

Inviting
September 29, 2002
Background Study

This is the last week in the eight-week sermon series exploring our vision for St. Andrew, which is that we are “to invite people into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another through worshiping, learning, loving, and serving.” So far we’ve examined the invitation God extends to us all, the nature of our relationship with God as fully revealed in Jesus Christ, and our relationships with others in the community of faith. We’ve looked at our growth through worship, through learning, through loving, and through serving. This week, we’ll close the series by considering how we might invite others into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ and one another.

Key Scripture Passages – Matthew 28:16-20, NRSV – Jesus’ last words in Matthew’s gospel

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Acts 1:8, NRSV – Jesus’ last words to his disciples before his ascension

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The Great Commission

This week, we return to Jesus’ final commands to his disciples, sometimes called the Great Commission. These passages present us with the ongoing ministry of the church. Jesus commanded his disciples to go to “all nations,” Jew and non-Jew, making disciples of Jesus, baptizing them, and teaching them the path to obedience. The Christian church has always understood this commission to be our own. This commission is not limited to the New Testament. Israel understood that they were the people of God, chosen by God to be his agents, to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom the whole world would be blessed. (See Genesis 12:1-3, Isaiah 2:2-4, and Isaiah 42:6 for example).

The Book of Acts tells the story of how this commission was carried out in the first 30 years after Jesus. Jesus was crucified and resurrected in 30AD or so. About three years later, Saul, a zealous Pharisee who was present at the martyring of Stephen¹, was on his way to Damascus to round up more Christians. While on the road to Damascus, Saul was visited by Jesus, transformed, and would thereafter be known as Paul, the great missionary to the Gentiles². For the next thirty years, Paul traveled throughout the eastern Mediterranean founding new churches, making disciples, teaching and baptizing. The Book of Acts tells us how the invitation to follow Christ was taken by Paul and others to much of the Roman Empire, even to Rome itself.³ The people of God are charged with inviting everyone, in all places, at all times, to accept Jesus’ invitation and enter the covenant community of God’s people. As Jesus so neatly put it in his Sermon on the

¹ See the Background Study for September 15, “Growing . . . through Loving,” for more on Stephen.

² A gentile is anyone who is not Jewish. In the NT, the word “Greek” is sometimes used to denote anyone who is not Jewish.

³ Paul spent two years under house arrest in Rome in the early 60’s AD, where he preached from his house every day!

Mount, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16). We are to be that light, drawing the world to Jesus Christ.

Being the Light – Extending the Invitation

We know we are to be the light to the world but we are often unsure as to how to go about it! Sometimes we think it means we have to pull people out of their homes or stand on street corners passing out tracts. Sure, we ought to invite our neighbors to church with us and share the Good News with strangers, but the Biblical understanding of invitation, of being the light to the world, extends to every part of our lives. We invite when we worship, when we learn, when we love, when we care, when we serve, when we work, when we play – every part of our life is to be an invitation and a witness to others.

Let me give you one example. We often don’t think of our own worship as an act of evangelism or invitation. But, when a person who is not a churchgoer visits our worship service, they are looking for three things. They want to feel the presence of God. They want to see the Christian church living out its faith – kindness, love, patience, service to others, and so on. Finally, they want to see the relevance of the faith for their lives.⁴ Every Sunday, each of us, as a member of the St. Andrew community, is an important witness to the reality of Christ’s love and invitation to all persons. Just as sports heroes are unavoidably role models for our youth, we are always, in all times, and in all places, witnesses to the living reality and glory of Christ’s sacrificial love.

Peter understood this when he wrote to Christians suffering for their faith, “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles⁵ to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge” (1 Peter 2:11-12). Paul understood this when he wrote to the troubled church in Corinth, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1). Paul calls us to imitate Christ in all we do so that the glory of God will be visible to all and that all will be saved.

Again, what does it mean to be the light to the world? It means that we are to lift Jesus up for all the world to see, so that all the world might be drawn to him, enabling all the world to see his saving love. Because Jesus announced and inaugurated the arrival of God’s kingdom, we live in the “bright interval”⁶ between Easter and the final, great consummation of the story, the renewal of all creation and the “new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21:1) The early Christians found great joy because they understood that they lived not in the last days but in the first days of a new age! We live in such days as well and we should find such joy, a joy that will shine for all to see, drawing them in, inviting them to join us in the community of God’s servant people!!

⁴ This is from the survey and focus group research of George Barna.

⁵ For more on the “alien” status of Christians, see *Resident Aliens*, by Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, 1989, Abingdon Press. They offer a challenging vision of what it means to be a Christian community.

⁶ from N. T. Wright. *The Challenge of Jesus*. 1999. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 2:2-4 Out of Jerusalem will come the word of the Lord.</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 42:5-6 & 49:6 Israel (the people of God) is to be the light to the world.</p>
<p>Day 3 Acts 2 The Day of Pentecost and the growth of the first church in Jerusalem</p>	<p>Day 4 Acts 10 The conversion of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion; Paul invites Gentiles into the family of God</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 5:6-20 We are children of the light and we are to live accordingly.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

