

SERMON TITLE: "A Compelling Invitation"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 14:12-23
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 4, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

My husband Steve and I had a nice week of vacation. We went to western Oregon to see Steve's mom, who is 90 years old. We enjoyed our visit with her and got some chores done to help her. On our way back, we stopped in Boise to visit my uncle, who is soon to be 93. Uncle Fred wanted to take us out for lunch, but he isn't driving much anymore. Of course, we could have driven, but Uncle Fred had already made another arrangement. With a twinkle in his eye, he explained that he had asked his 85-year old lady friend to drive us. Fred had told Hope that if she would drive him to his morning doctor appointment and then all of us to the restaurant, then he would buy her lunch. Hope agreed to the plan, so I guess Uncle Fred must have made a compelling invitation.

Next Sunday is our fall kickoff day. In anticipation of the startup of new ministry programs, I thought it would be good for us to consider today why and how we might go about inviting folks to participate with us. Like Easter, Christmas, and the beginning of a new year, September is a time when people are more open to the church and starting new routines in their lives. Summer may have taken us every which way with vacation, family visits, class reunions, and weekend outings. But, in September, kids are going back to school with all the excitement of starting a new grade, and even older folks are signing up for social and recreational opportunities. As this new school-year season begins, the idea of settling down and getting involved in a church seems more possible for many people. So, let's look closely at our scripture passage from Luke 14 and see how we might make a compelling invitation.

1—WHY DO WE INVITE?

If we are going to make a compelling invitation, the first thing question we need to ask is, "Why do we invite?" In verse 12, Jesus teaches that the reason we invite shouldn't be just so we satisfy our

own desires to be invited back by someone else. Reciprocity and the ability to share equally may be a good feature of a friendship with family or neighbors. But, we who have resources shouldn't just keep them among ourselves, says Jesus. We also have an obligation to share them with people who don't have resources. We have an obligation to invite those who are in need. So, says Jesus, we are to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

Jesus was speaking directly about banquets and dinners, of course. But, in the scriptures, food is almost always a metaphor or symbol for spiritual nourishment. So, we might understand Jesus here to be saying, "Don't invite active Lutherans, Baptists, and Mormons to come with you to church, because they already have spiritual resources, and they would be inclined to reciprocate and invite you to visit their churches. Instead, invite those persons who are lacking in spiritual resources. Invite people who don't already go to church. Invite people who are in need of spiritual nourishment."

In times past, a strong motivation for Christians to invite was the belief that people outside the church were lost and going to hell. You might not feel *comfortable* inviting people to come to church or to believe in Jesus, but you'd do it because you certainly didn't want their soul to be damned eternally. You wouldn't want that guilt on your shoulders. Some Christians still believe this way today, and thus are motivated to try to rescue the perishing. But I have a hunch that most United Methodists don't believe in hell very much. We don't really think that God is going to send anybody to an actual place of hot flames and eternal suffering. And neither do the people we invite. Consequently, if we invite with only a get-out-of-hell-free card in mind, we don't come across as very genuine. Our invitations aren't very compelling.

The motivation that would be more authentic for most of us is our very own personal and positive experience of how our faith has helped us. When we think about what wonderful things our church and our belief in God do for us, it's easy to believe that others could benefit also. So, I've made a

list and included it in the bulletin today. This is a list of the positive blessings of coming to our church and putting our faith in Jesus. How about if you read it in unison with me?

- We enjoy the music.
- We are encouraged by the prayers.
- We are strengthened by God.
- We are guided by scripture.
- We are challenged by sermons.
- We are supported by Christian friends.
- We are cleansed by forgiveness.
- We are re-directed by following the way of Christ.
- We are welcomed into a community of faith.
- We are empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- We are held accountable by Christian brothers and sisters.
- We feel safe.
- We feel at peace.
- We feel spiritually OK.
- We participate in meaningful activity.
- We help others.
- We fund worthy projects.
- We grow in our understanding of God.
- We are turned away from dangerous habits.
- We are turned toward habits that are healing and hopeful.
- We develop our talents.
- We express our gifts.
- We are stretched to appreciate and stand up for people who are different from ourselves.
- We are encouraged by people who are on the same faith journey as we are.
- We have fun.
- We connect with God.
- We find mercy in Jesus Christ.

Maybe these seem like small things to you. But they're not. Especially when you put the whole list together, these benefits of faith and church participation are huge. They're lifesaving. They're life giving. They're life rewarding. Whether you believe in eternal consequences or not, these are the kind of elements that rescue us from a living hell and bring heaven on earth. These are the benefits that make life worthwhile. These are the spiritual nutrients and delights that come in the banquet of the Lord. These are the blessings in our own experience that motivate us to make a compelling invitation.

2—WHOM SHOULD WE INVITE?

Once we have an authentic reason why we should invite, then it's easier to see whom we should invite. Jesus speaks twice about the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. We may know some of them in the material and physical sense. But we may also know some who are handicapped in the spiritual sense. They need hope. They need reassurance. They need comfort. They need a way to contribute and make a difference. They need meaning. They need inspiration. They need guidance. They need good people in their lives, who can encourage them to do and be better.

On the other side of that bulletin insert, you will see some inviting and welcoming strategies. Among those is the "FRAN Plan." F.R.A.N. stands for Friends, Relatives, Associates, and Neighbors. FRAN helps us consider all the people we know. When we think of our friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors, we need to be looking for those people who are hungry for the banquet of faith that we have ready for them. Lots of times I hear people say that everyone they know already goes to church. But I don't really think that can be true. I looked up some demographic information on the internet. It indicated that, in the Ogden area, about 60% of people are LDS, and the rest of us religious folks make up another 15%. But that leaves 25% of the population that has no declared religious affiliation. And maybe even some of those who have a declared affiliation aren't actively participating. So, yes, there are people out there who could be invited. Maybe they live next door to you. Maybe they repair your car. Maybe they check out your groceries. Maybe they're your grandkids.

I know, I know, you've probably already tried. And you didn't get a positive response. So you quit trying. But one thing Jesus' parable emphasizes is the need to keep trying. People go through seasons of life, and at times of change they are often more receptive than at times when everything is going along the same. So, just because you asked them once before doesn't mean you shouldn't ask that same person again.

Nor should you stop looking for other people to invite. In Jesus' parable, the invitation was made to a landowner, then to a guy who had five yoke of oxen, and then to someone who had just gotten married. The idea was that there are a lot of different people out there. If one person is too busy, try someone else. If another person is uninterested, then try yet another. Keep reaching out and inviting until you find those who are hungry for the spiritual food of Christ's great banquet. In Jesus' parable, the master instructs his servant to go out into the roads and lanes because that's where people would be found. Today, we might find people at work, in the building supply store, at exercise class, or at school. Some of us might find people through email or on Facebook or in the contacts list in our cell phone.

CONCLUSION

Most of you have heard me tell my story before, but I think it's worth telling again. When I was a kid, my family didn't go to church, read the Bible, or pray. We didn't talk about God or Jesus. Other than my parents and school teachers, I had no sense of a higher power who was able to give me strength or guide me in positive ways. I had no sense of mission or purpose beyond myself. But, in September of my sixth grade year, my school friend Kelly invited me to go to church with her. Her church was having a Sunday school contest where she could earn some rewards for bringing a friend. When I went with Kelly, I started earning rewards too, and that motivated me to return. That congregation very much believed that it was important to invite people into a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ, and they were more than willing to inspire 6th graders in a way we could understand and appreciate.

That invitation to church changed my life. Of course, there were a lot of other supportive elements and decisions along the way that kept me going and growing in faith. But the spiritual person and leader I am today is initially due to the fact that a congregation, a faithful church family, and a sixth grade girl took seriously Jesus' instruction to make a compelling invitation.

So, in this week leading up to our Kickoff Sunday, I encourage you to think, pray, and act. Whom can you invite? Who would benefit from coming to church? What will you say to that person that will motivate him or her? Will you offer to pick them up and bring them? Will you sit by them in worship? Will you assure them that you'll bring enough potluck food for all of you? Or, maybe you can bargain: If they'll come to church with you, then you'll help them with something they need to get done—or maybe you'll help them *before* they come to church with you. Be creative. Be motivated. Plan now to make a compelling invitation.