

The Three Ms of Invitation
1 Thessalonians 2:1-13
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We are not in Iraq. You don't have to worry about whether an invitation to church will sound like an invitation to suicide. We are not in Iran or North Korea, or other places where inviting people to church might land you in jail. No, we are in Costa Rica, where there is no hiding from religion even if you wanted to. It's easy here in Costa Rica, church is Pura Vida, we are a casual, low-key, no pressure kind of place. This place should be bursting at the seams next Sunday.

Last Sunday we looked at the invitations made by Andrew and Philip to Simon Peter and Nathanael, that led them to meet Jesus and begin to see some of the "greater things." And we saw, at least from Jesus' point of view, that these greater things, up to and including angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, are the reason to follow him, since seeing them means you are seeking the kingdom. And we remembered that although Jesus didn't start a church, he did create a community, and it is to that community that we invite people because their best possibilities for seeking the kingdom are found here. I hope that episode inspired you to make some invitations this week.

I suspect that it was the search for greater things that also led the Apostle Paul to the city of Thessalonica, and into the synagogue there for three weeks trying to help the citizens of that city to recognize those same greater things. Apparently, he succeeded quite well, and so tonight we'll be taking a look at how

Paul approached that task, not only because it adds something to our invitational toolbox, but also because Paul's experience is perhaps a bit more like our own. Jesus wasn't in Thessalonica for Paul to send his friends to meet the Lamb of God, and Jesus isn't hanging out in Escazú waiting for us to send ours over either. And so we might wonder what Paul had learned about preaching the Gospel in the days since John the Baptist got the ball rolling by sending Andrew on over to meet Jesus.

I should say first of all that Paul had more than just an Invite-A-Friend Sunday on his agenda. His plan was to start a church from scratch, to gather together people who would be willing to go deep into the mystery of Christ and God's grace, and whose starting point was almost complete ignorance about the story of Israel and Jesus. There was no church to send them to to learn all that. It was him and some companions, like Silas and Timothy, who sat down with willing or curious people and patiently explained it all from beginning to end, from Jew to Gentile, from ignorance to glory. Let's be clear that no one is expecting you to do all that with your friends by next Sunday! You can give it a try if the circumstances seem right, but we are blessed with a church community that is charged with doing what Paul and his team undertook. All we need you to do is get people here so they can start their journey towards experiencing those greater things.

Our passage from First Thessalonians is not part of a handbook for church growth. It is actually just Paul making a case for how and why he is different than the Philosophers of his day who used some heavy-handed and egotistical tactics to

try to gain followers. You have probably heard about the most prominent groups, like the Cynic and the Stoics, but there were others as well, and of course, there were also a hundred and one religions vying for attention in addition to the philosophies. There was a lot of noise to cut through, a lot of people with dubious agendas and moneymaking schemes. And so when Paul reminds them that “we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext of greed,” he is making reference to the others around him who did bring their message by trying to butter people up, or to shake them down. He reminds them too that he was no burden on them, that he worked as hard as anyone else and didn’t live off anyone else’s labors, like more unscrupulous people might. And he reminds them that he truly cared for them, not just to get the job done, like a nursemaid might do for her employer, but like a nursemaid caring for her own children.

People have wondered since the beginning why Paul felt the need to do this, to remind the Thessalonians of his modus operandi. Some say Paul is defending himself against charges that he really is just like them, that some outside the church were accusing him of being just another conman out for their money. Others say he is simply using the Philosophers as a foil, as straw men, for reminding the Thessalonians of the way they came to faith, to make sure they know how his God is different than other so-called gods or philosophies. Whatever the reason may be, it is a good thing he did, and that it was preserved, since it gives us some clues about how we might approach the task of sharing our good news.

You don't have to read too many different commentaries to find some commonalities among those who have analyzed Paul's words. You find them saying how in this chapter, Paul is providing the three Ms of evangelism, the means, the method, and the motive. He speaks pretty clearly of each, that his means were by urging and encouraging and pleading, not quite begging but clearly showing that this was something to be taken seriously, life and death stuff, not just some suggestions for how to live a stress-free life, but how this Jesus guy was worth following even if proclaiming him meant being of the receiving end of some shameful mistreatment. He appeals to them by reminding them of what he went through on his first visit there, how they tried to run him out of town and poor old Jason got the worst of it. You can find that story in Acts 17. Paul's life led to his choice of his means, honorable ones from his own experience rather than questionable ones used to manipulate. There was no bait and switch, that old trick in retailing in which customers are "baited" with advertised products or services at a low price, but when customers visit the store, they discover that the advertised goods are not available, or the customers are pressured by sales people to consider similar, but higher priced items. Paul probably told them the exact opposite. Listen, if you hang out with me, you might end up a little bruised. But it's worth it. What are your means when you invite others? An honest expression of your own experience at ECF or with a bait and switch? Now, I must admit that I have used the Chili Fellowship Dinner which we will have after the service as a manipulative

ploy but it's not really a bait and switch, right? I mean, I've tasted your cooking and I can testify. I know you won't let me down next Sunday. But really, I tell people about the dinner because it offers a way to talk about the fellowship we share together as a church and how meaningful it is in a world starved for genuine relationships.

The second M is the method. Paul's methods must have been refreshing to the Thessalonians, as he and his companions simply shared themselves in all the holiness God had given them. Listen again to what he says: "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves. You are witness, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers." In the hardscrabble world of Paul's day, such a way of being with other people must have really made an impression. It must have been clear that Paul and his companions weren't in it for themselves, that they saw nothing to gain beyond glory for God. They became friends with the Thessalonians. The word isn't used here but doesn't that sound like a good definition of a friend? Now, you and I have something of an advantage over Paul and Silas in that we are already friends of the people we might invite. We don't have to start from scratch in getting them to know and trust us, at least if we've been behaving with the same methods Paul employed. I hope in all your friendships that you care deeply and act honorably. And that will make the difference when you invite someone, for they will know that you are asking not

because there is some benefit for you, some finders fee, so to speak, but because there is a benefit for them.

The final M is for motive, the reason Paul does what he does. He states it pretty clearly when he says, “just as we have been entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts.” They are making their appeal, and sharing themselves, and acting honorably not to be liked, not to be popular, but because they are responding to the trust God has placed in them. They don’t care how unpopular they may be in the world’s eyes, as long as they are acceptable in God’s eyes. They are like John the Baptist who we looked at last week, who gave his disciples away. How does our passage tonight conclude? “We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.” They spoke so that God’s word could be heard, rather than their own words. No accolades needed here. Paul doesn’t give thanks for his success at preaching the gospel, but for their success at hearing it correctly. I hope these are our motives as well, and I hope you are inviting people not because I am requesting it of you, or because we have a few fewer seats filled around here these days, or because you want to be the person who brings the most invitees next Sunday. You’ll have to search your own hearts for your own reasons, and Paul motives are good ones to guide that search. It’s not like we’ll turn away anyone

you invite even if your motives are mixed. But it will be a little less likely that they will hear as clearly God's words as our words.

I mentioned earlier that Paul was up against Cynics and Stoics and other religions, and that helped define his approach. That's not our case however. We don't have Cynics and Stoics. We have skeptics and post-moderns. We don't have a bunch of other religions to compete with so much as we have indifference to contend with. And so, while I think those three Ms of Paul's time are still completely valid, let me briefly suggest three more Ms that might also serve us well in our own time. These are Mystery, Madness, and Mirth. By mystery, I mean recognizing that each of us encounters God in Christ in a unique way, and that there really is no "one size fits all" faith. This means that we need to give up our desire to have all the answers and instead lead people to encounter Christ on their own terms, at their own pace – not necessarily how we did, or how some formula suggests it should happen, but trusting that God is doing the leading and that it will come to fruition in God's mysterious timing. Our job is just to get that process underway.

With all due respect to those suffering from mental illness, I think we need to show a little madness in our evangelism. I use the word madness to mean our passion for doing what God has called each of us to do, taking the life of faith seriously enough to risk ridicule. I am talking about the kind of madness the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, noted about us Christians: "Look at whom they

worship. Look at this God whom they worship. How foolish and imbecilic to follow one who died, and then to claim that that death is victory! There is foolishness and there is foolishness. There is madness and there is madness, but to call death victory is the ultimate madness of all. This is a pathetic deity and he is followed by a pathetic people.” There is a certain group of people who look at our madness and see only what Nietzsche saw, but there are many others who long to become involved in our madness if only we would invite them. They long to have someone to stand alongside in battling injustice, or fighting poverty, or loving the unlovable, marks of madness we Christians bear. Yes, Mr. Nietzsche, there is madness and there is madness.

And let us not forget the power of mirth, the ability to take faith seriously without taking ourselves too seriously. There is power in laughter and sharing a meal and being silly together. There is power in joy. The great Roman Catholic theologian de Chardin once said, “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” And I think it is a contagious sign, one that draws people to it, and then to the God who is behind it, the wonderfully creative, graceful God who calls us into the kingdom of mirth and glory.

Means, method, and motive. Mystery, madness, and mirth. These are more, of course, than ways of inviting people to church on a particular Sunday. They are ways of living in the love of Jesus Christ that give witness to the power of God to do what we cannot do ourselves. You see, without God, our ends begin to justify

our means, our methods become our madness, our motives become mysterious, and our mirth remains buried within us. None of these ways of being reflect our Creator's love for us, or those we want to invite. "As you know," Paul writes in our chapter tonight, "As you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition." Go forth in that courage of God to live and invite and share your good news. Amen.