

"An Invitational Church"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, August 19, 2007

Text: Hebrews 13:1-8 John 1:35-51 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our minds and open our hearts, that we may hear your Word for us today. Amen.

TAKING THE INITIATIVE

Brian McLaren tells about going for to a doctor's appointment. It was a routine checkup. He needs to see his doctor every three months to make sure that the medications that are supposed to help his blood pressure and cholesterol aren't damaging his liver. Their visits are usually very brief: blood test results, blood pressure, temperature, and pulse, followed by, "How are you feeling? Any problems?" To which Brian answers, I feel fantastic. No worries at all." Then the doctor tells him to come back in three months.

This day was different. His doctor knows that Brian is a Christian, because it came up in an earlier conversation, maybe a year ago. So the doctor comes in and says, right off the bat, "I have a question for you. I'm getting older, and that makes any sane person think about their mortality, their spirit, you know what I mean. But any time I begin to feel closer to God, I hear some wacko on TV say something absolutely outrageous in the name of God or religion, and it just smothers my interest. It pushes me in the totally opposite direction."

They ended up having a good conversation. In today's society, people like Brian's doctor – intelligent people, thoughtful, honest people – really want to talk about

God and the spiritual life. People are thinking about life, its meaning, its destiny, their soul, their purpose, God. They want to talk. They need to talk. And they need a conversation partner. We have the opportunity to listen, to talk, and – when the time is right – to introduce them to Jesus.

Jesus calls us to introduce people to him. Jesus calls us also to welcome people in genuine, friendly ways.

We read in the letter to the Hebrews, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2) The author is probably referring to Abraham and Sarah’s experience in Genesis 18. They provided hospitality, food and a place to rest to some strangers who turned out to be angels with an important message.

When people greet you with genuine warmth, sincere interest and love, how do you feel? Whether you are new to a group or not, how does that make you feel? Did you feel that way earlier this morning during the Passing of the Peace?

My family and I were on vacation one summer along the coast of South Carolina. Andy and Sarah were both in elementary school then. We awakened one Sunday morning and made plans to attend Sunday School and worship at a United Methodist church. When we arrived at the church, we located an adult class to attend. Melody offered to go and get Andy and Sarah settled in their children’s classes. I went ahead to the adult class.

By the time I arrived, the class had already begun. There were about 30 to 40 people in the class, seated in rows of chairs, facing a teacher who was standing at a podium. The room was full. I managed to find an empty seat in the middle of one row of chairs. As it turned out, Melody decided to stay with Sarah in her Sunday School class. At the end of the adult class, the person seated on my right stood up and walked away. The person seated on my left, stood up and walked away. Nobody in the class of 30 or more people spoke to me. Not a “hello” or “good morning” or “We’re glad to

have you,” or “What are you doing here?” That did not feel good. But I mustered up some initiative and approached the teacher. I thanked her for a good lesson.

A couple of summers later, we were on vacation again, this time in the North Carolina mountains. I wanted to worship at Central United Methodist Church in Asheville, so that we could hear Dr. Michael Brown preach. From the message on the church answering machine on Saturday, we learned that Central Church was renovating its sanctuary. Their worship service was at 9:00 a.m. the next day in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church, one block away.

We attended the service, and were welcomed warmly. One couple who was seated in the pew in front of us talked with us after the service. They asked us if we wanted to attend Sunday School. We replied that we did want to go to Sunday School. They accompanied us down the block to their church’s educational building. They took us to Sarah’s Sunday School class. Then they guided us to Andy’s Sunday School class. As Sarah and Andy became settled in those classes, Melody and I then followed this kind couple to their class. What a wonderful experience of Christian hospitality! The next time we were in Asheville over the weekend, it didn’t take us long to decide that we wanted to go back to Central Church.

Warm, friendly hospitality toward guests -- and everyone -- makes such a difference! What is needed is a willingness to go out and invest our lives in other people. When William Temple was the Archbishop of Canterbury, he said, “The Church is the only institution on earth that primarily exists for people outside its walls.”

People who are adrift spiritually, who are lost, matter to God. As United Methodists, we believe in prevenient grace. Theologically, that means that God is active in our lives, wooing us into a relationship with him, even before we know that God exists. God is reaching out to people. God is searching for people even before they are aware of this searching. You and I can be partners with God in reaching out, in welcoming, and in inviting people to God and his Church.

Someone has said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” We were created for eternity. How incredible will it be when you arrive in heaven and God says to you, “Come here and look. Joe and Sally are here because of your prayers, your welcome and your invitation.”

As followers of Christ, we take the initiative to invite. Fred Mason, our organist, was telling me about his deep-sea fishing trip in the Chesapeake Bay one day last week. Fred and other fishermen went to where the fish were to reach them. Fred did not park a boat and trailer in the front yard of his home and put a sign on it that said, “Fish welcome.” For us to introduce people to God and our church, we take the initiative to invite them.

A FIRST-CENTURY MODEL

Think about preparing to attend an event. You have not attended it before and you will not know anyone there. How do you feel? A little nervous? Perhaps you have a great deal of anxiety. You are a little apprehensive.

Now consider going to the same event, but this time someone has personally invited you to the event and will be with you there. How do you feel? You are confident. More comfortable. You look forward to it with anticipation.

A 4-year evangelism research project funded by the Lilly Endowment found that almost 60% of new members of churches went there for the first time because a person invited them, or because they knew someone in the church. They also found that the biggest barrier to attending the church was not knowing anyone there. I think this has been the case for 2,000 years.

Jesus and his disciples did not sit in a synagogue in Capernaum and wait for people to come to them. The first chapter of John gives us a fairly obvious model for becoming an invitational church.

John the Baptist introduces two of his disciples to Jesus. He sees Jesus walking by and he exclaims, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” Those two disciples begin to follow Jesus. Jesus invites them. He tells them, “Come and see?”

One of those two men was Andrew. The first thing that Andrew does after encountering Jesus is to find his brother, Simon. Andrew then brings Simon to Jesus and introduces Simon to Jesus. Jesus tells Simon that his name will be Peter.

Later in this gospel lesson we learn that Philip was from the city of Bethsaida, where Andrew and Peter had grown up. Andrew and Peter may have introduced Philip to Jesus. In any case, Jesus invites Philip. He says, “Follow me,” and Philip responds. The next thing that Philip does is to go and find his friend, Nathanael. Philip brings Nathanael to Jesus and introduces him.

To review, John the Baptist introduces Andrew and a friend to Jesus. Jesus invites Andrew and his friend to “come and see.” Andrew introduces Peter to Jesus. Andrew and Peter introduce Philip to Jesus. Jesus invites Philip to “follow me.” Philip introduces Nathanael to Jesus. That is six invitations in 16 verses!

Most, if not all of us, have faith in God. We have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Who are we introducing to Jesus? Who are we inviting to come to church?

THE BLESSING OF AN INVITATION

Dr. George Barna is a church researcher who conducts surveys and interviews and then produces reports with the results. See what you think the answer to this multiple-choice question is. The average United Methodist invites a person to church: a) once a week; b) once a year; c) once every 26 years; or d) once every 38 years. According to his research, the average United Methodist invites a person to church once every 38 years. We can do better than that!

Part of our strategic plan to fulfill our church’s mission calls for an “Invite and Welcome” team. This team is to lead us in becoming an invitational church. If you are

interested in this area and would like to be a part of this effort, please let me know.

It is hard to overstate the importance of an invitation. I read about a woman who had been looking for a church during a tough transition time in her life. She talked with friends about what was going on in her life. After a while she decided to try a church. One Sunday morning, she walked into a congregation close to her house. She was shocked to find that five of her friends and coworkers were sitting in the sanctuary. She had discussed her problems with most of these people! Not one of them suggested that church might help. Even worse, she had no idea that any of them were even members of a church. She didn't know they were Christians.

One dream that I have for our church is for people to become so excited about how God has blessed them or how the ministry of this church has blessed them, that they tell others about it.

If faith and church have changed your life, you'll want to share that discovery with your friends. You want everyone to know that Christ lives. You want everyone to know that God loves us extravagantly. You want everyone to know that God will overwhelm their souls with grace and wash away sins. You want everyone to understand to the soles of their feet that there is no sin, no resentment, no bitterness, no wound, no fear, no illness, no loneliness that Christ cannot forgive, dissolve, heal, cure, fill. You want everyone to know that the God of infinity is there to lead them by the hand into forever, into an eternity of powerful love. Nothing is more beautiful than this good news.

All kinds of people can invite people to church. Martha Reese, a Disciples of Christ pastor, writes about Bob Hope, a smiling, retired mechanic who was a member of her church near Indianapolis. Bob was one of the most loving, outgoing men she has ever known. Bob knew the name of every guest who had ever set foot in the church. He had invited a third of them.

Bob drafted a bucket brigade out of the choir one Sunday morning between worship services. They filled the baptistery to hip height with tepid water from the kitchen

sink and water heated on the stove. A middle school student had the flu when she should have been baptized the week before. She had shown up for Sunday School the following Sunday and wanted to be baptized! Martha doesn't remember if the choir practiced the anthem. She does remember that they baptized Heather!

One afternoon the church secretary walked into Martha's office, laughing. She told her that she had just seen Bob Hope at the supermarket, loading 17 paper bags bulging with Pampers, formula, and hot dog buns into the trunk of a young woman's car. The woman grinned feebly at Bob as she juggled a fractious 4-year-old and a crying baby. The whole family appeared in church the next Sunday. Bob was a magnet for Christ and their church.

Martha also told about a gentleman named Brian that she met from another church. Brian was the church treasurer, a quiet CPA. He told her, "It's hard for me to be outgoing or really friendly like some people, so what I do is to pray that God will show me people to pray for who might be open to Christ now. When I ask, God brings people to my mind, or into my life, whose kids left for college a couple months before. Sometimes it's someone who just retired, or a lady whose husband just died, or someone who lost his job. When their names come into my mind, I call them for lunch or golf, and then I ask them if they want to come to church. I don't talk about a lot of stuff, but I invite them."

Martha asked Brian what has happened with the people he has invited to church. He said, "Well, a lot of them have come to our church, and a large percentage of them have joined. I really never have been able to tell them about the Lord or lead them to Christ. I just tell them church means a lot to me and helps me. I guess my job's just the praying and the inviting."

I dream of more and more people praying and inviting people!

I invite you now to take your worship bulletin and go to the front page. Now get something to write with. Pencils are in the pew holders and pens are in the attendance

notebooks, or you may want to use your own pen.

Look at the name of our church, then the address. On the next line is the mission of our church. Let us read it together: "Sharing Christ from the heart of Durham.." You may want to underline it. That is what we are about.

Now I would like you to write this question somewhere on the front of your bulletin: "Who will I invite to church next Sunday?" (Repeat) I encourage you to answer that question during the next couple of days and then do it. I look forward to meeting the people you invite to come with you. Amen.