

The Baptism Barrier – Unbinding Your Heart – week 1 – Jan 24, 2016

(this is an expanded version of the sermon that would have been preached this morning)

This week we begin a sermon series that is related to our whole congregation experience of Unbinding Your Heart.

Over this past week, 11 small groups have begun meeting together for prayer and conversation. This morning 3 small groups will begin their journey. Its exciting to know that there are 100 adults gathering in the small groups. Even our youth and children are participating in this experience as they gather in Sunday School and Youth Group.

And now, my sisters and brothers in Christ, everyone in the congregation will be participating in this study through our worship and this sermon series.

Through this whole congregation experience, we will be breaking down the barriers that keep us from sharing our faith with others, we'll deepen our prayer life and strengthen our relationships with God and each other, we'll develop our comfort and capacity to speak about who Jesus is to and for us, and we'll reach beyond our comfort zones as we become a congregation known for actively inviting others into the fellowship of God's people.

I love thinking about words and how we use them and what we might be communicating to others through them.

You might have noticed that we're moving away from the words "visitor" and "guest" to refer to those who are not yet part of the faith community of St. Philip. To me, both of these words communicate a message that says "you can visit if you want to but we don't want you to stay too long." I don't think this is exactly what we want to be communicating to those who are seeking a faith community.

Instead of calling someone a visitor or a guest, we're shifting to the word "newcomer." This is a word that describes more accurately the kind of relationship that we pray will develop with those who are exploring this faith community. By thinking of them as newcomers, we invite them to become a full participant in the life of this faith community. We make space for them to be active and involved. To settle in and become part of the faith community.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about the difference between "welcoming" and "inviting."

For a while we had the phrase “All are Welcome” on our website and in other documents. The hope was that by seeing this phrase, newcomers would feel comfortable walking through the doors. Being welcoming is good, we should be a welcoming congregation and many newcomers report that we do a pretty good job of welcoming others. But, my sisters and brothers, being welcoming is not enough! it’s passive. It means someone has to take the initiative themselves to show up before we can welcome them.

Inviting, on the other hand, means we’ve reached beyond our doors, probably beyond our comfort zones, and actually extended an invitation to someone. Being an inviting church means that we are actively and intentionally reaching out to others and sincerely inviting them to share in the faith community here at St. Philip.

Instead of using the phrase “all are welcome,” we are now using “there’s a place for you here!” The hope is that this phrase communicates that we are an inviting church, and that we value and appreciate the presence of each person who is part this faith community. To say that “there is a place for you here!” is to say that there’s room for you at the table and in the fellowship of St. Philip and that we look forward to your presence here.

I wonder. My sisters and brothers in Christ, do you think of yourself as an inviter? Sure its easy to invite someone to coffee or lunch. But are you an inviter for Jesus, someone who is willing to invite others into an encounter with the living Christ?

In the 2007 Issue of the Lutheran Magazine an article by the name “A Cure for Lutheran Laryngitis” appeared. In this article, the author David Daubert recalled that the average Lutheran invites someone to worship once every 23 years. Once every 23 years, really!?

Now there are people among us who are really good at inviting their friends and neighbors, even strangers, to worship at St. Philip. They go out of their way to invite and include others. Are you among this group or are you more shy, more hesitant to actually say the words “come and see.” To extend a direct and genuine invitation for someone to come and see how God is at work in and through this faith community and an invitation to partner with God and other disciples in this work.

Our readings for today, introduce us to two men named Philip, both were inviters for Jesus. One was the Apostle Philip whom Jesus called to follow him and who called to Nathaniel to “Come and See” – there’s someone I want you to meet!

The other was the deacon Philip who was led by an angel of the Lord to an encounter and conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch. The eunuch is an African man with an important job that came at a high price. He was unable to be married or have children. Religious law kept him from participating in worship services. Yet, somehow, he had heard of God and wanted to know more about God.

Here's someone who longs for an encounter with God but who bears deep wounds inflicted by the world . . . Someone who is not welcomed by traditional religion . . . Someone who looks successful but feels empty . . . Someone who is searching for God, someone who is longing for something more in life: for peace, forgiveness, love & acceptance Someone who needs to hear about God's love.

The Ethiopian man asked, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" It's a good question. For some people the obstacle to being baptized, to becoming a Christian, is simply that no one has ever told them about God.

I wonder if we are preventing people from hearing about God? ...about God's love? Are we constructing barriers between the gospel and the people who desperately need to hear it?

While serving in my previous congregation, a young mother and her 8-year-old daughter started coming to worship. I noticed that they did not come forward for Holy Communion so after a couple of weeks I assure the mom that they were welcome at the Lord's Table. Mom said, "that's not what your bulletin says. It says that only the baptized can receive Holy Communion and we are not baptized." Oh no! The language in our bulletin had made her feel uninvited to participate in one of the central aspects of worship. I apologized for making her feel less welcome and assured her that Jesus would meet her at the table whether they were baptized or not. Later that week, she and her daughter met with me to talk about what happens at Holy Communion and about baptism. They began communing the following Sunday and then were baptized on Easter Sunday.

In was in this experience that I realized that our language in the bulletin had created a barrier, a baptism barrier, between the gospel and the people who desperately need to hear, and touch, and taste the grace and mercy of God.

What barriers are we constructing?

- Is our fear that we might offend a barrier?
- Is our lack of confidence in ourselves a barrier?

Acts 8:26-37 and John 1:43-46

- Is our desire to give people their "space" about religion a barrier?

You know how tight lids on water bottles or jars can be sometimes? A rubberized jar gripper helps a lot. Can you imagine sitting there with one of them in your hand, keeping it to yourself, while someone, even someone you don't know, struggles to get to that water? Of course not! You would gladly share what you had to make things better for someone else. You wouldn't just keep it to yourself if someone needed it!

But this is often what the church does when we do not share the gospel with those in need. We sit with the keys to the waters of baptism in our hands. Meanwhile, neighbors around us are desperately thirsty to know that God loves them through Jesus.

We have a gift for you. It's a rubberized jar gripper with our logo and contact information on it. You're invited to take 2 with you this morning. Use one for yourself as a reminder that you have something that can make things better for someone else and that you are called to share it with others.



Use the second one as a tool for inviting someone to worship next Sunday. Consider it a conversation starter that will help you open the door to a conversation about the power of God at work in the faith community we love and know as St. Philip.

Late this past week, I had the opportunity to hear a presentation from the Rev. Dr. Kathryn Love, a pastor in the ELCA based in Chicago, on the topic of telling the gospel confidently. She said, *"God usually gets things done through people.... There's no more Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Esther, Ruth, Mary, Deborah. Those were the folks of old. But the church today is filled. There is a Moses in the house. There is a Deborah in the house. There is a Jeremiah in the house. God wants to shake you and use you so that others can get to know what is good. And if it is so good for you, shouldn't you tell somebody?"*

Shouldn't you tell somebody? It all begins with an invitation. It all begins with our willingness to meet someone where they are and to sit down beside them.

A family told me about one of the most memorable Christmases they ever had. It was the last Christmas they spent at their grandparents' house. The grandfather had a debilitating disease. Soon, they would move him to an assisted living center. It had been their family's tradition to gather around the Christmas tree and listen to the granddad read the Christmas story from

Acts 8:26-37 and John 1:43-46

Luke. This year, when Granddad tried to read, he could barely move his jaws. He just couldn't manage to speak the words aloud. The family sat there and watched him struggle. No one seemed to know what to do. Should they say something? Would it hurt his pride if someone helped him?

No one did anything for what seemed to be a very long time. But Emily, the 6-year-old granddaughter, had just learned to read. She knew exactly what to do. She quietly tiptoed over to his chair and snuggled in beside him. Then, taking his finger into her hand, she helped him point to each word, saying them out loud with him as they read along together:

"Unto you is born this day a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Philip asked the Ethiopian eunuch, "Do you know what you're reading?" The man nearly begged, "How can I unless someone guides me?"

So Phillip went and sat beside him.

Who will God lead you to sit beside?

Note: Red, heart shaped grippers like the one in the photo were to be distributed today as part of the sermon. Be sure to pick up 2 this coming Sunday: one for yourself and one to share with a friend. Use this as a way to open conversation and invite someone to "come and see."