

GOD INVITES US TO INVITES PEOPLE

JOHN 1:35-51

Dr. Martin Marty is a professor of history at the University of Chicago, an author and a leader in the Lutheran church. A while back he came to a two part conclusion. Churches that grow are made up of people who invite others to attend church with them. Churches that decline are made up of people who don't invite other people to come with them. He shared the statistic that the average Presbyterian invites someone to attend church with him or her on the average of once every 24 years. The average Episcopalian invites someone to attend church with him or her once every 28 years. Martin Marty went on to talk about a Presbyterian friend who had served as an elder in his church for some 40 years who said that Marty's statistics couldn't possibly be true. He thought they were far too optimistic! After all, this man said, "I've been a Presbyterian elder for 40 years and I've never invited anyone to attend church with me." Wow.... I don't know the statistics for members of Baptist churches. Hopefully, they're better than the ones I mentioned, but I don't know!

"Our Inviting God." That's the name I've given to a series of five messages starting today. Each Bible passage we're going to consider has one thing in common – the word "come." "Come" is the universal word of invitation. God invites all kinds of people into a transforming relationship with Himself. God even invites people who are spectacularly unworthy of His love and grace. But today's message examines a slightly different kind of divine invitation. God also invites us to invite others to Him. Who is "us"? "Us" is people who already follow Jesus and are committed to Him. Saved people. Born-again people. But, not perfect people. Not people who never mess up or make mistakes. But, yes, people in whom the Holy Spirit already lives. Are you one of the "us"? If so, God invites you to invite others to Him. You've already heard today that Sunday, September 15 is Back to Church Sunday. We're joining many other churches across our community, country and indeed the world that are drilling down on that one day as a day to encourage the "us" to invite the "them" to church!

God calls us to be spiritual inviters. What is a spiritual inviter? A story from the Bible offers some important answers to that question. This story happened at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry when he was out picking the group of men who eventually became the group of twelve disciples. Let's read it now. How can you and I become spiritual inviters? First of all...

ACCEPT THE FACT THAT I'M A HUMAN CHANNEL FOR A DIVINE MESSAGE TO LOST PEOPLE.

By this time in His life, Jesus knew that He was God's one and only chosen instrument for the salvation of all people. In order to reach humanity, God became human in the person of Jesus some 2000 years ago. Then Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and rose again to provide an eternal home for every person who puts his or her trust in Him. But God's plan didn't

begin and end with Jesus' 33 year life span here on Earth. God's message of love, grace, forgiveness of sins and eternity in Heaven with Him continues to be made through human beings like you and me.

We meet a man named Andrew for the first time in this story. Andrew became one of the twelve disciples. He's not mentioned a lot in the Bible, but one common thread runs through most of the passages where he makes an appearance. Andrew was constantly inviting other people to Jesus. It started the very first day he met Jesus. Andrew invites his brother, Simon, to come to Jesus. On another occasion, Andrew brings a young boy to Jesus who had two fish and five loaves of bread. Jesus performed one of his most incredible miracles that day; He multiplied the fish and bread and fed 5,000 people. On still another occasion, Andrew brings two Greeks – two non-Jewish people – to Jesus because they had questions. They were spiritual seekers and Andrew did what Andrew did best. He invited people to Jesus! He brought people to Jesus!

Andrew illustrates a fundamental principle. God has chosen to use you, a human being, to be the channel through which He shares His message to lost people. It's God's plan A and He doesn't have a plan B. It's a pattern that began with Jesus and it continues today in you and me. One of the most troubling statistics I've ever heard anywhere is that 95% of those who claim to be followers of Jesus never bring even one other person to Jesus in their lifetime. That's a whole lot of clogged up human channels through whom God's message never flows! What's the problem? Do they just not want to be a channel? Do they not know how to be a channel? Do they not realize they're supposed to be a channel? Are you a channel? The first step in becoming a spiritual inviter is to accept the fact that if you're a follower of Jesus, you are automatically a human channel for a divine message to lost people. How wonderful! Imagine God wanting to use the likes of you and me to bring lost people to Himself. Yet that's what the Bible clearly teaches. How can you become a spiritual inviter? Secondly...

TAKE THE INITIATIVE BECAUSE I'M CONFIDENT GOD IS ALREADY AT WORK IN LOST PEOPLE.

Jesus took the initiative with Andrew and an unnamed disciple. Both of them were disciples of John the Baptist. These two were curious about Jesus. They literally started to follow Jesus around and so He took the initiative to ask them, "What do you want? What are you looking for?" Those questions were designed to discover where they were spiritually and if they were truly open to Him. Then, Andrew goes out and finds his brother, Simon, tells him about Jesus and brings him to Jesus. Then, later on, Philip takes the initiative with his friend, Nathanael. Philip finds and tells Nathanael and brings him to Jesus, too. Do you see the pattern of initiative? Jesus initiates a conversation with Andrew and the unnamed disciple. Andrew initiates contact with his brother, Simon. Philip initiates contact with Nathanael. When it comes to lost people, a spiritual inviter takes the initiative. It's always our job to take the first step. I love that description

of Andrew, “The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ).” (John 1:41 NIV)

It takes confidence to take the first step to do anything. Simply and only this: you know that God is already at work in the hearts of lost people preparing them for your contact. The Holy Spirit was already working in Andrew and this anonymous disciple. The fact they were hanging around John the Baptist told Jesus they were spiritual seekers at some level. The Holy Spirit was already at work in Simon and Nathanael. Ultimately, they believed in Jesus not because Andrew and Philip were so smart or persuasive, but because God was already working on them and in them. The fact is that none of us would even begin to seek for God unless He was already in our lives drawing us to Himself.

We never save anybody. Only God can transform someone’s life through Jesus. Just be willing to take some initiative and let God do the rest. Here’s the greatest requirement for being a spiritual inviter. One word: willingness. Andrew was no theologian. He was just willing. Philip wasn’t a professional evangelist. He was just willing. Are you willing? Are you willing to take the initiative – to take the first step – knowing that God is already at work in the lost people you invite to Jesus? How can you and I become spiritual inviters? Third...

BEGIN WITH THE LOST PEOPLE I ALREADY KNOW PERSONALLY.

Again, Andrew is a wonderful example. Who’s the first person he invites to come to Jesus? His brother, Simon. You’re called to be a spiritual inviter to the members of your own family first and foremost. I love it when parents invite their kids to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Many of you have had that experience and it just doesn’t get any better than that, does it? Salvation is never somehow genetically passed on by parents to kids. But a home where Jesus is honored is still the best place to invite lost people to Jesus. Mom or Dad, have you invited your children to follow Jesus? Perhaps you became a follower of Jesus later in your life. Well, have you invited your parents to follow Jesus? How about a brother, a sister, a cousin, an aunt or an uncle? Who should care more about the eternal destination of the members of your family than you?

Now, Nathanael doesn’t appear to have been related to Philip, but he sounds like he was a close friend. A personal relationship already existed between the two men and that made an appropriate, natural channel that God used for maximum effect. A survey of some 10,000 people got asked this question, “What was responsible for your coming to church?” 79% responded, “A friend or a relative invited me.” Yes, God wants you to invite people to Jesus who you don’t know very well yet. But why not start first with the people you know personally? How can you and I become spiritual inviters? Fourth...

CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOST PEOPLE INTENTIONALLY.

Jesus models this principle in the story we read. Andrew and the anonymous disciple were strangers. They had a desire to talk with Jesus, so He invited them over to His place for a conversation. The text says this first encounter with Jesus was at the tenth hour which means it was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Apparently, they stayed and talked with Jesus until late into the night. Jesus took the time and made the effort to cultivate a relationship with these two men which resulted in both of them making a commitment to follow Him. If lost people are ever going to encounter Jesus, it will be because you and I cultivate relationships with them. That's how most lost people first encounter Jesus. They meet Him in and through the lives, the words and the attitudes of His followers.

Why are we slow to cultivate relationships with lost people? It's work to cultivate relationships. The fact is we can get lazy spiritually or too comfortable in an unhealthy sort of way. For instance, most Christians don't have any close non-Christian friends as soon as two years after their conversion. Why is that? Because once you become a follower of Jesus, it's just easier and sometimes much more pleasant to hang out with other followers of Jesus all of the time! It demands effort to get to know people who aren't Christians yet, develop a rapport with them and look for opportunities to get into spiritual conversations with them. It takes energy, creativity, prayer, sensitivity, timing and patience. Why do it, then? Simply because God expects it of us and He wants us to experience the eternal joy of being used as a channel to draw someone to Him.

There's another reason we can be slow to cultivate relationships with lost people. You can be afraid of spiritual contamination. That was the attitude in the church I grew up in. Lost people were to be avoided at all costs. Lost people could drag you into a sinful life. Lost people were dangerous to be around. Lost people could corrupt you spiritually. Now, there's always some truth in every really effective lie! It's true that lost people can sometimes be used to tempt you to sin. But here's the problem. If your attitude towards lost people is that they should be avoided at all costs, how are lost people ever supposed to ever hear the good news about Jesus through you? What if every follower of Jesus had that attitude? How would anybody anywhere ever get invited to come to Jesus? The Bible tells us clearly that God loves lost people so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for them. Yes, cultivating relationships with lost people has some risks. But it's God's plan to invite us to invite others.

Even in this era of the iPhone, Facebook, and Twitter nothing still beats person-to-person contact and relationship building. Mass media can introduce a new idea to people. But people still follow the lead of other people they know and trust when they decide to change. This is something that salespeople understand well. A pharmaceutical rep was asked how he persuaded doctors—who are notoriously stubborn—to adopt a new medicine. He said just presenting them with scientific evidence is never close to enough. Instead, he uses "the rule of seven touches." That's seven intentional contacts he makes with the doctor. As a result of those "touches" the doctor comes to know and trust him. Yes, he

stocks the doctor's closets with free samples in person. But from there, he might poke his head around the corner and ask, "So how did your daughter Debbie's soccer game go?" Eventually, this becomes, "Have you seen this study on our new drug? How about giving it a try?" As that rep has recognized, human interaction is the key force in overcoming resistance even to the message about Jesus. How can you and I become spiritual inviters? Fifth...

BE PREPARED TO GIVE A VERBAL WITNESS TO LOST PEOPLE.

Both Andrew and Philip were willing to be verbal with Simon and Nathanael when it came to Jesus. Neither of them had learned a Gospel presentation at this point in time – not Evangelism Explosion, not the Four Spiritual Laws – nothing. Just the same, Simon and Nathanael used actual words to share what Jesus meant to them at that point in time and God used it. Why does this principle need to be stressed? Too many of us say things like, "Well, I witness to others by how I live my life." Can I make this observation? I'm kind of paid to be a good, moral person. That's an almost universal expectation for most pastors. But I've never had anyone ever say to me. "You live such a good, moral life. Tell me, please, how I can know God?" Not for a minute am I dismissing the importance of living a good, moral life, but it's not how most lost people find Jesus. At some point, people need to be told verbally who Jesus is, what He did for them and what it means to put your trust in Him for this life and eternity. How can you and I become spiritual inviters? Sixth...

AVOID ARGUMENTS WITH LOST PEOPLE AND JUST POINT TO JESUS.

When Philip approached Nathanael about Jesus, Nathanael got all bent out of shape over the fact that Jesus was from a town called Nazareth. Apparently, Nazareth had a bad reputation and Nathanael couldn't believe any spiritual leader could emerge from that environment. Philip refused to argue with him. He wasn't going to get drawn into a debate over whether Nazareth deserved to be the home of the Messiah or not. Nathanael wanted to argue, but Philip wisely ignored the temptation and just pointed him to Jesus instead. No person was ever argued into believing in or following Jesus. If people have genuine questions, by all means, try to answer them. But if people are defensive or argumentative, just back off. I like Philip's approach here. He avoided an argument but he persevered in inviting Nathanael to Jesus just the same. When you run into a lost person who is negative about Jesus, don't argue. But don't give up either! Keep looking for those opportunities to say, "Come and see Jesus. Check Him out." How can you and I become spiritual inviters? Finally...

SEE BEYOND WHAT LOST PEOPLE ARE TODAY TO WHAT THEY CAN BECOME TOMORROW.

You see that principle clearly in this very first encounter between Jesus and Simon. We're told here that when Jesus laid eyes on Simon for the first time

ever, He gave him a new name: Cephas or Peter. Cephas was the Aramaic version – the everyday language Jesus and these men spoke. Peter was the Greek version. Both Cephas and Peter mean “rock.” It’s not farfetched to claim that Jesus gave Simon a nickname – “Rocky.” But there was a purpose in giving Simon a new name. In that day and age, the name of a person pointed to a hoped for character trait in him or her. When Jesus gave Simon the name “Rocky”, He was pointing to a future spiritual transformation that He knew was going to happen in Simon’s life. At that point in time, Simon was anything but rock-like in his character. He was weak, impetuous, egotistical and loved to put his foot in his mouth. But the Holy Spirit transformed Simon into Rocky. He did become a man of rock-like character. He became strong in his faith, utterly loyal and faithful to Jesus and deeply compassionate towards others.

What’s the point? If all you ever see when you look at a lost person is his failures, her mistakes, his sins, her character flaws, you need to get Jesus’ eyes for that person! He saw beyond what lost people are today to what they could become tomorrow when His grace transformed their lives. A key to becoming a spiritual inviter is being able to get Jesus’ eyes for lost people. Lost people are precious to God. Lost people matter to God. Lost people are loved by God even when they can’t stand Him. We all need to learn to look beyond what lost people are today to what they can become when Jesus invades their lives and transforms them by the Holy Spirit living in and through them. It’s not a matter of believing in people. God never asks us to do that! It’s a matter of believing in what Jesus can do in, for and through people for His glory.

Call it the domino theory of spiritual impact. Imagine a long line of dominoes. When one falls, it starts a chain reaction that can cause dozens or hundreds more dominoes to fall. For instance, Jesus set up 12 dominoes (his disciples), mentored them, empowered them with the Holy Spirit, and then sent them off to go and do likewise. Now there are over 2 billion followers of Christ in the world. That's a lot of dominoes!

In the 1880s, Robert Wilder, a missionary kid from India, was preparing to return to the mission field. During college, he even signed a pledge along with friends to become a missionary. But because he was so physically frail, he never fulfilled that pledge. Instead, he encouraged others to take up the task. One domino fell. During a preaching tour that took Robert through Chicago, he spoke to an audience that included Samuel Moffett. Samuel also signed Robert's pledge, and within two years he landed in Korea. Another domino fell. A few years later, Samuel shared the gospel with a man who had become disillusioned with his religion. Kiel Sun-chu trusted Christ, and quickly another domino fell. In 1907, Kiel was one of the leaders of the Pyongyang revival. In January of that year, spontaneous prayer and confession broke out during regular church meetings. Thousands of dominoes fell. Those days of fervent prayer are now considered the birth of an independent, self-sustaining Korean church. When Kiel died in 1935, 5,000 people attended his funeral. The church in Korea now numbers

about 15 million, and it sends more foreign missionaries out than any other country except the United States. Millions of dominoes continue to fall.

As Christians, we are all dominoes in the chain reaction set off by Jesus 2,000 years ago. The amazing thing about dominoes falling is that the chain reaction always starts small—with just one, seemingly insignificant domino. Sometimes what you do to share your faith might seem very small and insignificant. But the Bible says, “Don’t despise the day of small things.” Whether you invite someone to Back to Church Sunday, help out in a ministry to children here at our church, talk to your own children about Jesus, or pray earnestly for people around the globe, you have no idea how big the impact will be as God multiplies your faithfulness. God invites you and me to invite others.