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# You Are Invited

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 4 February 2024

Isaiah 40:21-31 • 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 • Mark 1:29-39

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

It is difficult for us to spread the Gospel. It is not that we do not have enough faith, or that we ourselves are not convinced of its truth; it is not that we do not know enough about God and Jesus to be able to tell someone else about them. It is perhaps how we think about it. We are influenced by many things. There are Jesus' words from Matthew's Gospel: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19). There is that old hymn: "Go forth and tell the greatness of the Lord." There are the models in the Bible of preaching — and preaching is telling. So we naturally have the impression that we are to go up to people and tell them about Jesus Christ.

This is true, and it is our charge and duty as Christians. But we might want to think of it in a slightly different way. Rather than *telling* — which is direct speech aimed at another person — perhaps we should instead be *offering*. *Offer* the Gospel to others, rather than *tell* them about it. It can be an invitation; and

indeed, that is how God does it. God does not whack us over the head and make us believe; Jesus does not usually throw us to the ground (even though he did it to Paul) and force us into faith. God offers. God invites. Jesus invites.

And so should *we* invite, taking Jesus as our model. We should be able to put into words what our faith means for us, for then we can show it to others. This idea is closely tied to the idea of being an example in our lives for others. In the Bible God seems to tell us, “Follow me and your lives will be happy; you will prosper and live long.” We may recall God’s promise through Moses from the Book of Deuteronomy:

So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today—to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul— then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied.

(Deuteronomy 11:13-15)

This is a promise of prosperity; but it is not the material things, the good crops, the grass in the fields which are important. This is really God’s promise to be with us, close to us, responsive to us, no matter what happens. The rains may not always come as we wish, the wine and olive oil may not always be abundant; but if we put God first in our lives, God will always be with us, to rejoice with us in the good times and to comfort us in the bad times. If we are true to God, God will be true to us.

I am speaking here, of course, about our earthly lives. The great promise that Jesus brought us is of eternal life with him. But in talking to others, it may be more effective at first to show what having God with us means in this life. That is a more visible example.

In our passage today from Paul’s letter to Corinth, he talks about how he does this. Paul gets to know a little about the people he is talking to. Once he knows their professions, or what they like to do, or where they’re from, then he does his best to talk to them in a way that they understand. As he says:

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law ... so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law ... so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Cor 9:19-22)

He learns, he listens, and then he invites. Jesus did the same, when he used farming analogies in talking to farmers, fishing examples when talking to fishermen, etc. You will recall the Gospel from two weeks ago, when Jesus

called his first disciples: “Come, follow me,” he said. It was an invitation. Of course, Jesus had the great advantage that he knew intimately every one of his people already! We have to do a little more work; so we listen and learn.

One of Jesus’ disciples, Philip, picked up on this when he told Nathanael to come and meet Jesus of Nazareth, and Nathanael responded, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip replied, “Come and see” (John 1:45-6). The Psalmist invites us to “taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8). The Bible is, truly, one great big invitation to God’s people to trust in God and come to faith. Our church should reflect that, and indeed I see a lovely level of hospitality here in this parish. You all are very inviting and welcoming to people who come through our doors. We must extend that invitation beyond our walls to all who will listen.

And that brings me to a final point. Jesus often said, usually when he was telling parables: “Those who have ears to hear, listen!” You can find it several times in Luke, Mark and Matthew. Jesus was speaking of the attitude of the people around them; were they open to his teaching? Were they open to new ideas? What he says indicates a passive approach on his part: he is not forcing, he is not demanding. He is inviting. He might have said: “All those whose hearts are open to my words, I invite you to listen, learn and follow me.” And those who accepted his invitation were greatly blessed.

So in our conversations with others who are not Christians and may not have heard God’s call, we too should look not to tell, not to insist, but to invite. For our God is a gracious God and wants all to accept the invitation. It’s up to us to issue the invitation, as representatives of our great and loving host, Jesus Christ. Amen.