

“PARTY PLANNING (#1): INVITATIONS”

(John 1:35-46)

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[PROPS: (#1) “The Pizza Evangelist” Video; (#2) “Evangelism: Here I Am, Lord, Send Me” Video; (#3) “Bless Your Neighbor Creative Ideas” Sheet for All Congregants]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 8-10-08]

–I–

1. Read Text: John 1:35-46 and Pray.

2. How many of you like going to parties? (Most everyone.)

A–You know, whether it’s a birthday, a wedding, an anniversary, a holiday, or “just because,” parties are events of joy that we look forward to because they’re a celebration of life itself.

B–We like the cake, the ice cream, the chips and dips, the party favors, the games, the socializing and good company, and more! Parties are just plain fun!

3. And so, it’s not by accident that much of Bible describes salvation and our relationship with God in terms of a great party or celebration.

A–For example: ...

1–The “*Great Supper*” that Jesus talks about in Luke 14 where many are invited, but few respond;

2–The “*Marriage Supper of the Lamb*” described in Revelation 19;

3–And what about the three great parties in Luke 15 given by... the woman who lost her coin and found it; the shepherd who left his 99 sheep to go find the lost one; & the father who “*kills the fatted calf*” when his prodigal son comes home

B–But if one way to think about salvation is in terms of great party that God throws for us (on our behalf), then one of the great privileges and responsibilities that WE have as Christians is *to help others experience that party* – that is:...

1–...We’re to (First) help get them there;

2– ... (Second) help them feel welcome/“at home” after they arrive;

3–...And (Third) help them find their place there.

4. Now, these three practices (Invitation, Hospitality, and Incorporation) *collectively* make up what we in fancy, theological terms call “**EVANGELISM**” – something that, according to the Bible, is to be an essential part of *every* Christian’s walk.

A–And yet, unfortunately today “Evangelism” often gets a bad rap and scares us to death!

Let me show you what I mean in the following video...

[WATCH VIDEO: “The Pizza Evangelist” (Time: 1:29) from SermonSpice.com]

B–You know, in the Bible the term from which we get our English word “*Evangelize*” literally means “*To announce, declare, show, or bring good news,*”¹ and the word “*Evangelist*” comes from a term that simply means “*One who brings good tidings / good news.*”²

C–So in its simplest form, then, *biblical* Evangelism has nothing to do with button-holing or scaring people to death (like in this video), but instead is merely the process of sharing the good news of Jesus for the purpose of helping others find the kingdom of God – ...

D–...In other words, through our words and deeds, to help others discover and experience God’s party for themselves through a relationship with his son Jesus Christ.

–II–

5. That’s all Evangelism is. And it’s why, over the next three weeks, we’ll be sharing in a new series called “**Party Planning**” in which we’ll be relating the Christian practice of “*Evangelism*” to the planning of a great party *thrown by GOD*, but in which *WE* play a crucial part.

A–Now, in each of the three weeks, we’ll be focusing our attention on ONE of the three different dimensions of biblical evangelism that I referred to earlier:

- 1–*Invitation* (how we invite people to God’s party);
- 2–*Hospitality* (how we welcome and help them feel “at home” once they arrive);
- 3–And *Incorporation* (how we help them “find their place” and “get connected”).

B–Today our focus is on the first dimension: what I often refer as “***Invitation Evangelism***,” and we find a great example of it in today’s scripture reading from John 1.

C–Here we have the story of Jesus calling his first five disciples.

- 1–Now, three of these (Andrew, Philip, and one other) he calls directly, through his own *personal* invitation.
- 2–But I want us to notice how the other two (Peter and Nathanael) are called – in this story, Jesus is NOT the one to make the initial invitation to these two men.
- 3–Instead, Peter and Nathanael are first invited to meet Jesus by two of the other three: Andrew invites his brother Peter; and Philip invites his friend Nathanael.
- 4–And as a result of *these* invitations, Peter and Nathanael meet Jesus, and then choose to become his followers themselves.

6. Now friends, we have in this story a pattern for how “invitation evangelism” works.

A–Nowhere does it say that Andrew or Philip went knocking on the doors of total strangers, seeking to button-hole them or save them “in the name of Jesus!”

B–What it *does* tell us is that two people who’s lives had been personally touched by Christ (Andrew and Philip) couldn’t wait to invite their loved ones and friends to meet this man who meant so much to them.

1–And so, the “Invitations” that they sent out to their family and friends simply said, “*We have found the Messiah.... Come and see!*”³

2–It wasn’t scripted like “The Four Spiritual Laws,” or manipulative and fake like the “Pizza Evangelist.”

3–No. These were simply 2 ordinary men sharing the love of their life (Jesus) in a natural way with those whom they’d had a previously established relationship.

C– Did you know that according to a poll by the “Institute for American Church Growth,” when 10,000 people were asked why they first came to church,...

2% said it was because they had a special need;

6% said it was because they liked the Pastor;

12% said it was because the church had a specific program or ministry;

But 80% said they came because a friend, relative, or neighbor *INVITED THEM!*⁴

D–And even our own church demographics bear this out... because in the church-wide Opinion Poll that we conducted earlier this year, to the question “*Why Did You First Come to ECUMC?*”, the largest response we received were words to the effect that it was initially because of an invitation from family or friends.⁵

–III–

7. So here’s the reality and the challenge: like Peter & Nathanael, many (if not most) of you are both here today at church *and* have a relationship with Jesus Christ *because someone INVITED you*. My question is: have you passed on the favor to someone else lately?

A– That is: have you invited someone to be your guest at church with you recently? (I.E., A family member? A neighbor across the street? Someone you work with?)
When was the last time you did that?

B–And more importantly, when was the last time you verbally shared your Christian faith with someone in your family or friendship network? Perhaps how your faith helped you through some tragedy or crisis of life?

1–This past May, our denomination’s “2008 General Conference” added a new vow that we’ll now be asking every United Methodist to take.

2–In addition to supporting Christ and His church through our *Prayers, Presence, Gifts, and Service*, we now also add through our “*Witness*”– just another word for “Evangelism” = the sharing of our faith.

C–You know, throughout the year we even try to make it easy for every single member and regular guest of our church to do this kind of “Invitation Evangelism.”

D–For example, you may know that right before Christmas, New Year, and Easter we pass out invitation cards that you can use as tools to make it easy for you to invite those in your family and friendship networks who either do not have an active church home, or an active relationship with Jesus Christ.

8. But of course, for us to do effective “Invitation Evangelism,” it’s important for us (like Andrew and Philip) to *start* by inviting those who we *already know*.

A–The problem with a lot of us is that while we may know our family and friends, we don’t actually know our neighbors or work-mates very well – certainly not enough to talk with them authentically about faith issues.

B–So as we wrap up, I want us to watch one more video that invites us to consider tangible, creative ways that we can both get to KNOW and BLESS our neighbors, as we consider how to invite them to God’s party.

[VIDEO: “*Evangelism: Here I Am Lord, Send Me*” (Time 1:52, SermonSpice.com)]

–IV–

9. Here’s how I want us to end today: ...I want to invite each and every person forward during the music to receive a card that contains creative ideas about ways that you and I can “Bless Our Neighbors.”

A–As you receive it, I want to invite you to stand or kneel in the altar area and prayerfully consider doing (over the next two months) at least ONE “Bless Your Neighbor” activity found on the sheet (or one of your own making).

B–And then, after you’ve done your activity(-ies), I want you to send me your stories about what happened so we can share them with the rest of the congregation as a source of blessing and encouragement to all.

C–Friends, God has invited US to HIS party. But it’s an “**Invitation**” that we can’t keep to ourselves. And so He’s asking: “*Who will go and bless their family, friends, and neighbors? Who will invite them to my party –to a relationship of faith with me and my people (the church)?*”

D–My prayer is that each of us would answer, “*Here I Am Lord, Send Me!*”⁶

10. [PRAYER]

11. [BACKGROUND MUSIC as congregants come forward to receive “*Bless Your Neighbor Creative Ideas*” sheet (made to look like a party invitation)]

12. [CLOSING SONG: #593, “Here I Am, Lord”]

ENDNOTES:

1. Greek term “*Euaggalizo*,” Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries, Greek Term #G32.
2. Greek term “*Euaggelistes*,” Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries, Greek Term #G2099.
3. John 1:41 and 1:46.
4. “Institute of American Church Growth Poll,” reported by Wayne Zunkel in Leadership magazine, Volume 5, Number 3.
5. In the 2008 ECUMC Opinion Poll, 63 out of 134 (47%) of responses to this question indicated that they were here because of family or friend invitations (higher than any other response). It’s true that this percentage is not as high as what national polls indicate. However, remember that some of the other responses given may have included personal invitations *prior* to the stated/given reason. Plus, the original question was open ended. If the question had been phrased as multiple choice (with “Personal Invitation” as one of the answer choices), my conviction is that the percentage of those making that choice would most likely have increased significantly.
6. Isaiah 6:8.