

# *All That We Are*

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The sign outside of a church said: "Exercise Daily. Walk with the Lord."

That's just what John the Baptist has suggested to the people who heard his message. "Don't follow me. Follow Jesus." And while John may have meant this as an imperative, a command, I think that today we might also hear it as an invitation.

Invitation: a spoken or written request for someone to take part or be present.

They said to Jesus, "Where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see."

An invitation. To what? We don't know yet as we read the story chronologically, but they must have liked what they saw. The gospel writer reports that they stayed there with him that day until it was four in the afternoon.

Next week we'll engage in our annual meeting, talking about the last year and the coming year at St. Peter's. I am almost certain we won't be here 'til four! And I hope you'll like what you see.

Now, not only did those early disciples like what they saw, they wanted to share it, so they started making invitations of their own. Andrew went and found his brother, Simon, and said, "We have found the Anointed One!"

And he brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are to be called Peter," the very same Peter who is the rock upon which the church is said to have been built. The very same Peter whom the Popes of the Roman Church claim as a spiritual ancestor. The very Peter who is the namesake of this faith community. Peter, who came and saw because his brother invited him. To what? We still don't know, even after Peter gets there with the now growing group of followers. But they liked it and they were willing to invest in it. They were willing to make it their own.

Invitation: a spoken or written request for someone to take part or be present.

A statistical study recently undertaken asked people how they happened upon the church they were currently attending if it was not the church of their birth. Two percent said they responded to an advertisement in the media. Six percent said they responded to an organized evangelism outreach program by the local church. Another six percent said the pastor of the local church issued them a personal invitation. The remaining eighty six percent said the way they found their way into the local church they now attend is that a friend or neighbor invited them.

The Psalmist wrote:

"I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart.

I have told the glad news of deliverance  
in the great congregation;  
see, I have not restrained my lips,  
as you know, O Lord.

I have not hidden your saving help  
within my heart,

I have spoken of your faithfulness  
and your salvation;

I have not concealed your steadfast love  
and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

Jesus said to them, "Come and see." And they went. And they stayed. For what? We don't know yet as we read the biblical story. But they responded to an invitation. They were willing to invest in it. They were willing to make it their

own. Just like Peter did. Just like many of you did when you accepted an invitation to come here to St. Peter's United Church of Christ. Now, it is time for the invitation to go forth once more.

A story: I once invited a complete stranger to come to church. Now, I know, many of you will think I should automatically be good at that since I am a pastor, but it was hard and I was nervous as I did it. Guess what? They came!

That was the good news. They worshipped. They came through the line after worship and reintroduced themselves to me. They didn't sign the guest book. And I have never seen them again.

Perhaps I had a duty to pursue them. Or perhaps they didn't find what they were looking for in a worship place. Probably both are true to some extent. And it's ok that no church is the perfect worship space for every person or family.

But that's not my point. My point is that I was challenged to reach out to a complete stranger and when I did: they came!

How much more so if I had been reaching out to a friend?! Eighty six percent more so, I venture to say. It is time for the invitation to go forth once more. It is time for a spoken or written request to be issued from this place for someone to take part or be present.

Many folks, when we talk about evangelism, do so timidly, almost fearfully. Now I know people are only afraid of evangelism because people have allowed their preconceived notions of what that looks like to rule the day rather than expending energy learning about what evangelism really can be for the church and for the world. Pastors need to take some responsibility for that and be better teachers.

Folks often say, "We're not interested in going door to door. We don't want to push our faith on anyone. We don't wear our faith on our shirtsleeves. Don't ask us to go cold-calling in the neighborhood. We're not fundamentalists."

On reflection today, I see that only a few people really say those things, but they say them loudly, and, as so often happens when a few speak loudly, it is tempting to listen, to interpret their distaste with certain methods of evangelism as a total lack of desire to share the good news.

We are wrong. We know that we love God. You love what your church has been and is for you. People say, more and more, that "We take care of each other. We love our music. We are thoughtful about the scriptures. We share the good news in bad times. We are a family. We are inclusive. We want to be diverse. We respect other people's opinions."

These are wonderfully elucidated values, and I know that the experiences spoken of as valued by people are values that most of us can agree with in one way, shape, or form. And even when we disagree, we revel in the value of the United Church of Christ wherein the faith of each generation is found afresh and anew because there is still light to come forth from God's word.

The ability to disagree and still worship together before God is a value all its own. Do you see what we have to build on? Values that bind us together. The Word of God that is true and liberating. An invitation from Jesus himself to "Come and see." And the perspective of history that tells us just what we're getting into. For we have witnessed the resurrection and the great peace that comes after it, even if that peace is not yet our own.

We have a better shot at it than Andrew did when he invited Simon. But when he talked his brother into coming, his brother stayed, and on that rock named Peter the church was built. How much easier should it be for us who know the end of the passion story and will never endure what those first disciples endured?

It is time for the invitation to go forth. It is time for a spoken or written request for someone to take part or be present. And eighty six percent of the people who hear the invitation and respond will be people that you invited. Not me. Not our occasional advertisements in the newspaper. You.

God once said to a whole people, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. People will come because of the Lord, who has chosen you. I will give you as a light to the nations."

It occurs to me that if the church wants to leave most of the work of inviting new folks to church to the pastors, each congregation could be a light to the nations. But we'd also cast the dimmest glow that emanates from a three level bulb. A nice atmosphere, but not much light. If the church wants to compound whatever work the pastor does with some advertising or organized evangelism, or adherence to the fad or trend of the day, the church might reach another eight percent of the population, and shine as a light to the nations on the second level of that bulb.

But if the church really wants to shine as a light to the nations, the church needs you to get involved, too. Not by cold-calling. Not by being a fundamentalist. Not by wearing your faith on your shirtsleeve (although, why not?) No, the way for you to be involved is to do what Jesus did, and do what Andrew did. They issued invitations. "Come and see. Come and see." To family members. To friends of yours who you already care about, who might be going through a rough spot in life or be searching for new meaning, who might relish the opportunity to share in the values we have already said are important to us.

Don't you have a friend who is looking for a family? Who wants to feel included? Who wants to hear some good news in bad times? Who enjoys the kind of music they will hear in this sanctuary? Whose life might just be waiting for the touch of the Spirit?

Invite them. God will strengthen you for the task if you are nervous about it.

Invite them. Ask someone to be present. You be present to them with all of who you are. Gently urge them to come and see.

We have good news to share! We have new life to share!

You invite them. God will do the rest, and we will be a light to the nations.

Next Sunday, might this sanctuary just be packed to overflowing?

Amen and amen.