

“Simply Invite”

Date: Feb. 9, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Acts 1:8; John 1:35-51 Occasion: Invitational Evangelism, series

Themes: Witnessing, Faith-sharing, Evangelism, Inviting

There’s an odd thing about the Gospel according to John. The first time we hear Jesus speak, he is not teaching, preaching or praying. He is asking a question. In fact, it could be the question the Gospel writer wants to ask all of us. “When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’” (John 1:38)

So what are we *really* looking for? What is the nagging hunger in the human soul for something that cannot be purchased on Amazon Prime? What is the deep longing that tugs at our hearts when we are alone in the darkness at night? What are we looking for even before we know that we are looking for it?

John’s answer is life. But it’s not just any kind of life. It’s a special kind of life called “eternal life.” Life that is not bounded by the finite categories of time and space. Life that is fully alive with the life of God. Life that is not something we wait to experience until we get to heaven, but a way of living that begins right here and now.

Life that Jesus defined as loving God with our whole hearts, souls, minds and strength; and loving others the way we have been loved by God.

Eternal life: that’s what these followers of John the Baptist were looking for when they started following Jesus. Jesus’ invitation to them was, “Come and see” (John 1:39). They spent the remainder of the day with Jesus.

Then Andrew immediately went to find *his* brother Simon. He told his brother, “We have found the Messiah” (John 1:41). They had found the

“anointed one,” the one who is God’s life present in human life. Andrew brought Simon to Jesus. Jesus recognized Simon as if he had known him for a long time, and renamed him Peter.

It happened again the next day when Jesus found Phillip; and Phillip immediately went to find Nathanael. He told Nathanael, “We have found him” (John 1:45). Phillip offered Nathanael the same invitation Jesus had offered to him, “Come and see.”

Now, if Andrew and Phillip had *not* been willing to share their stories, Peter and Nathanael would never have met or followed Jesus, or had their lives transformed. But after experiencing eternal life in Jesus for themselves, they shared their experience with someone else.

But notice this. They didn’t begin by telling their stories to total strangers. They began with people they knew; people who knew them.

We see the same process at work in the story of the woman who met Jesus at the Samaritan well (John 4:1-42). After meeting Jesus, she ran to all of her neighbors and said, “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!” (John 4:29)

They came and saw, with the result that “many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.” (John 4:39)

Now that’s what we call invitational evangelism at its best! It’s one person sharing with another person how he or she has experienced God’s love in Christ; and then offering the invitation, “Come and see.”

Last week I kicked off this sermon series by telling you about Johnny Appleseed, and how he planted apple orchards all over Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. And my take-away from his example was this: “Be a Johnny Appleseed for Jesus. Simply sow the seed.” My message today is similar and just as simple: “Simply invite.”

A simple invitation is the way Jesus calls people to be his disciples. He says, “Come and see.” He invites people personally. He doesn’t take out an ad in the newspaper. He doesn’t advertise on television or on Google. He doesn’t pass out fliers or pamphlets or tracts. He simply invites.

Jesus did his inviting in person; face to face; one on one; in the flesh. Why? - because the good news is a personal gospel. The good news that God loves you needs to be told in a personal way. And the invitation to follow Jesus Christ needs to be offered in a personal way.

It was true when Jesus first began his ministry in Galilee. And it’s still true today. People are attracted to Jesus, people come to know God when another person shares their faith with them – simply telling that person what God has done in their life – and then inviting them to come and see for themselves.

Now, everyone does not have the spiritual gift of evangelism. But one thing we can all do is invite. People are hungry for spiritual food. People are starving to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. And if you’ve met the Lord of Life, why not tell others where they can find him too?

One definition of evangelism is simply this: it’s one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. So why not invite your friends to come to church with you, just to come and see. You don’t have to beat them over the head with the Bible, or overwhelm them with your best theology, or win any religious debate. Simply invite.

People inviting other people to come and see; it’s how the church has grown ever since the beginning. I’ve talked to some of our long time members and I ask them, “How did you start coming to Lakewood? How did you first meet Jesus?” And many of them have told me, someone invited me to come with them. They felt the warmth of God’s love in this

congregation and they decided to stay. And they've grown in their faith ever since.

Those people who do studies of churches, folks like the Gallop poll and the Pew Research Institute, have been saying for years that close to 80% of the people who attend worship regularly came to worship there for the first time because someone invited them.

Who was your Andrew or Phillip? Who first invited you to "come and see?" Was it your Mom or Dad; a grandparent; a neighbor; or a co-worker? Who invited you to first meet Jesus? You wouldn't be the Christian you are today if that person, or someone like them, hadn't invited you.

So I want you to do something for me. Think about the people you know, and I'll bet there are a couple of them who come to mind quickly who don't have a church where they attend. Think about your family; the people who live on the street you do, maybe a neighbor you've known a long time.

Now think about the people you see on a regular basis. People with whom you bowl; people at work; your hairdresser; friends that you play cards with or with whom you like to spend time. Do any of them *not* attend a church? Why not invite them to join you some Sunday? Or invite them to some other event where they might experience the love of God in Christ.

Here's what I'm suggesting. Over the next month, make a list of people you know who aren't attending church anywhere. Pray for them, and pray that God will give you the opportunity to invite them. I'm not telling you to bend their ear talking about religion. Simply invite them to come to church with you one Sunday morning.

The reason we invite people to come to church is so they can hear the good news of God's love, expressed through God's son, Jesus Christ. If you're not comfortable telling others about the good news yourself, simply

invite. The least you can do is to tell them where they can come to hear the gospel.

People need to know that their sins have been forgiven. People need to know that Jesus died for them. People need to know that God has a plan for their lives. People need to know that God loves them, no matter what they've done in their past.

In Christ Jesus we have all been set free. In Jesus Christ we have eternal life. In Jesus Christ there is a reason to live. Amen?

My friends, there are a significant number of people not attending church anywhere, who long to experience the love of God through a grace-centered tradition. They don't need to be judged or condemned. They need to be invited to experience God's amazing love and grace.

I believe our Wesleyan tradition offers people today the grace-filled message of hope and eternal life that they're looking for. They are simply waiting for some faithful Methodist disciple to say, "Come and see." They are simply waiting to be invited.

Will you be the one to invite them? They're waiting. They're hungry. They're looking for life, even eternal life. You know where to find the answers they're looking for. They need someone to show them the path, to show them the way, to show them where they can get started.

Will you be the one they're waiting to hear from? Simply invite. Amen? Amen?

This sermon borrows heavily from "A Disciples Path Workbook," by James Harnish with Justin Larosa; Nashville: Abingdon Press; 2012; page 97