

A Special Invitation

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Mark 1: 16-20

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Luke 17: 11-17

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they. Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except for this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

About eight weeks ago, Lee Gross from the Board of Deacons approached me after service and asked whether I might be interested in giving this morning’s sermon, because our senior minister, Art Ritter, was scheduled to attend a special anniversary service at Pine Hill Congregational Church, where he was called to serve early in his ministry. In asking me to fill in for Art, Lee was actually extending an invitation. He was inviting me to lead the service and share some meaningful thoughts about matters of our Christian faith, hopefully without offending anyone.

During our daily lives we receive all kinds of invitations. When we turn on the TV at night or on the weekend, there’s a little green gecko inviting us to save 15% on our car insurance. Every week, it seems, there’s a letter in our mailbox addressed to anyone, everyone, and no one in particular, inviting the recipient to apply for a new credit card. And when we use the drive-thru window at a MacDonald’s or Burger King, before we complete our order we’re automatically and inevitably invited to “super size it.”

Some invitations are instantly perceived favorably, like “would you like to go with me to the MSU game?” While others perhaps not, like “would you like to go with me to the U of M game?”

Then there’s a category for invitations that are special. By special, I mean invitations that really stand out above most others. These are invitations that have great meaning in our personal lives, frequently involving family members or close friends, like graduations, weddings, or significant birthdays or anniversaries.

Denise and I recently received a special invitation to the wedding of her nephew, Michael, in Kansas City. This is a special invitation, because Michael is the first of our nephews and nieces to get married. We’ll get to see all four of Denise’s brothers at the same time, which is something that hasn’t happened in a while. I’ll have the chance to remind our nieces and nephews of something I unabashedly proclaim every time I see them - “Uncle Steve Is Great!” I’ll also be able to let them know that if they ever need any advice they can reach me through my email address, which is unclesteveisgreat at yahoo.com.

In addition to significant personal meaning, special invitations are commonly associated with several things that are traditionally a matter of custom. The first is an RSVP, or commitment, to accept the invitation and attend a function or participate in what may involve a celebration. The second is a gift; it may be a gift to invitees, a person being celebrated, the person who extended the invitation, or gifts to everyone, but there’s usually a gift involved somewhere. And the third thing is an expression of thanks; thanks for the invitation, thanks for the gift, and thanks for everything else.

When preparing for today’s sermon, using Bible internet reference sites, I was unable to find the specific word invitation in the Bible, although I did find the word invite. Nevertheless, we all know that invitations, and all associated matters, certainly appear in the Bible.

The first scripture reading this morning was from the Book of Mark, where there is an example of a special invitation extended by Jesus. It references an early period in Jesus’ ministry, after he was baptized by John and spent 40 days in the wilderness. Jesus then went to Galilee to proclaim the good news of God, where he encountered four fishermen to whom he extended an invitation; ***“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”***

What happened next was then quite amazing. All four of the men immediately stopped what they were doing to follow Jesus and become his disciples. They all must have believed that Jesus’ invitation was a special one, because the commitment involved in accepting it was so burdensome and absolute. It required them to leave their families, their homes, their jobs and to undertake a whole new direction with someone they probably had only just met for the first time.

As amazing as Jesus’ special invitation was in the Book of Mark, it’s not the best example of a special invitation in the Bible. The most striking example of a special invitation is recounted in John 3:16, which states: ***“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”***

John 3:16 is a single sentence, containing only 26 words, that extends an unqualified open-ended invitation to anyone in the world, anywhere in the world, to believe God. Those

who accept this invitation by committing to a sincere belief in God receive a gift. That gift is eternal life, which is received after an initial gift was already given. The initial gift, as we all know from the very same passage, was God's only son, Jesus.

The invitation reflected in John 3:16 was probably the most special invitation ever extended not only because of who extended it, but because of the unique nature of both the gift promised and the commitment involved.

The second scripture reading this morning, from the Book of Luke, touches on the commitment attendant God's special invitation to all of us. This passage recounts a time when Jesus was traveling between Samaria and Galilee on his way to Jerusalem and he was approached by a group of ten lepers who called out to him for mercy. Jesus cured all in the group of their physical affliction and directed them to show themselves to the priests, as an example and affirmation of the power and glory of God. On being healed, nine of the group went on their way, while only one, a Samaritan, turned back to praise and thank God and Jesus.

When only the Samaritan returned, Jesus reacted by asking: ***“Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they. Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except for this foreigner?”*** Then he said to him, ***“Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”***

From this we learn that “spiritual wellness” is not something reserved for select individuals or groups – anyone and everyone is invited. We also learn that spiritual wellness involves significantly more than a physical transformation. Fundamentally, our spiritual wellness is a matter of faith, which encompasses being sincerely thankful, and expressing that thanks in a meaningful way.

The thankfulness aspect of our faith, touched on in our reading from Luke, is something that we, as Christians, always have the opportunity to fulfill through stewardship. Unfortunately, when the word stewardship is spoken in our Church and others, thankfulness is not always the first thing that comes to the mind of many who hear it. Instead, the first thing associated with stewardship is money and budgeting. This is unfortunate, because it diminishes what stewardship actually is, and it affects how meaningful our expression of faith may seem compared to what it actually can be.

In his message on the front page of the October Meadowbrook Messenger, Reverend Ritter makes a notable effort to remind us all that stewardship is about more than budgets and money. Stewardship is about our relationship with God and with our local church. It is about commitment, but less a commitment of money and more a commitment of faith. Our stewardship defines who we are in relationship to God.

Stewardship questions are questions of purpose. Where is God leading? What has God provided? How do I respond to God's blessing? What does my faith in God say about my stewardship? What does my stewardship say about my faith in God? What does my stewardship say about my relationship to the church and its ministry?

Two of my favorite TV shows – which air Monday nights on the History Channel – are American Pickers and Pawn Stars. American Pickers is about two men who travel the country

side looking to buy hidden gems in junkyards, basements, garages and barns, seeking to transform one person's trash into another person's treasure. Pawn Stars is about a pawn shop on the outskirts of Las Vegas, jointly run as a family business by a grandfather, son and grandson, who buy and sell items from the commonplace to the truly historic.

Both shows involve appraisals and monetary values assigned to personal items by both owners and prospective purchasers. And one recurrent theme is that people commonly overvalue many of their collected possessions only to become disappointed when they try to sell and discover that they can't get nearly what they thought their things were worth. It also inevitably seems that many of the possessions people have expended so much time, energy and money collecting don't merit nearly the attention and value they've been given.

Reverend Ritter concludes his message in the October Messenger with an invitation to attend a class he is teaching this month about stewardship and defining who we are. Through this invitation Art is offering us all an opportunity to better understand that thankfulness and stewardship are interdependent components of our spiritual wellness, and that both necessarily relate to our purpose in serving God and how we respond to God's blessings.

It's an invitation for us to seriously consider how we value things, what is truly meaningful, and how we manage meaningful and important things compared with the other things in our lives. It's also an invitation for each of us to develop a better understanding of our relationship with God; whether our actions are consistent with our purpose in serving God; and who we are as Christians.

On serious reflection, we all probably can agree that the things Art has invited us to learn and think about are pretty important. And if Art's invitation accomplishes its intended purpose - which is the gift it purports to bestow - it will be a special invitation indeed.

But in the end, we all individually determine how special the invitation actually becomes, through our actions, through our commitment, and whether we ultimately endeavor to accept it.

Amen.