**“Come and See”**

During the past month, Gary and I have spent time outlining the four key areas of focus that we hope to pursue with you during our time together. We have talked about the importance of vital worship, engaging the community, disciple making small groups and service to others. These are the areas in which we want to “drill down” and develop a specific plan of implementation. It will be exciting to discover the ways in which this plan might take shape and find direction. Before going any further this morning, I wanted to give you an opportunity to share any thoughts, ideas or questions that this overview has prompted in your own thinking. Is there any area that especially excites you? One that challenges you? Perhaps an area that confuses you? **(Congregational Conversation)**

There is, however, yet another focus that we dare not overlook, a focus that really goes hand in glove with each of these areas that we have spoken about. It is the area of what I would simply call, **INVITATION.** If we truly want to be a vital and growing congregation—and there is no reason that we can’t be—we must be willing to invite others to share in what we are discovering together.

Now, I realize that this may sound simple enough, but, in reality, it is not. For a number of reasons, many people who attend church on a regular basis, find it difficult to invite those outside the church to join them for Sunday morning worship or, perhaps, for a Tuesday evening social event sponsored by the church. If you ask them why, they will likely tell you that they don’t want to be seen as pushy or overly religious in sharing their faith experience with others. Fair enough. I respect their desire not to be one of “those” Christians who coerce or manipulate others against their will.

“Those Christians,” of course, have too often left a bad taste in the mouths of those that they are trying desperately to convert. I remember running a marathon in my seminary days. I was staggering through the last leg of this twenty-six mile journey when a street corner evangelist suddenly appeared and thrust a tract into my hands while wanting to talk to me about the four spiritual laws! Needless to say, I wasn’t exactly interested!

So, I can understand why people don’t want to be lumped into the same category with those who aggressively seek to convert others to their brand of faith while ignoring the need to respect their needs and desires. Believe me—I get it!

But what I don’t get is the utter reluctance to even consider extending an invitation to a friend, family member or colleague who just might have an interest in what the church has to offer.

**Doug Anderson**, a United Methodist pastor and Consultant, has pointed out that the average United Methodist today invites someone else to attend worship with them on the average of once every 37 years!

When this stunning information was shared at a conference that I attended, someone blurted out, **“Well, that gives me a couple of more years!”**

We may laugh at this person’s quick wit, but the underlying reality is no laughing matter. The fact is that many people are simply not comfortable sharing their faith in any context and that, I believe, is a problem, a big problem for the future of the church. It doesn’t take a mathematician to calculate that, in the wake of a continuing decline in worship attendance in many churches and in light of our culture’s tangible suspicion of “organized religion,” we must find a genuine way of sharing our experience of faith with others or we won’t have a future to plan for.

What we need then, is to find our **authentic voice;** that is, the voice that is truly ours, the voice that reflects our understanding of our faith while choosing to respect the thoughts and feelings of others. There is no need for coercion or manipulation, just a willingness to share the meaning and the joy that we have discovered. It was D.T. Niles, the great evangelist, who once defined the choice to share one’s faith as **“Nothing more than one** **beggar telling another where to find bread.”** That pretty much says it all.

**In our lesson from John’s gospel, we read of his account of the calling of the disciples**. You will notice that this is a somewhat different account from those offered in the Gospel of Matthew, Mark and Luke. In John’s account, there is no mention of fishing or nets or the Sea of Galilee. Instead, it is John the Baptist who identifies Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” Two of the Baptizer’s disciples then follow after Jesus. When Jesus sees them following, he asks a simple question: **“What are you looking for?”**

Without hesitation, they answer, **“Rabbi, where are you staying?”** This question would indicate that their intended conversation would be one that would take some time. “Where are you staying?”

Jesus then replied, **“Come and see.”** Notice, if you will, that he didn’t hand them a theological tract. He didn’t tell them that they had all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. He didn’t try to explain the four spiritual laws. No, he didn’t do any of that. He simply said, **“Come and see.”**

Three little words that would, in time, start a chain reaction of invitation that would launch a movement. It so happened that one of these two disciples of John the Baptist was Andrew who happened to have a brother by the name of Simon. When Andrew found Simon, he couldn’t restrain his excitement. “We have found the Messiah!” Andrew then brought Simon to meet Jesus and Jesus promptly gave Simon a new name—that of Cephas or Peter—meaning “the rock” upon which he would build his church. And the rest is history!

Notice, if you will, that there is no coercion or manipulation here—only the simple invitation to “check it out” and see for themselves.

It’s been said that our task, as followers of Jesus, is not to convince or to convict, but to convey. That’s it! Our task is to simply convey what we have experienced and allow that to be our invitation. Nothing more is needed.

While serving as the Chaplain at Yale University, William Sloan Coffin addressed some of the faculty members who had been quite vocal in their skepticism and doubt about religion. He said to them, “I can see doubting the quality of the bread, but I can’t see kidding yourselves that you’re not hungry.”

One of the great ironies of our time is that there are some who have voiced their skepticism and doubt about organized religion are, themselves, spiritually hungry. I would venture so far as to suggest that despite its disenchantment with the church, ours is a culture that is spiritually famished. People are looking for a meaning and a purpose, a joy and fulfillment that they simply aren’t finding in all their accumulation of stuff. They are looking for bread that will nourish and sustain them. And it is our opportunity to share with them, as one beggar to another, where to find this bread.

As important as our individual witness is, as important as our personal invitation may be, it is also important to recognize that there is another witness that matters, another invitation that is essential. And that invitation is one that comes not from individual people, but from the congregations made up of those individual people. Indeed, there is a very important witness that takes place every Sunday morning when we gather and certainly, at other times as well.

In a magazine article, **Ronald Scates** asks, **“Ever wonder what is the #1 reason why visitors return to a congregation that they have attended and eventually become members?” He then points to the results of a survey taken in 26 mainline congregations, suggesting that the #1 reason is that “the congregation acts like it really believes Jesus is alive through a 'collective effervescence' that pervades everything that is done.”**

What would a first-time visitor to our congregation say if we were to interview them about their worship experience with us? Would they say that they could sense that the Spirit of God is alive in the ways that we worship and the ways that we welcome? Would they say that we act like Jesus is alive through the **collective effervescence** of our witness?

I hope so. I hope and pray that they sense in the witness that we offer each Sunday morning that the Spirit of God is at work in our life together and that by God’s grace, we are growing, changing, becoming the people that God is calling us to become.

This, of course, is not to suggest that we have already arrived or that we have already reached our goal. That is simply not the case. But, by the grace of God, I believe that we can honestly say that we are on our way, that we are in the process of shaping our witness in ways that give powerful testimony to what the love of God has done and is doing in our lives—both as individuals and as a congregation. I believe that there is a collective effervescence that is stirring within us. Our task, quite simply, is to fan it into flame.

I conclude this morning with a simple homework assignment. I want to invite you to invite! During the next four weeks, Gary and I will share in a four-part series of messages entitled, **“Faith in Film.”** In the course of this series, we will be considering the witness of faith in certain well-known films**: The Lion King, Forest Gump, The Hunchback of Notre Dame and ‘The Hurricane.”** We think that this will be a fun and creative way of considering the ways in which some of the great themes of faith are woven into the script of some of our most popular films. We also think that this will provide an excellent opportunity for you to invite a friend, family member or colleague to attend worship with you. Given our world of social media options, you can use Facebook or Twitter or Email or you can text your invitation. If you are feeling really bold, you might actually call someone on the phone or, if you want to be old fashioned, simply invite them in person.

The fact is that we are a congregation with something to offer and it’s time that we offer it to others—without hesitation or apology. God is doing a new thing and we simply want to invite others to experience this good news. Besides, I really don’t think that we can afford to wait for another 37 years before we work up the courage to simply say, “Come and see!”

**Amen!**