

# RSVP

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Have you ever heard of the game Bigger and Better? This is a great youth group game. Everyone starts with something of little value, like a dime and then everyone heads out into the neighborhood to see what they can trade it for. The goal is to come back with a bigger, better thing than you started out with. In his book, *Love Does*, Bob Goff writes about this game. There was this kid named Richard who went to the first door with his dime and said, "Hi we're playing Bigger and Better. I've got a dime and I'm hoping to trade up to something bigger. Do you have anything you can trade me?" The guy at the door had never heard of this game. Nevertheless, he shouted over his shoulder to his wife, "Hey Marge, there's a kid here and we're playing Bigger and Better." "What do we have that's bigger and better than a dime?" Richard walked away with a mattress.

Richard and his buddies take this mattress to the next door, and walked away with a ping pong table. They wheeled the ping pong table to the next house and traded up for an elk head. How cool is that? Most people would have stopped there but Rich didn't. He kept trading up. By the end of the night when Rich came home, he didn't have a dime or a mattress, a Ping-Pong table or an elk head, or the five other things he traded up. Richard drove home in a pick-up truck. No lie. He started with a dime and ended up with a Dodge.

Christmas can kind of feel like that can't it? We are in this mad rush from place to place of what kind of feels like a grown-up game of Bigger and Better. And I wonder how the season of Advent got like this? Supposedly, we've been in this season of waiting, anticipating and preparing for the Messiah. We know the humble beginnings of our Savior; we been down this path before. We know that Jesus is born to a poor, young woman in a barn out back...yet we spend the month getting hyped up on cultural sugar:

PRESENTS: anyone buy some presents? We shop and buy and make and bake and wrap and mail and give all sorts of presents to all sorts of friends, neighbors, co-workers, family, even the family members we don't like that much-and you know who they are, we all have them;

How about CARDS: did anyone send Christmas cards? (I have to admit this is one of my weaknesses.) We buy cards, take pictures, write letters, address, stamp and mail hundreds of cards-although I've noticed some of my friends are sending out their pictures and cards electronically. I'm still kind of old school; I like to hold the card in my hand and hang it on my door frame in my kitchen;

Or how about the FOOD? We dig out family recipes or we google new ones: we make menus, we make lists, we grocery shop...we mix, whip, puree, stir, blend, mash, cook, and bake more food than some people eat in an entire month;

Does anyone DECORATE for Christmas? We decorate houses, garages, trees (inside and out), tables, doors, cars, cats...you name it. If it stays put long enough, we will string lights around it.

And then there's the "SPECIAL EVENTS": Did you go to any of these? Singing Christmas trees, Live Nativities, choral concerts, symphony concerts, Jingle Balls, the Nutcracker, A Christmas Carol, Mammoth Light Displays.

Not to mention the PARTIES: class parties, club luncheons, Cookie Exchanges, holiday lunches, Trolley rides to see the lights, and don't forget—BYOG: Bring Your Own Gift for the white elephant gift exchange.

With all of that, we hardly have time for *our* Messiah concert or Advent Dinner or Christmas Tea or Shepherding Deacon Christmas Luncheon or our joint Christmas Concert with First Pres, or to adopt an Angel or ring the Salvation Army bells or grab a 102 Bag to clothe kids in Peru or for our Office Decorating Competition...which by the way, I create the flyer for and whole-heartedly push every year in our staff.

Don't get me wrong, there are so many of those things that I LOVE, that I nearly kill myself trying to take it all in. How about you? Are you a little tired, a little weary of our quest for bigger and

better? I wonder if we can even find Jesus underneath all of the Christmas trappings. You know who did find Jesus? The wise men and they didn't even have GPS.

We just read about the journey of the wise men which is only recorded in Matthew. The thing that strikes me in the passage is the response of the wise men after they encounter God's Son. They ask for directions, they used the technology available of the day: the star. They find him and then they did two things in response:

1. They knelt down and worshipped him
2. And then, **they** went home another way

Oh yeah, and they were overwhelmed with JOY.

The Scripture says, "They left for their own country by another road." They went home another way. They encountered the living Lord and they were changed. Now here's an interesting thing that I had never known before. The Magi were outsiders, yet God invited them to the first Christmas party.

I read that Magi were most likely a tribe of priests. They were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. They were soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. At their best, the Magi were good and holy men, who sought for truth.

But, from the Jewish perspective, Magi were not understood as good or wise. They were idolaters. They were people who looked at things other than God the Creator and his Torah for guidance; they looked to their own calculations, "wisdom" and mental creations (like the zodiacs) to deliver the meanings of things. The Jewish leaders, the Scribes and the Pharisees despised magicians and Gentile astrologers-like the Magi. God and God alone had rescued them from the tyranny of the stars and from those who claimed to know their secrets. So Biblically faithful Israel felt about the Magi, kind of like how we might feel about "New Age" spirituality. (Having your palms read or a tarot card reading about your life and future)...eh, that's not really what it's all about. **So the Magi would be the least deserving guests at the birthday party of the Christ.**

Yet God chose to reveal his presence to them...the despised, the underdogs, the broken ones. If God invites them to the party-not only invites them, but gives them a STAR to follow, does

that mean he has a place for even me? This is one party I don't want to miss. You know I want to be ready; I want to be good enough; I want to follow the rules and do the right things so I get to be included, but my goodness, I fall so short. That darn Herod is in me too. I harbor resentment; I have some folks I still can't forgive, I struggle with pride and jealousy, sometimes my heart is squeezed shut so tight that I don't think Jesus could even wedge his way in there. Do you ever feel like that? Unworthy? Just not quite good enough?

And then I wonder, if I get the invitation, the star to follow to the manger, can an encounter with Christ heal my broken heart enough to help me go home another way---and not down the same worn path of bigger and better?

I believe the Good News is that the grace of God is so big, he invites *all* of us to the party, even those of us who don't think we deserve it. And when you party with God, you're life will never be the same. He makes us new. He fills the holes of our battered and broken hearts. And I believe He often does that through other people.

One of my Seminary Professors, Andy Root wrote in his book *The Relational Pastor*, "**To be a person is to be broken.**" Most of us probably don't like the sound of that too much, but there is surprising power and freedom in admitting it's true. For once we stop trying constantly to pretend that we have it all together, that life is just as we want it to be, and that we don't really need anyone else, then and only then, can we open ourselves up to the power of authentic and transformative relationships.

It all started with relationships. God entered into our world as a human baby to have a relationship with us, to know us and to love us anyway. I believe he continues to meet us as we have relationships with one another. Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher and theologian, was asked: "Where is God?" He answered, "God is found in relationships. God is not found *in* people; God is found *between* people. When you and I are truly attuned to each other, God comes down and fills the space between us so that we are connected, not separated."

Did you see the movie *Silver Linings Playbook*? It's a great story revolving around two broken people, Pat Solatano and Tiffany Marshall. Pat is a man who has been recently released from an

eight-month stint at a psychiatric hospital after being diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. Tiffany is struggling with depression after losing her husband. They are each trying to put their lives back together. But as they discover, that doesn't mean going back to how things were or even really fixing things that are broken. Instead, it means acknowledging one's own brokenness as a place where you can meet another person in theirs. We are truly human, as it turns out, only in our brokenness, those places of need and limitation and hurt that turns out also to be places that harbor the possibility of love and acceptance and growth and grace. The upside down nature of God is like that isn't it? The first shall be last, the last shall be first. Out of death, He brings life. You see, if we were perfect, we would not need each other; we wouldn't even need God. But in admitting our need – and being willing to acknowledge and honor the need of others – we become whole. And God is right in the middle of that.

One of the questions the film poses is as straightforward as it is challenging; if we don't meet each other at our points of brokenness, where do we meet? For if we cannot be vulnerable and honest enough to admit and share who we really are – the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the kindness and the hurtfulness – then how do we find genuine acceptance? How do we know the people around us love us for who we are, and not just for who we are pretending to be?

As we now enter this Christmas season, having been invited to the party by God himself. How are we going to respond? Will we continue down our same ole, well worn path of bigger and better, or will we allow the Christ child into our hearts and into the spaces between us...to make us new and whole? Make no mistake about it, new doesn't always look perfect. And like the manger scene, it is often messy. New looks like recovering alcoholics. New looks like reconciliation between family members who don't actually deserve it. New looks like every time I manage to admit I was wrong and every time I manage to not mention when I'm right. New looks like every fresh start and every act of forgiveness and every moment of letting go of what we thought we couldn't live without and then somehow living without it anyway. New is the thing we never saw coming-never even hoped for-but ends up being what we needed all along.

New is the gift of life a young boy was willing to give his sister. A volunteer at a hospital shared the story of a little girl named Liz who was suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance

of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her 5-year old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness. The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the little boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. He hesitated for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, "Yes I'll do it if it will save her." As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as everyone did, seeing the color returning to his sister's cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, "Will I die right away, or how soon?" You see the boy misunderstood the doctor; he thought he would have to give his sister all of his blood in order to save her.

The invitation from God is like that; He invites us to a party with his Son that sends us down a completely different path. It may not be covered in rose petals, but it leads to an abundant life that matters. Oh, and Richard? You know the truck he won in the game Bigger and Better? He gave it away to a church down the road. He traded up.

So I'm wondering what stuff are you holding onto that prevents you from this amazing love relationship with the Father? What is giving us a false sense of security...what is holding us back from a truly full life? And why wouldn't we make that trade? Look, none of the stuff we have is going to last, including you and me. We've only got about a dime's worth of life now. The invitation is waiting for our response. Come and trade up...go home another way.