood Cancer, Peter for the Eastman School's RocMusic program serving underprivileged children, Lynette for the Third Church Pastor's Emergency Fund, Martha for Fisher House working with veterans and military families and Becky for the Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteer program.

On a more serious note, this has been a difficult week for our community, with the death of the Glazers who worked so diligently for the city's re-development, and the tragic death of Officer Daryl Pierson. I was privileged to be asked to write a brief essay for this morning's Democrat and Chronicle about Officer Pierson's death; we will post it and have scattered a few copies around the church. It includes a call to prayer, but also a call to action and resolve. Part of the case I will make during this Year of Invitation is

that we are invited in deeper ways into the life of the city, for its transformation and healing. In that spirit, and in the spirit of openness to where the word of God is leading us, let us pray.

Silence, O God, the voices of fear and anxiety and violence in our city, and invite us into your peace and justice and compassion. Silence the voices of busyness and cynicism and invite us into your presence. Silence in us any voice but your own, and invite us into the power and truth of your word, as we gather to encounter you and then depart to serve. For we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

We have had a Year of Connecting, a Year of Feasting, a Year of Growing. Welcome, as you have heard already, to a Year of Invitation. It promises to be a tremendous year, filled with a growing sense of energy and enthusiasm and possibility.

If you need to remember nothing else, remember today that you are both invited, and called to invite. Invited, and invite. They are organically related and inextricably linked. Inviter and invitee, host and guest, giver and receiver. You are invited, and called to invite.

It is true that a central impetus of our Year of Invitation will be an advertising campaign growing out of our "Called to Grow" strategic plan that we will conduct with assistance from the Rochester Ad Council. We are branding and messaging, not to change who we are, but because we believe, and I believe, that we can find ways to tell our story more effectively and compellingly in the broader community, and that there are people who would find meaning if they connected with us, and who have gifts to share to enhance our ministry.

That will unfold later this fall, and all of us will be invited to take part in one form or another. You might be invited to share an experience, or where you've found meaning. Perhaps you can invite a friend to a concert. Perhaps someone you know would like to volunteer at Dining Room Ministry. Perhaps a co-worker has mentioned looking for a church. Perhaps you can post a picture on our Facebook page, or tweet a picture at our Twitter feed, as we enhance our social media presence.

But before we can begin inviting, it's good today to lay the foundation, to think about the church to which you have been invited, and RSVP'd, and the church to which we will invite others. I was advised one time not to preach too much about the church itself, but to preach about God, about faith, about the gospel. That's good advice. And I will mostly take it, even today. Yet it's good to think about who we are as we re-group for a new year, about who we are and who we are called to be and what God is calling us to do.

One of the things we are is a people formed by the word, which will be a good starting point today.

We have heard from the book of Exodus the familiar story of the first Passover, the meal our Israelite forbears celebrated, and our Jewish friends continue to celebrate, to mark the Exodus from Egypt. The whole congregation was invited into a celebration, a highly prescribed and choreographed ritual. The Israelites are told to celebrate, and also to remember. They are also told to pass the practice on to future generations.

We do not observe Passover, but we do observe the Lord's Supper. Rally Day, with hot dogs and Dixieland, is not the Lord's Supper, but it is a celebration, and a remembrance. We have not always had Rally Day, but are there not things we do that have been passed down to us that we will do for our season, and then pass on?

They will not look like they have, nor will they look like what they do now. But the deeper call to celebrate, and remember, in community, across generations, will be the constant invitation that we accept and sustain with joy and hope.

Though we embrace Exodus in our scripture, Jewish voices are better equipped to comment on Passover itself, and help us connect with its meaning. Jennifer Wagner writes that "Passover...is when the whole community and family gets together to remember who we are and why we are here." Rabbi David Teutsch writes that "Passover is not only about 'freedom from.' It is about our having the freedom to make the world a more sacred place by expanding God's presence in it." Can you not imagine inviting people into that vision of community that remembers and celebrates all of those things from which we have been freed, by God's grace, and into which we have been liberated?

To what are we invited and to what do we invite?

Love, in a word. Love. Celebrate love, remember love, share love. Paul sums it up for us. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Love. That will look like many things. One easy characterization of religion is based on shame and guilt. Another easy characterization of religion is personal piety to ensure eternal salvation. Not here. Love. Love self. Love others.

Beverly Gaventa writes that this is "real love for real people who are met in everyday life, not theoretical love for humanity as a whole." And she reminds us that "love of the other begins with a self-love...not self-deprecation...not self-hatred," but love of self that makes us capable of loving another. (Texts for Preaching, Year A, page 475)

My first Rally Day happened as Rochester was enjoying its "Horses on Parade" phenomenon, and we participated with a big fiberglass horse, Horse Chess-Nut. Thanks to Sandy Gianniny Horse Chess-Nut is making a return appearance this morning after all these years!

Back then I called us a "Horses on Parade" church, a church seeking to be welcoming and hospitable and engaged with the community beyond our walls.

Using the words of this morning, a "Horses on Parade" church is a church called to remember and celebrate across generations. It is a church called to love, love inwardly and love outwardly, love the person you see in the mirror, love the neighbor sitting next to you in a pew, love the neighbor in Ferguson, Missouri or Syria or the Ukraine, or at the corner of Hudson and Warsaw, less than 10 minutes from here, where Officer Pierson was killed.

When we are at our best, or seeking to be our best, that is the church God has invited you to this morning, and that is the church to which we would seek to invite others in this Year of Invitation.

Let's not talk too much about it. Let's simply be it.

Let's be a church filled not with people who have it all figured out, but who are seekers, explorers, on a journey.

Let's be a church of people seeking to find meaning not in easy answers but in searching questions.

Let's be a church of people not content with stereotypes of religion, or antiquated religion, but also not content with no religion at all, because community is needed to allow our faith to take root and to take wing.

Let's be a church that tends to the relationships within our walls, with those that grieve, or struggle, or ache in body or soul.

Then let's be a church that tends to the world beyond our walls.

Let's be a church that seeks to keep, as the old adage says, the rumor of God alive, because whether the world knows it or not, it needs God and God's love big-time right now.

I believe we are called to grow, and able to grow, grow in all kinds of ways, including the number of people participating in our life and who eventually might join. That is important. But a Year of Invitation should never be invitation for invitation's sake, growth for growth's sake. It is invitation for the sake of the story that has drawn us here, this love story. Why not share it with a broken city, a searching culture, a hungry community?

A "Horses on Parade" church that lives as a community of love. That's a story worth telling. That's a church I might even invite someone to. Amen.