

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-51

January 19, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A GRACIOUS INVITATION

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When was the last time someone invited you:

- to their house to watch the big game?
- to play golf?
- to go to Wilmington for dinner?
- to join their book club?
- to play bridge or Bunko or Mahjong?
- to a wedding?
- to a holiday party?
- to go on a trip with them?
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How did that feel? What were your expectations? Why did you accept the invitation?

Now, when was the last time you invited someone:

- to your house to watch the big game?
- to play golf?
- to go to Wilmington for dinner?
- to join your book club?
- to play bridge or Bunko or Mahjong?
- to a wedding?
- to a holiday party?

- to go on a trip with you?

How did you extend that invitation? Was it with a formal, printed invitation that said, “I request the pleasure of your company . . .”? Was it with a phone call or an email – “Hey, why don’t you join us Saturday night?” Or did you extend the invitation in person – “Come on over!”?

And why did you extend that invitation? Was it to enjoy the company of your friend? Was it to introduce your friend to some new friends? Was it to share something important and enjoyable with another person? Was it because you knew you and your friend share the same interests?

Now, consider this question: When was the last time you invited someone to come to the Wallace Presbyterian Church? Research into why people visit a church for the first time has remained remarkably consistent over the years. In an interview, a church growth expert was asked, “In your research, have you found that there’s one specific reason that visitors come to church?” His answer was simple and supported by years of research. He said, “The friendship factor. We’ve asked more than 50,000 people over the last 10 years why they came to church, and between 75 and 90 percent of respondents say, ‘I began attending because someone invited me.’” Another researcher commented on why visitors come to church, and noted the following statistics:

2% by advertisement

6% by an invitation from the pastor

6% by organized evangelism campaign

86% by friends or relatives¹

We Presbyterians are sometimes referred to as the “Frozen Chosen.” Actually, I’ve heard many more Presbyterians refer to themselves as the “Frozen Chosen” than other people calling us that. It’s always good for a laugh or a nervous chuckle, but, you know, I really don’t like that name. I know plenty of Presbyterians who are anything but frozen in their faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. However, if that’s how people see us or, sadly, how we see ourselves, that says an awful lot about our willingness to say what we have seen in Jesus Christ. Let me put it in the form of a question: What difference has God made in your life in Jesus Christ?

It’s significant to me that in this story from the beginning of John’s gospel, there is no strong-arming people into believing in Jesus Christ. Nobody gets defensive. John the Baptist doesn’t get bent out of shape when Andrew, one of his disciples, accepts Jesus’ invitation. In turn, Andrew graciously invites his brother, Simon, to meet Jesus. In Galilee, Philip accepts Jesus’ gracious invitation, and then turns around and extends the same invitation to Nathanael. Philip doesn’t get his back up when Nathanael questions whether anything good can come out of Nazareth. Philip extends the same

gracious invitation as Jesus – “Come and see.” Andrew, Simon, Philip, and Nathanael all accepted the invitation and found what they were looking for in Jesus Christ.

This sermon is not about secrets to church growth or a plan for how we can get more members in the Wallace Presbyterian Church. Instead, this sermon is a reflection on the experiences of Andrew, Simon, Philip, and Nathanael, all of whom responded to gracious invitations to “Come and see for yourself.”

There may be some people here today for the first time, but the large majority of all of us have been here many times. So, when we think about offering a gracious invitation to someone to “come and see,” we ought to begin by asking ourselves, “Why do I come?” Another way to ask the same question is, “What do I most value about my church life?” To dig down even deeper, we can ask ourselves, “How is God at work here in a way that deepens my faith in Jesus Christ?”

In his comments about this story about Jesus, Andrew, Simon, Philip, and Nathanael, David Lose writes, “[John] doesn’t actually baptize Jesus in this gospel; instead he only shares what he sees. And that may be the larger point of this story from the Fourth Gospel – that when it comes to our relationship with Jesus, our primary job is to see and share. Not threaten, not coerce, not intimidate, not woo or wheedle or plead, but simply to see and share. Could it be that simple? At its heart, evangelism is noticing what God is doing in our lives, sharing that with others, and inviting them to come and see for themselves. Notice. Share. Invite. These are the three elements of evangelism, sharing the good news of what God has done and is still doing through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for us and all the world.”²

Maybe one of the reasons we are reluctant to offer the gracious invitation “Come and see” is that we think it all depends on us! But the story from John’s gospel is full of people who always point to Jesus, not to themselves. John, Andrew, and Philip notice what Jesus is doing in their lives and the difference it makes. Then they share that with others by extending the gracious invitation “Come and see.”

John’s gospel is famous for its symbols such as darkness and light and blindness and sight. Significantly, in this story, John uses six different words for “to see” sixteen times. So, the invitation to “Come and see” is more than just “Come and check it out and get some information.” The invitation “Come and see” is an offer to share with others the difference Jesus Christ makes in your life and in this church. If we extend the invitation to “Come and see” God will certainly follow up on that invitation.

You invite someone to visit your book club because the authors you read make a difference in your life.

You invite someone to visit your Rotary Club because you think the motto “Service above self” is more than just a catchy phrase.

You invite people into your home or to your special occasions and celebrations because you value the relationships and the community that is formed.

Surely, we can invite people to “Come and see” what God is doing in our lives and in our church through Jesus Christ. Our invitation is that of John the Baptist – “I myself and seen and have testified . . .” When people come and see, Jesus also offers another gracious invitation – “Follow me.” That is not our invitation to offer, but only Jesus’ to give.

Our closing hymn this morning is “Will You Come and Follow Me.” You will see that the subtitle is “The Summons.” This hymn was written by John Bell, a Church of Scotland minister who lives in Glasgow and is actively involved in the Iona Community, an ecumenical Christian spiritual community on the island of Iona.

As you join in singing the final hymn today, pay attention to the words and to the structure of the hymn. The first four verses are written in the voice of Jesus Christ with his invitation to follow him – the summons. The fifth verse is the individual singer’s response – your response? my response? – to Christ’s summons.

Here is a description of this wonderful hymn of invitation:

“‘Will you come and follow me’ is typical of many of the worship songs to emerge from Iona. It is set to a traditional Scottish melody, ‘Kelvingrove,’ and is often referred to as ‘The Summons.’ It takes as its theme the ‘Call of Christ.’

The Gospels tell us that our Lord called others to ‘follow him,’ whether it was the Galilean fishermen who left their nets to become ‘fishers of people,’ or his disciples who were encouraged to ‘take up their cross.’

Through the centuries, as today, Christ continues to call his saints to a life of faith, prayer and service.

‘Will you come and follow me’ celebrates how the Lord calls us by name so that his life can be grown in us. It is a way of living that involves taking up the cross and to ‘risk the hostile stare.’ It is a call to love in action which liberates the captive and blind and which dares to ‘kiss the leper clean.’ It is a summons, too, to self-discovery and to the faith that can conquer our inner fears. The hymn ends with a prayer for strength to follow and ‘never be the same.’ For in responding to Christ’s call to love in action we move and live and grow in him and he in us.

Though ‘The Summons’ is a worship song of our generation its call to the Christian pilgrim is a timeless one.”³

Jesus calls us . . . Jesus extends the gracious invitation, “Come and see” . . . Jesus says, “Follow me.”

Let’s return the favor and extend the same gracious invitation to someone else . . . Come and see!

Let us pray: Good and Gracious God, your Son, Jesus Christ, invites all people to follow him and become his disciples. Touch our hearts, enlighten our minds, and stir our spirit. Help us daily to take up our cross and follow him; by living his Word and proclaiming his Good News to those around us. May our faith in you increase, may our hunger for the Gospel intensify, and may our church be strengthened as we learn to love one another as he has loved us. For this we pray, Amen.

NOTES

¹ August 22, 2012, "Personal Invitations to Church are Most Effective," at www.evangelismcoach.org.

² David Lose, "Notice, Share, Invite," January 13, 2014 at www.workingpreacher.com.

³ "Will you come and follow me," Hymns We Love to sing at Parish of Oystermouth at Swansea at www.oystermouthparish.com.