

Catch: Invitational Evangelism ---- Part 3: Inventive Hospitality

We continue this week with a very important topic---casting our nets wide-- inviting people to come and see who Jesus is. In week one of this series we looked at what it means to be a relentlessly outward-focused church. In week two, we considered three really important questions that we need to personally answer in order to be effective in inviting others to the table. This week, I hope you will be inspired to let your creativity run wild to show the love of God both to people who come in these doors and to those outside the walls of the church.

Let us pray.

God of grace, would you pour out your Holy Spirit. Open our eyes and our hearts to your word. Lead us to live as your people. Amen.

A relationship with Jesus Christ is both life giving and life saving. Living in the light of Christ changes our lives here and now **and eternally**. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus said this: 28 “Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and **I will give you rest**. 29 Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. 30 My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.”

This invitation to rest is real for us today. And the core of our mission as followers of Jesus is to invite others who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, to rest in him. We, God’s church, are called to a very serious task. We are called by God to live and serve in ways that best lead to the salvation of the world. I don’t often quote the Book of Discipline, but I want to share this profound statement that I shared with the traditional services last week. The United Methodist Church and its people are faced with a serious task: **“we must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced.”**¹

When I was in my 30s and my two boys were in elementary school, we moved to a new town. I wasn’t a very devoted follower of Jesus at all, but I did go to church. So as soon as we got settled in, we went to a church of another denomination. After the service, there was a coffee time, and I clearly remember standing in a circle with five or six other people and no one speaking to us or welcoming us. Not one single person said, “Hello!” or introduced themselves or even made small talk. Now certainly, I could have introduced myself and taken the initiative, but I’m a pretty introverted person - so I didn’t. We went back the next week, and another week with the same results before I gave up on this church.

One of the ways that we convince the world of the reality of the good news is by demonstrating the love of God through being welcoming and showing hospitality. Here are some key verses from the book of Romans about sharing God’s love as well as sharing hospitality:

Romans 12:9-13 The Message

Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. **Be good friends who love deeply**; practice playing second fiddle.

¹ *The Book of Discipline*, 98.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; **be inventive in hospitality.**

Romans 15:7

7 [W]elcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God's glory.

Today, I want to talk to you about two different ways that God calls us to welcome people into the body of Christ. The first way is by doing every single thing that we can to invite people to come into the church and then by welcoming them when they do. We want our church to be so compelling in every way that folks are attracted to it, and when they come to this place they are able to experience God here. The church ought to be a place where we can lay our burdens down and experience God; it is a place where we come to figure out what purpose God might have for our lives. And we want our church to be the most excellent it can be -- we want fantastic music and preaching and children's and youth programs. We want our ushers to be kind and helpful, we want our facilities to be attractive, comfortable, clean and useful. We want to show our depth of love and caring for guests in every way we can. We want people to know that we really care about them as people and that they are not just a number or a customer and that they are not outsiders here. We want to invite people to come, we want to welcome them, receive them with love, and then care for them.

I thank God that my bad experience feeling UNwelcome in church did not turn me away from church altogether. I tried another church--a whole other denomination in fact, and found it to be wonderfully loving, welcoming, and joy-filled; in short, I felt God's love there. The welcome I received in the United Methodist Church, and the invitations of people to join them in Bible study and service to God led me to a real relationship with Jesus.

There are so many inventive ways that we can welcome people and help them to feel the love of God. And with the rest of my time today, I want to share as many stories and examples as I can. I hope you will see that we are only limited by our own willingness to take risks to put ourselves out there -- because the Holy Spirit of God is constantly providing creative, original ways for us to welcome new people.

A few years ago, I attended a conference at St. James United Methodist Church in Little Rock. People were posted at the doors, and when we asked where our room was located, they didn't just point the way--they walked us all the way down the hall to the room. They really went the extra mile to make us feel important and welcomed.

The biggest UMC is Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. They have 20,000 members and just built a huge new sanctuary. In the design of the building they created sections of around 100 people each, and there is a person for each section who is assigned to connect with people sitting there. It takes planning and being intentional to be welcoming. And it takes all of us.

Because here's the problem that we face: there are regularly scheduled folks who do a terrific job serving as ushers and greeters, and there are staff members and clergy. There are lots of people around here, and so we tend to think that someone else is taking care of welcoming newcomers. We think someone else will greet the people in our section or walk someone to their classroom. But I hope you will hear this if you hear nothing else today--each one of us are responsible for welcoming others --- one person at a time. We are each responsible for noticing

guests and welcoming guests -- one person at a time --- giving full attention -- going beyond what might normally be expected. And instead of saying someone else ought to do that, our attitude must be I will do it!!

There is a church in South Texas where a Baby Greeter ministry developed. Each week, a woman would welcome guests with infants to show them the nursery, introduce them to the people who would be caring for their children, teach them the security and paging processes, tell them which restrooms had changing stations, showed them the rocking chairs, the cry room, and the crayons and coloring books for young children. Most importantly, though, she learned the names of every baby who came through the door.

Rev. Adam Hamilton, pastor of Church of the Resurrection , tells the story of some visitors who came to his church in its early days. When he visited the family and invited them to visit again, they said they couldn't because they had a special needs child named Matthew whom they couldn't leave on a regular basis to attend worship. And so Adam Hamilton asked the family what it would take for them to become members of the church. He got their answer, returned to his church and let his congregation know that it was going to take a group of people who were willing to provide some extra special care for the young man, not your regular Sunday school class or child care. The church stepped up, and this was the beginning of a program that still exists today called Matthew's Ministry. Watch this video about inventive hospitality that turned into something so much more.

<https://www.facebook.com/churchoftheresurrection/videos/340690543158545/>

My friend Whitney Piper leads a unique weekly worship service at her church in Houston for people with disabilities called the Courage Service. Last week they had bluegrass music. And they love to have communion.

There is no end to the inventive ways we can help to welcome people into the walls of our church. We only have to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and willing to do whatever it takes to love people.

The second way we can be inventive with hospitality is by connecting with people outside the walls of the church to share the love of God. More often than not, Jesus went out to where the people in need were -- he talked to the Samaritan woman at the well, he went to the woman about to be stoned for adultery, and he ate with tax collectors. Research these days shows that there is a large portion of our population who will never come to this place, no matter how excellent we are in every area. And if you think about it, that was the case in Jesus's time. The woman at the well would have never come to the temple to worship. The woman caught in adultery? No way. The tax collector coming to the temple? Surely not. Part of our mission of telling the world about Jesus includes extending inventive hospitality to people who **do** not and **will** not want to come in. And so, this is where we are really leaning in to risky ministry--this is where we really rely on the power of God to lead us and to make us bold.

The father of United Methodism John Wesley who was a priest in the Church of England, began a whole movement when he committed to preaching outside of the church. He would preach in fields and outside of factories so that the working class and poor would have the chance to hear about Jesus. It was extremely radical for his day, and the Church of England did not approve of his behavior **at all**. So, I wonder how the Holy Spirit might be calling us to some radical/inventive work outside this place.

My friend Gabrielle who lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana, is about to take an appointment as the pastor at her local YMCA. She has had a prayer station in the YMCA for a while, and they will be starting a worship service there, too.

There is a whole movement afoot to start fresh expressions of church wherever the people are. We are seeing things spring up like dinner church, set around a dinner table, messy church designed for families with kids, and church centered around things like biking, hiking or playing basketball. I've heard stories about Fresh Expressions of church in Mexican restaurants and tattoo parlors. The idea is to notice people who are not connected with a church, and then gather a group of people who are willing to do whatever it takes to share God's love wherever the people might be.

I want you to hear about church under a tree in Texas.

<https://youtu.be/RiGYJnGLPZs>

Go where the people are. Show them God's love. Isn't this what it means to "go and make disciples." Part of our purpose on this earth is **to convince the world of the reality of the gospel or to leave it unconvinced**. We are limited only by our tolerance to risk -- because the power of God to work through us is unlimited.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, would you open our eyes to see in fresh new ways. Would you help us to see our neighbors who are struggling hard, and would you give us the courage and the innovative ideas to do whatever it takes to share your grace. Holy Spirit, we are ready. Amen.