



Saint John the Baptist Episcopal Church
The Rev. Michael Carroccino, Priest-in-charge

Rev. Carroccino's sermon for Sunday, July 26, 2015 – The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 2 Kings 4:42-44 ▪ Psalm 145:10-19 ▪ Ephesians 3:14-21 ▪ John 6:1-21

An Invitation

Some of you may have been at our diocesan convention in 2008 when Reverend Stephen Wendfeldt was the keynote speaker – on the theme of radical hospitality. He talked a lot about how churches unintentionally send the message, “Go Away!”; by having poor signage, or bad restrooms, or by not acknowledging people as they walked through the door – or not thanking them as they walked out. For the next few days, we had table discussions about the level of hospitality present in our various churches. Let me tell you – you have never seen people more defensive about the state of their church's bathrooms. Every conversation we had inevitably had to land for a time on someone justifying – yet again – the tiny bathroom with the pull-chain lightbulb tucked away under the organ pipes on the way to the parish hall as somehow inviting to the visitors who were expected to find it. But one thing that Stephen said really grabbed my attention. After talking for a few minutes about the church and its people – how we love great music and respect tradition and ritual and don't mind standing up and juggling a prayer book and a hymnal while still actively participating in worship – he said this: "there are no more episcopalians out there. You've already got them all!"

I've been to a lot of Episcopal churches in my time, and I've discerned a kind of pattern – a stereotypical experience – of what it is to visit a new church. The majority of Episcopalians are introverts, and nowhere is this more clear than at Coffee Hour. At each new church I've visited, there are greeters and ushers, there are clergy who generally make a point of seeking out the new face in the crowd and inviting us to fill out a visitor card and to stay after the service for coffee. I've never been snubbed at the Peace or skipped over at the Communion rail. In worship, we can be pretty open and accepting. But when I arrive as a visitor at Coffee Hour, at almost every church I've visited, there is a marked shift. Suddenly I have a generous bubble of personal space – about 12 feet in most cases; just enough to ensure that I always have an entire table to myself, and sometimes even the table beside it! My favorite part is what comes next. After sitting by myself for a time with the rest of the group gathered over on the other side of the room, they finally decide they're not being very welcoming – and we're a welcoming church, right? – and so they send over the token extravert to greet me and learn my story. They eagerly await his or her return, anxious to know more about this stranger in their midst.

Once I visited an old – and very established – church on the east coast, and it was the day of their annual parish picnic. Now my space bubble wasn't quite powerful enough to clear the food line, but sure enough – once my kids had their plates full and we surveyed the crowd – there was only one table left with enough seats to hold the four of us. And it was all ours. There was something different about this church, though: it had been growing in leaps and bounds over the past several years, almost doubling in size. Lonely coffee hours notwithstanding, they had taken on a new and different project: as a congregation they had agreed that each of them would invite a friend at least once a year. It changed their outlook, because now they were welcoming people they knew, and they were suddenly very conscious of the experience of coming into the church for the first time. Because they had time to think and be intentional in their invitations, they took it seriously: their invitations were direct, and their hope was apparent. There was no hard sell, no emotional pressure on the relationship – simply an invitation, a sharing of something they loved with a friend. The people gradually found that they began to live lives of invitation, they were always aware to who in their circle of influence would most appreciate and benefit from their invitation, aware of the invitations of others in the church and what kind of community they hoped to be.

In a way, Stephen's Wendfeldt's statement that there were no more Episcopalians out there is absolutely true. But the parish I visited had found a way through that particular challenge. There were still lots of friends out there, lots of people who need community, people who are looking for ways to express their grief and their gratitude. They didn't need a building with great signage and clean restrooms -- which is not to say those aren't valuable. They weren't looking for a coffee hour where total strangers would welcome them like family. They needed instead a place where they felt connected already to at least one other person, a place where they knew, not just that they were welcome, but that their presence was anticipated, that someone was waiting on them.

Almost every church I've visited has a welcome sign on it. "The Episcopal Church welcomes you" has become so ubiquitous that I don't even read the sign anymore. There's not a church in my experience that doesn't think of itself as a welcoming community - after all, they all feel welcome when they come, right? But what does welcome mean? I think it depends on whom you ask. Whatever your definition, welcome is a necessary part of greeting newcomers to a community. Welcome is great. Invitation is better.

Now invitation doesn't mean a flyer in the mail or a sandwich board on the street - helpful though those may be. Invitation doesn't even necessarily mean asking someone you know to accompany you to church. There's something I want to carve out of our definition about invitation. Up until about the last two or three generations, Christianity -- or, in this case, Christendom -- was more or less assumed of everyone in a community. In that world, church often became a competitive sport: we stopped at nothing to bring up our market share in a finite community where our best hope was to attract people from other churches. In that context, worship becomes an evangelical tool, a selling point for a denomination or congregation, a way to bring more people in the door. That world is fading fast all over the country, and probably already long-gone in the Pacific Northwest - and as I said in my first sermon here -- good riddance to it! So here's the point I'm trying to make: worship is not an evangelical exercise. Of everything we do as Christians, worship ought to be about the strangest one. After all, we come together every week to eat flesh and drink blood. If you don't already belong here, that is really odd if not outright disturbing.

We are no longer looking up and down the street trying to poach more Christians from the church down the road. We're in a culture where spirituality is judged more by results than attractiveness. It doesn't matter so much anymore if our music is grandiose or traditional or contemporary, if my sermons are relevant or comforting or theologically astute. What draws people's attention is a community that is honest, grounded, and effective - a group of people who know who they are and what they're up to, folks who are in touch with their callings because they are supporting one another to live them out.

All this to say, invitation is both simpler and more complex than you might think. It doesn't have to be a coordinated strategy, a community program, or a gimmick to get people just to walk through the doors. The doors to this place, after all, are at the heart of what we do, not the edge. Invitation is as easy as talking about what brings you life in this community. It's as complex as doing the work of prayer and discernment, of working out what forgiveness and reconciliation look like in your own life, of living out your calling in the world. It's in realizing that the sacrament has become your daily bread, that this place is on your side, that we all have your back in working out the darkest stuff and celebrating the best of our lives together, that this community, the body of Christ, is truly the bread of life. I am not interested in worship that fills the seats. I am looking for community that fills the heart. That's about as inviting as it gets.