

Sitting Pat
Mark 9:30-37
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To An Empty Chair

So, you're wondering how that uncomfortable conversation might go with the person you really want to invite to church on Invite-A-Friend Sunday. Don't worry, you are not alone. According to statistics, a very small percentage of churchgoers have invited friends to church, and one of the reasons is discomfort with the prospect that the conversation might lead to an awkward rejection and negatively affect the friendship. And maybe that will happen to you. But I doubt it. I doubt it because I know what kind of people you are, and what kind of God you serve, and what kinds of friends you are likely to have, and that kind of friend isn't likely to be too offended if you raise the subject, and if they are, as we probably all tell our kids, if they are offended, they probably aren't very good friends after all.

But maybe you need a little more encouragement before you charge out there to fill the chairs of the church. And maybe it would help if you actually saw someone be invited and accept the invitation, so you could kind of see how it is supposed to go. Well, thanks be to Clint Eastwood, I think we can pull that off. Maybe you've heard by now about Clint's speech at the Republican National Convention last month, during which he spoke to an empty chair supposedly filled by President Obama. Well, he got a lot of applause for his speech. It seemed to work. So I thought I'd invite my friend Pat to join us, and that I could invite Pat to

ECF on October 7, and that you could all just kind of eavesdrop and take a few notes, and then go and do likewise.

Hey, Pat, I'd like to invite you to come to church with me next Sunday.

What do you say? Five in the afternoon.

Don't laugh. I'm serious, you know, church, God, that kind of stuff.

I know we don't usually talk about that kind of stuff, but you did know I went to church, right? Yeah, it's called ECF, Escazú Christian Fellowship.

So, you have heard of us! And no, we are not the Baptist's evening service. We've actually been in Escazú longer than they have, although we've never had our own building. Actually, that is one of the things people like best about our church, that we are able to concentrate on just being the church without worrying about paying for the church. I'm very proud that our church gives more than 20 percent of our budget to organizations in the community. We probably couldn't do that if we had to worry about a building.

No, we don't have a lot of rich people. In fact, we have a lot of missionaries, and other people who are just pretty middle class. Some days, I'm not actually sure how we are able to do it.

Well, no, our pastor doesn't beg for money *all* the time. But he does emphasize that our generosity has a lot to say about our faith. He even says that you should be wary of any church that doesn't ask you for money, because money

is a very spiritual issue. It's on almost every page of the Bible in one form or another.

Well, he is pretty amazing, that pastor of ours. Sure, I know him well. But enough about him. Do you think you can make it on Sunday?

That sounds like fun, but that is the cool thing about ECF. It meets in the evening so you can make it back from the beach in plenty of time.

That's very honest of you. There are some judgmental Christians out there but I don't think you'll find that at our place.

No, I'm not positive no one will comment on your hair, but hey, that's a risk I take every week too. But there's no dress code, that's for sure. Why one Sunday recently, the pastor showed up wearing raggedy clothes with paint all over them. We did think it was a little weird, but he made a good point, that God doesn't really care what's on the outside, but rather what's on the inside.

Well, that hasn't stopped *me* from being your friend.

I'm not *that* different.

Well, I think we're all hypocrites, don't you? I mean, in one way or another.

Well, if the church waited for everyone to get their act together, it would be a pretty long wait. You know, I read a pretty interesting story in the Bible the other day. Jesus was trying to teach his disciples about what was going to happen to them, that he was going to be arrested and tried and executed, but that he was also going to be raised from the dead. And it said that, "they did not understand what he

was saying and were afraid to ask him.” I thought that was pretty lame of the disciples. I mean they’d been hanging out with Jesus for years, and they still were as dense as they could be. And they were afraid of him! And so I thought, wow, if the disciples who like walked around with Jesus didn’t get it, maybe I’m not as much of a spiritual loser as I thought.

Well, that’s very kind of you, but there are days when I feel like I’m not really a very good disciple. Like I have no business asking anyone to come to church with me. But here’s the thing about that story, that even though his followers obviously weren’t listening, Jesus didn’t call them losers and just give up on them. He hung in there with them, and I kind of feel like God does that with me too. If what mattered was always having the right answer, we’d all fail the test eventually.

Well, sure, there are some very Biblically knowledgeable people at our church, but that’s not a requirement to come! We actually have a great mission statement we use to describe ourselves. We like to say we are the “heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ in Costa Rica’s English-speaking community.” And there’s nothing in there about knowing the Bible backwards and forwards.

No, you wouldn’t have to memorize any Scripture to come. But if you want to say you’ve memorized a verse, just in case, just repeat after me: “Jesus wept.” Shortest verse in the Bible, John 11:35.

You know there's something else about that story that really struck me. After it says they didn't understand and that they were afraid to ask him, it says that he busted the disciples after they went ahead and argued amongst themselves about who was the greatest among them.

I don't know! Isn't that weird? I mean they just demonstrated that they didn't really get it! Maybe it was about who was the best with the sword to defend Jesus. Or maybe who would be the bravest and take over if he really did die. But whatever it was, it must have been so contrary to everything Jesus was about. I mean, I would have been really upset. All that time telling them about what is really important in life, and that is the best they can do? But again, here is what is really cool about Jesus. He didn't ditch them at that point either. Instead, he made a teachable moment out of it, and he called over a child, like the lowest of the low in those days and he said, look (you bozos), this is where it's at. This kid. If you want to be great, treat this kid great. The way he put it was, "Whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all."

Yes, that is one of those stumbling blocks about Christianity, isn't it? I mean who lives like that? But you know what, that's what keeps me coming back. I just know it's true, and just ignoring it won't make it go away.

Yeah, I've seen that stuff on Facebook too. My favorite was that awesome description about Christianity. I memorized it because it was so hilarious. "The belief that a cosmic Jewish Zombie who was his own father can make you live

forever if you symbolically eat his flesh and telepathically tell him you accept him as your master, so he can remove an evil force from your soul that is present in humanity because a rib woman was convinced by a talking snake to eat from a magical tree . . . yeah, makes perfect sense.” From the outside looking in, some of the stuff we believe in sounds a little wacko, I know.

No, he wasn't a zombie. Stop.

No, we are not cannibals. Stop! But you should know that on October 7, when I would like you to come, we will be having communion. Do you know what that is?

Well, it is when we remember what Jesus did for his disciples, and for us. We eat bread and drink grape juice (and sometimes even real wine, but don't tell the Baptists) remembering just what Jesus told his disciples in that story I was telling you, that he died and was raised, and maybe most important of all, that he doesn't give up on us when we give up on him. That God's love doesn't depend on us.

What's love got to do with it? I don't know, I think it has everything to do with it. I've heard people say that there are too many rules in the church, too many things you say you have to believe in, too many words with too many syllables that nobody even knows what they mean. And maybe that's all true. But that couldn't keep me away from church. Because that's where I go to learn about love.

Yes, I do love big words with lots of syllables, but so what? It's not going to get me very far talking about doctrines like predestination, prevenient grace, original sin, substitutionary atonement, the theology of praxis, transubstantiation, consubstantiation, intinction, immersion, imago dei? I barely know what those things mean, and neither do too many people who come to church. But that's totally OK. God isn't looking for experts on the theories of grace. God is looking for people open to learning the art of practicing grace like Jesus did when he taught the disciples rather than chastising them for arguing. And I see that in you. If you want to learn the doctrines, fine. But most people need to start with experiencing love, and that's what I love most about my church, that we really love one another. Does that sound like something you could use more of in your life, Pat?

I'm going to leave Pat's answer hanging out there, because Pat's answer doesn't really matter. What matters is the conversation. What matters is the risk you take. You can't control the outcome, but you can control the input. You can't force your friends to come to church, but you can tell them why you come to church.

Maybe you've had the experience of trying to argue someone into believing in Jesus, in trying to help them see the truth of Scripture, and the necessity of salvation. I used to do that once upon a time. And I wasn't very good at it, or at least the results suggested that I wasn't very good at it because no one ever

responded the way I wanted them too. I've had a lot more "success" simply inviting people to experience the Gospel as it is mediated through the church, through us, through the story of fallible disciples and our hypocrisy, through our mistakes, and through our crazy doctrines from the fourth century, but most of all, through our love. Yes, Christianity *is* hard to believe. But it is a lot easier to experience, and that is what you are inviting people to do on October 7, to experience the grace of Jesus Christ. They may say no. They may only come once. They may become fixtures here at ECF and be the ones who celebrate the 50th anniversary of this church. But no matter how they respond, you will have exhibited the grace of God. You will have done what Jesus did when he took that child into his arms. And you will have done what he told the disciples when he said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." You will have loved. And love conquers all. May the perfect love that drives out fear give you a fearless heart to share that perfect love with your friends. Amen.