

Five Invitations from Jesus: Come and See Sunday, 5/5/19

1 How many of you know that invitations aren't all the same, and often they aren't what they first appear to be. For example, those fake handwritten invitations you get in the mail granting you special access to the next big sale- they're just advertisements that are masquerading as personal invitations, and the advertisers are hoping to trick you into opening the envelope before you preemptively chuck it into the recycle bin. It didn't take me long to figure out that when I get a call or an email at church inviting me to be a "partner in ministry," it's almost always an appeal for money. Some invitations are just courtesy invitations, like the wedding invitations you receive for the destination wedding in Aruba, or even the words "all are welcome" that are printed so often on exterior church signs. Nobody really expects you to attend. Other invitations convey a sense of obligation or duty, like a jury summons or a Church Conference. We receive invitations through text messages, on Facebook, over email, through the regular mail, and even occasionally on the telephone or in person. Among all the invitations we receive, there stand out the rarest of invitations- the invitations that are, well, actually inviting! The invitations that aren't self-serving, like an invitation to an Amway party. The invitations that are addressed to you as a person, not your credit card or your vote. The invitations that speak to your need to be a complete person in healthy relationship with others, not just a glossy appeal to a passing fad or the latest addiction. The invitations that are authentically personal, and not just the product of a mailing list or an address book. Aren't those the kind of invitations that we're really hoping for? The ones that bring a smile to our faces rather than a cynical frown?

This morning we're kicking off a new worship series: Five Invitations from Jesus. Jesus had a way of inviting that's strikingly different than what we typically experience today. His invitations were deeply personal and never self-serving. The invitations he gave to the disciples and the crowds two thousand years ago are still invitations each of us can receive today. And even more, we can learn from Jesus how to become better at inviting others. When Jesus said, "Go and make disciples," he implied thoughtful, intentional, and deeply personal invitation. By God's grace, we can learn how to recapture that spirit of disciple making.

2 Did you notice all the invitations in the Scripture readings this morning? Some of them were explicit, and some were just implied. But they were all invitations to a relationship with Jesus. In a way, John the Baptist gave an invitation to his disciples when, seeing Jesus walk by, he said to them, “Look! There is the lamb of God!”¹ In the most basic way, John gave a testimony of faith about Jesus, which set everything else in motion. He didn’t give a long speech or a sermon, he didn’t offer them an evangelism tract, he didn’t try to enroll them in a confirmation class or coerce them into praying a prayer for salvation, and he didn’t order his disciples to follow Jesus. He simply lifted up the truth of who Jesus was in the briefest way. It was an open invitation to those who were curious to put that claim to the test. Without John’s testimony, do you suppose the two disciples would have followed Jesus?

I believe there are simple ways that we might point out God at work in the world that might invite others to check out this whole Jesus thing. Sometimes we get confused and think our job is to invite someone to church, and then we feel bad because we don’t do it. One of the reasons we don’t do it is because somewhere, deep inside, we know that our real job is to invite people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus. Worshipping and growing and serving together as a church is important, but it’s not the main thing! John demonstrates for us the simplest of authentic ways to point someone to Jesus. When you see Christ in someone, when you see or feel the Holy Spirit at work, then share it with someone else! To borrow a phrase from the Department of Homeland Security, “If you see something, say something!”

3 Notice next what Jesus did and didn’t do when he noticed the two disciples following him. He didn’t immediately wallop them over the head with a demand that they surrender their lives for the sake of the Gospel (although he often did get right to the point with people). Instead, he did what he almost always did. He led off with a question: “What do you want?”

Asking good questions is a lost art form. We live in a time of propositional soundbites, with every silence seen as a window to insert our positions. Jesus didn’t do that,

¹ John 1:36, New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

even though he had every right and opportunity to do so. Instead, he invited the disciples into a relationship in one of the most personal and authentic ways possible- by asking them a question. Cindy Gregorson, one of your former pastors and now the Director of Connectional Ministries for the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, has a unique gift for asking good questions. What's a good question? A good question is one that invites us, individually or as a group, to focus our attention and reflect on something important. Jesus could have asked the disciples their names, where they were from, or any number of social pleasantries to skirt around the encounter. Instead, by asking them what they want, he invited them to reflect on why they were following him, even though he himself could very well have told them better than they knew themselves!

4 The third invitation from the text this morning is to “come and see.” Jesus knew that there was much more going on here than a curiosity about where he was staying. He could have given them a description of his ministry, or told them about the next big event the disciples had planned, or even given them a “welcome to the church of Jesus” scroll. He didn't do that. He simply said, “Come and see.”

I would guess that most of us have had conversations with friends, family, or neighbors where the topic of church came up. Maybe you were talking about the music you appreciate, or the worship time you prefer, or the friendliness of our congregation. Maybe you were even bold enough to invite them to come and see our church. But when was the last time you talked with someone about Jesus, what Jesus means to you and how you experience Jesus in your daily life? Have you ever said, come and see? Come to worship or to fellowship or to Bible study or a service project or just about any other thing we gather for- but come and see- not our activities, but come and see Jesus!

The confirmations class on Wednesday night spent some time pondering that Casting Crowns song, Only Jesus, where Mark Hall sings that he doesn't care if anyone remembers him, he just wants them to remember Jesus. That's the way we need to think about our invitations to others. It's not that I don't care if new people come and join us as the unique part of the body of Christ that we are, Buffalo United Methodist Church- I do care about that. But that's only going to happen if we invite people to come and see- not us, but Jesus, only Jesus.

“Come and see” is a powerful way to invite someone to experience the presence of the living Christ in our midst. It was such a powerful invitation for Andrew, that he went straightaway to find his brother, Simon, and issued the same invitation. It was a powerful invitation to Philip, too, who went and shared that invitation with Nathaniel. I wonder who it is in our lives that’s waiting, even today, to receive that very same invitation? Come and see!

5 It’s that time of the year when the invitations start arriving for the graduation parties. Those are wonderful invitations to receive, and I hope you get at least one. But I hope that everyone gathered here today has also received an invitation to know Jesus. If you haven’t, then please receive one now. There’s more to being a Christian than coming to church on Sunday and attending a committee meeting on Tuesday. Jesus is alive, reigning from heaven, and present in God’s indwelling Holy Spirit and in us, his body, the church. You can experience the real presence of Jesus in your life. I wish I could tell you about that in an adequate way, but I’m afraid it takes mentoring and modelling and time and seeking and relationship for you to find your path to Jesus. Look around you in the sanctuary today. These are your fellow seekers, and God offers you to each other as guides along the way.

If you do know Jesus, and not just know about Jesus, then get up off your butts and get to work! Discipleship isn’t just about basking in the warm glow of worship. We are the holders of a priceless treasure! Don’t forget that after he said, “Come and see,” Jesus also said, “Go and tell!” So, if you see something, say something, don’t keep your experience of the risen Christ to yourself and deprive others from knowing the joy of the Easter story. Ask good questions, listening instead of assuming you know what someone wants or needs. Invite someone to come and see what it looks like to see the hands and feet of Jesus healing the world, or the Spirit of Jesus opening up the Holy Scriptures.

What we have together as a church is a wonderful gift, but the real gift is our incomparable savior. Long after we’ve left this life behind, long after the United Methodist Church ceases to be, still the name of Jesus will be lifted up in worship, as it will be for all eternity. Now that is something I want to see. Isn’t it worth inviting someone else to see as well?



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