

Message: “Who Will You Invite?”

What do you think comes to mind for most people when a stranger asks them to church? Here’s an image we see all too often. This person seems to be an equal opportunity hater. The video captured it in a humorous way. And believe me, when we’re facing this kind of message, we all need some humor.

Consider this: everyone here today was invited to come.

It may have been the turkey dinner or a women’s group or scouts or the car show or a special occasion, but you were invited. We’re glad you accepted the invitation and chose to come. You are important to us. We care for you and about you. What’s better is that God loves you and cares for you. We hope the Spirit of the Lord speaks to you through us, because we want you to be with us.

Do you remember who invited you? Some of you may not. Maybe you were born into Corona UMC or your parents decided to come and they brought you. Some of you came from other United Methodist churches. There’s something about the Wesleyan way of life and the way God calls us that appeals. You may have looked for us. Some of you came from other denominations. Different things call to different people. For some, it’s the Methodist emphasis on grace. Others like our inclusivity and willingness to explore the horizons of faith. Some of you came from other faiths or from a household where there is no faith. You found relationship, a different kind of family and a spiritual life that’s unique, one based on love and forgiveness, not rules and judgment.

No matter what your life was like, the invitation meant something. And so you are here. I’m so glad. And so is everyone in this place.

Those of us who were invited came for one reason: we trusted the person who invited us. We didn’t get a second bid or check references or do research into the children and youth ministry program, missions or the pastor. That came later. You came to church because someone, a person you knew, invited you to come.

That’s why I came to the Methodist church. I’ve shared parts of my story over the years. I was raised in a church-going home, but fell away from church right out of college. I spent the next twenty years outside the church. Sure, I’d go to the occasional Christmas or Easter program to make my family and friends happy, but it didn’t mean a lot. In early 2000, I came to faith and joined a Lutheran Church. Late in 2006 I moved from the Boston area to southern California.

I started looking around for a church, but found a lot of dead places. By that, I mean they either had no members or there seemed to be little spiritual life. I can’t tell you how many churches I went to where I met two people: an usher and the pastor. The rest of the people didn’t seem to care. I was disappointed and a bit disillusioned.

Esperanza gets the credit. We started dating shortly after I moved to southern California. A few months after we met, she invited me to go to church with her at the Church of the Foothills UMC in Duarte, CA.

It was like finding a home I never knew I was missing!

You know what I mean? There were things they did that I hadn’t experienced. For example, the congregation has a unique practice: everyone greets everyone else, every Sunday!

But what mattered most was that I could feel the Spirit of God in that place. The people really cared. They cared about God. They cared about each other. They cared about me, a stranger who showed up unexpectedly one Sunday.

Do you know what I did? I couldn’t help it. I had to go back. I had to see if it was true. After all, I was still shopping in my mind. God didn’t disappoint. I was home. A few months later, I joined the United Methodist Church. My life has never been the same.

I give thanks to Esperanza for her care and willingness to take a chance and invite me to church. I give thanks to Pastor Timothy Ting, who mentored and guided me. I give thanks to the members of the Church of the Foothills who accepted me as a member of their family. Most of all, I give thanks to God for leading me to a place where I truly found my calling, what Jesus invited me to become. I give thanks because that path has led Esperanza and me to you.

What’s your story? Someone invited you or made you feel welcome, no matter whether you were raised in the church or never set foot in one. Think of someone who makes you feel like you belong here. Then tell them thank you and show them your appreciation by passing the invitation on. Share the good you’ve received by making friends with someone and inviting them.

After all, that’s what Jesus did. Jesus invited people with these words (Matthew 4:19):

“Come, follow me, and I’ll show you how to fish for people”

Jesus spoke these words to fishermen, tax collectors and others.

Then he put it into action. Jesus invited regular, ordinary people, not Hebrew scholars, people born in palaces or those with the right bloodline. Jesus used the regular people of the world to show those with power, privilege and money that God’s kingdom operates on a different economy. The fuel in God’s kingdom is love.

Jesus spoke to people where they were, using language they knew.

It’s the same way today. Jesus calls us to follow and invite others to come and see who and what we are: real people with real faith.

- Jesus calls bakers to bake for people.
- Jesus calls car salespeople to sell for people.
- Jesus calls caregivers to heal people for Jesus.
- Jesus calls those in information technology to use technology to help people be connected to Jesus.
- Jesus calls retired persons to show others how to live for Jesus.
- Jesus calls all who are in service to serve people for Jesus.

Everyone has a way they can follow Jesus and care for others.

How is Jesus calling you? There are many ways you can use your gifts, skills, experience and personality to invite others to know Jesus in a way that gives life. It’s as simple as making a friend.

Where does the invitation lead? Jesus wants all of us to hear his call, respond and find true life. That means following him on the path he shows us. It means being in a relationship with him and with others who join us on the journey. We aren’t made to be alone, left to suffer or be in

pain without hope. Jesus came to give us life. Through him, every aspect of our lives is made better.

How do we call other people? We invite, connect and engage with people. We invite people to be in relationship with us. We invite friends, family and neighbors to be part of our lives and activities, inside and outside church. Everyone is welcome to come and participate.

It’s not hard. You just have to show people you care.

There is one thing I want to set straight. There’s a myth we need to debunk. It’s the myth I call “believe or fail.” It stands on the premise there’s only one decision to make and one chance to make it. If we invite people to a small group or event or activity with the purpose of asking them to become a believer, we’re setting ourselves and that person up for failure. It puts the wrong emphasis on that moment. It makes conversion the basis for our invitation, rather than relationship. Life in God’s kingdom is about relationship!

The reality is every one of us makes decisions to follow Jesus (or not) every single day! Some days we’re ready to care for others, for all that relationship requires. We’re filled with confidence and hope. Other days we’re not sure we want to get out of bed, much less face the challenges some relationships bring. On those days, our self-esteem is low, anxiety is high and we’re filled with doubts. We go from decision to decision every day. Sometimes we choose the path of spiritual light and life. Other times we choose the path of spiritual darkness, self-interest and death. All that matters is that we end up choosing Jesus.

There’s something to keep in mind when you choose: Jesus’ love is unconditional. Jesus loves us on those days when we’re ready to take on the world. And Jesus loves us just as much on those days when we struggle to get from moment to moment. Even when we don’t want to admit who Jesus is and what he means, Jesus loves us.

Because Jesus loves us, Jesus forgives. The words of John 3:17 say it, “*For God didn’t send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved.*” All you have to do is hear his invitation and say “yes.” It makes a difference. Divine love is the only kind of love that can hold up under the trials of life. Divine love is the

only kind of love that calls to us before we even know who Jesus is or why that’s important. Divine love is the only kind of love that can overcome death, carrying us into eternity with all those who have loved us. Jesus makes all aspects of our lives better, here and now, and for all of eternity.

I don’t know about you, but I think that’s an invitation worth sharing.

Matthew 4:17-25 (CEB)

From that time Jesus began to announce, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!”

As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” he said, “and I’ll show you how to fish for people.” Right away, they left their nets and followed him. Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread throughout Syria. People brought to him all those who had various kinds of diseases, those in pain, those possessed by demons, those with epilepsy, and those who were paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from the areas beyond the Jordan River.

Acts 2:38-41 (CEB)

Peter replied, “Change your hearts and lives. Each of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, your children, and for all who are far away - as many as the Lord our God invites.” With many other words he testified to them and encouraged them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” Those who accepted Peter’s message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day.