

Preaching On Evangelism Without Turning Off Your Congregation

INTRODUCTION TO SERIES

Many Christians, especially in mainline churches, are afraid of and turned off by evangelism. However, reaching people for Christ and church is at the heart of the Gospel. This collection of sermons will help you effectively communicate the need to invite and welcome others to Christ's church, and how to do so in a natural way. The sermons in this collection include:

Evangelism with Integrity (Matthew 28:16-20)

Becoming An Inviting and Welcoming Church (Luke 15:1-7)

Our Other Constituency (Luke 14:16-23)

Evangelism with Integrity

Matthew 28:16-20

Many years ago, when I pastored a Baptist church in Arkansas, churches all over the state were showing a film called *“The Burning Hell.”* It depicted life in hell, full of fire, fury, screaming, and worms coming out of people’s eyes. The film was followed by a heavy-handed invitation, and thousands of little children from across the state came flocking down the aisle to be saved. I saw the film at a neighboring church and was so disgusted by this manipulative abuse of children that it made me physically ill. A few days later a sponsor of the film called me and asked, “When can we schedule *“The Burning Hell”* for your church?” I said, “You can’t.” But he persisted. He went on and on about how great an evangelistic tool the film was. Surely I didn’t want to be left out. I’m a pretty diplomatic guy but I finally lost my cool. I told the man that “hell would freeze over before I showed that film in my church,” and that pretty well ended the conversation.

Through the years I’ve had a lot of bad experiences with evangelism. Long and manipulative altar calls. High-pressure gospel presentations. Annoying people on street corners who hand out tracks. Manipulative invitations at funerals of children and teenagers. I finally decided that if this is evangelism then I wanted no part of it. For a time, I gave up on it. However, in time, I realized that my problem was not with evangelism, but with inappropriate methods of evangelism. I came to realize that evangelism—reaching people for Christ and church—was at the very heart of the gospel. Jesus gave us a mandate to reach people, as we see in today’s “Great Commission” text where Jesus told his church to go into all the world and make disciples. Since that time, my goal has been to do evangelism—but evangelism with integrity.

We are going to talk today about evangelism with integrity in the 21st century. I’m not talking about tent revivals, or hell fire and damnation preaching, or long emotional altar calls, or annoying Gospel sales presentations, or handing out tracks to strangers, or knocking on stranger’s doors. Instead, I’m talking about relational evangelism, sharing our faith naturally through the relationships in our life. As followers of Christ, we are called to share our faith with others. Please turn to your listening guide (***you can find the guide at the end of this sermon***), and we will review three relational ways we can share our faith with others with integrity.

First, let's look at Lifestyle Evangelism. One of the best ways we can witness to our faith is to live it. That's the point of this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. In this text Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to God" (Matthew 5:16). When we live lives of love, grace, compassion and integrity, we testify that we are people of faith. People see our lives and think, "If this is what Christianity looks like, I'm interested." Saint Frances of Assisi once said, "Preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary." This is lifestyle evangelism, and God calls all of us to do it.

Second, let's look at Conversational Evangelism. We need to live like Christians. But we also need to verbally share our faith. I'm not talking about a sales pitch, or pressuring people, or annoying them. But all of us, in our network of relationships, can find opportunities to naturally share our faith with people we know. It can be as simple as letting folks know that our faith is important to us, grounds us, gives us meaning and purpose, helps us through hard times, and motivates us to serve others. We see this spirit of relational evangelism in 1 Peter 3. In this text, Peter says, "Always be prepared to share with others your hope in Christ, in a spirit of gentleness and respect." God wants us to find ways to verbally share our faith with the people in our life. This kind of relational evangelism can be done naturally in our conversations with others and can make a huge impact on people. So I encourage you to pray for opportunities to do this.

Third, let's look at Invitational Evangelism. In short, this is a "come and see" method of evangelism. The most common form of invitational witness is to invite people to church for worship, or a special event, or to a small group. This is a simple and easy way to share faith. And it's exceptionally effective. Studies constantly show that about 90% of people first visit a church because somebody they know invited them to come. We see this approach in this text from John 1. In this passage, Andrew invited Simon to come and see Jesus. Then Philip invited Nathanael to come and see Jesus. We can't invite people to come and see Jesus. But we can invite people to come and see the church of Jesus Christ. If we do, many will visit, and through that experience, some will come to know Jesus.

Years ago Harvey Cox wrote a story in the *New York Times* about a Baptist Church in the northeast. One Sunday morning a Hispanic man showed up. Nobody knew who he was. But he kept coming back and eventually he joined the church. He told them he was from El Salvador, and that he had recently immigrated to this country. About a year later they found

out this was not entirely true. He confided that he had actually come to the US illegally and that immigration authorities were now after him. In fact, they were going to deport him back to El Salvador. He told the church that if that happened he would be killed upon his return.

The church didn't know what to do. They didn't approve of breaking the law. But he was a member of their church. So they gulped hard and made a momentous decision. They put a cot in the basement of the church, moved him in, and told Immigration Services that their church was a sanctuary, and they must not come in and take him away. Immigration authorities didn't have to honor that, but they didn't want any trouble with a church, so they reported the situation to the FBI.

The FBI decided to place an informer in the congregation, and the church soon found out. They didn't know who the informer was. They just knew that out there on Sunday morning, somebody praying the prayers and singing the hymns—was a spy. A lot of people in the congregation were amused. They said, “You don't have to put an informer in this church to find out what's going on. This is a Baptist church for goodness sake! We know more about each other than we ought to know.” But others in the congregation were nervous. One Sunday morning the pastor was praying the pastoral prayer. He prayed for the lost, and for the sick, and then he said, “Lord, we ask a special blessing today on our informer.” Harvey Cox, who wrote this story, added a commentary. He said, “I'm so glad that pastor prayed for the informer. And I hope the informer will not grow weary and go away. Who knows, if he sings *Amazing Grace* enough times, he may end up being saved. It wouldn't be the first time.”

Harvey Cox knew that under the influence of the church, even an FBI informer could be touched by God. When people come to church, something mysterious begins to happen. The Holy Spirit begins to work on their hearts. As they meet loving Christian people, and pray the prayers, and sing the songs, and hear the gospel, and take communion, God works in their life. I see that happen all the time. People tell me on a regular basis, “I visited this church and found God in this place.” Invitational evangelism is easy. We simply invite people to visit our church, welcome them when they come, and leave the rest to God.

So there you have it. Three ways to relationally share our faith: lifestyle evangelism, conversational evangelism, and invitational evangelism. May God help you, and may God help me, to engage in evangelism with integrity.

LISTENING GUIDE

1. Lifestyle Evangelism.

“Let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to God” (Matthew 5:16).

2. Conversational Evangelism.

“Always be prepared to share with others your hope in Christ, in a spirit of gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

3. Invitational Evangelism.

“The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus” (John 1:41-42).

“Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.’ ‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ Nathanael asked. ‘Come and see, said Philip’” (John 1:45-46).

Becoming an Inviting and Welcoming Church

Luke 15:1-7

Several years ago I read a book on the history of race relations in the South. The book included a photograph of a church in Alabama in the 1950s. On the front door hung a sign that said, “No Coloreds Allowed.” It shocked me to see such a sign on a church. But then I realized things haven’t changed that much since 1950. In fact, I used to pastor a church in the south that had a similar sign. It didn’t actually say “Blacks not allowed,” but it might as well have. At a business meeting I asked the congregation if we could host a community wide, ecumenical Thanksgiving service, and they unanimously voted yes. I promptly began to invite all the churches in town to the service, both black and white.

A few days later, three of the deacons came to my office. They were furious that I had invited black churches to participate. I reminded them that the church had just voted to host a community wide thanksgiving service. The men said to me, “Yes, but we thought you meant the white community.” They insisted that I disinvite the black churches. I refused, and have the scars to prove it. However, when 800 people gathered for worship that night, half black and half white, it was a little taste of the Kingdom of God. But sadly, if you went to that church today you would still find an unwritten sign out front that says, “Black people not welcome.”

I once served a church that had a sign out front that said, “Disabled persons not welcome.” It wasn’t a real sign, but it might as well have been. To get into that sanctuary a person had to climb two flights of steep stairs. The church had no elevator, no ramp, and no interest in spending the money necessary to make the church handicapped accessible. To this day the church has a sign that says, “Disabled persons not welcome.”

The sad truth is—American churches have hundreds of these kinds of “not welcome” signs. The signs are not literal signs, but they are very real. Some of the signs read, “divorced persons not welcome,” “homosexuals not welcome,” “poor people not welcome,” “uneducated people not welcome,” “liberals not welcome,” “conservatives not welcome,” “people of color not welcome,” and on and on. Of course, the problem with all these signs is that they are a complete rejection of the Gospel. The Gospel never says, “Not welcome.” Instead, the Gospel says, “Whosoever will may come.” According to God, every church

should have a sign on the front door that says, “All Persons Welcome Here,” including broken, imperfect people like you and me.

The Bible is clear. Everyone should be welcome in the church of Jesus Christ. Rich, poor, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, educated, uneducated, straight, gay, married, single, divorced, old, young, healthy, disabled, theological liberals, theological conservatives, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. If we are going to be an authentic church of Jesus Christ, we must be a welcoming church. And not just in theory but in practice. When people visit our church they need to FEEL welcomed. One of my dreams for our church is that when guests come to this place, they will be overwhelmed by a warm, authentic, Christian welcome. The good news is that in many ways, our church is already doing that. We’ve made great progress in being a welcoming church in recent years, and my hope is that we will continue to grow in this area in significant ways.

As important as it is to be a church of open doors that welcomes all people who come to this place, that’s not the whole picture. It’s not enough to put a sign out front that says, “All people welcome here.” No, the Gospel also calls us to go out and reach people. We’re not only called to be a welcoming church, we are also called to be an inviting church. That’s the whole point of today’s scripture lesson. Jesus tells the story of the shepherd who has 100 sheep, and one of them gets lost. So he leaves the 99 and seeks out the lost one, and then celebrates when he finds it. It’s not enough just to welcome those who come to us. We must also go to them.

Today’s scripture text commands us to seek out the lost. I know the term “lost” doesn’t sit well with most UMC congregations. We are a bit too sophisticated to use the term “lost.” But the term lost is a very biblical word. Jesus used it a lot. He once said, “I came to seek and to save the lost.” That raises the question, “Who is Jesus talking about? Who are the lost?” In a way, we are all lost, struggling to find our way. Who among us is not a little lost in our career, in our marriage, in our parenting, in our finances, or in some other way? None of us has it all together. None of us is completely on track. But some people are more seriously lost. Some of them don’t know Jesus. They don’t have a relationship with God. Others are Christian, but they don’t have a community of faith to help in their journey. And people who don’t have a faith community, even if they are believers, are lost. And these lost people matter to God, and they should matter to us. And our community has thousands of lost people. In fact, a recent study of our community showed that 57% of our population is not connected to a faith

community. 57% are lost. And God says to us—seek the lost! Reach out to them, and invite them into this community of faith.

Seeking lost people is really not that complicated or scary. Studies consistently show that the vast majority of people who become Christians and church members first come to church because a friend, relative, neighbor or co-worker invited them. You see, you are the best evangelists our church has. Your invitation to attend this church can bring lost people to God. You don't have to be obnoxious. You don't have to memorize some spiritual sales pitch. You don't have to be high pressure. That turns people off anyway. All you need to do is invite them to this place. Tell them we don't have all the answers, we are fellow strugglers, but we are trying to serve God, and we are trying to be a community of faith. And invite them to come check us out. Many people in our town are hungry for a church of "Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open doors." We just need to let them know we exist. Our community is filled with people who Jesus would describe as lost—people who are not connected to a community of faith. We need a burden for these people, just like Jesus had. If we invite them to this place, many will come. And when they do, they will encounter the love of God, and the love of the people of God, and it will make a difference in their lives. In the end, being an inviting and welcoming church is pretty simple. It means we regularly invite people to this faith community. And when they come, then we welcome them enthusiastically.

Let me tell you a story. Lyle Schaller, a well-known church consultant and author, was doing consulting work for a church in Minneapolis. As part of his consultation, he visited their Sunday morning worship service. After the service was over, he asked a few of the members why they attended that church, including a young woman in her mid-30s named Jennifer. Lyle asked her, "What attracted you to this church?" Jennifer said, "Do you really want to know?" He said "yes." So Jennifer told her story. She had been successful in her career, was married, and hoped to have children. But she felt a lack of meaning in her life. So she began to experiment with cocaine. At first, it was just for kicks. However, in time, she became seriously addicted. It cost Jennifer her marriage, most of her financial resources, her self-dignity, and now it was threatening to cost Jennifer her job. She lived in a downtown apartment complex, right next to a church. One day she was walking past the church, as she had done many times before. As she passed the front entrance, a young woman walked out the door of the church carrying a baby. The woman saw Jennifer and said hello. They both stopped for a moment while Jennifer admired the baby. The woman asked Jennifer, "Do you live around

here?” Jennifer told her she lived next door in the high-rise apartment building. After some small talk, the woman asked Jennifer if she went to church anywhere. Jennifer said no. The woman said, “We’d love to have you visit our church sometime.” She wasn’t pushy. She just offered a simple invitation. They ended their conversation and Jennifer went home. Over the next few days, Jennifer could not forget her encounter with the woman from the church. She seemed like such a nice person, a person Jennifer would like to know, a person Jennifer would like to be like. She told a friend about the incident and her friend said, “Maybe you ought to go visit the church.” Jennifer said, “Maybe I will.”

Two weeks later Jennifer showed up at the church, feeling scared and awkward. The young woman who had invited Jennifer to visit saw her walk through the front door and gave her a warm welcome. She invited Jennifer to sit by her in church. After church they went to lunch together. Over the next couple of months, these two women developed a friendship. In time, Jennifer admitted to this woman that she had a drug problem. The woman said, “Why don’t you come to the Winner’s Club at our church.” She explained that the Winner’s Club was a 12-step group to help people get off drugs.

To make a long story short, Jennifer went to the Winner’s Club. By the grace of God, and the help of this 12-step group, and the love and support of a church that invited and welcomed imperfect people to their congregation, Jennifer got off drugs and got her life back. One year later, in a Sunday morning worship service at the church, the pastor, who knew Jennifer’s story, said to the congregation (with Jennifer’s permission), “We have a birthday today. Jennifer has been drug free for one year.” Spontaneously, the congregation stood up and sang happy birthday. After the service dozens of people came up to Jennifer, hugged her, and told her how proud they were of her.

At that point in her story, Jennifer looked at Lyle Schaller, the consultant who was interviewing her. She said, “In a few weeks, I’ll be off drugs for 2 years, and my church promised to sing happy birthday to me again.” She concluded her story by saying, “This congregation invited me to church. And when I came, broken and full of fear, they warmly welcomed me with open hearts and doors. And in spite of my drug problem, they loved me and supported me without judgment. They helped me connect with God, and they became my family. And that, Mr. Schaller, is why I come to this church.”

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Our Other Constituency

Luke 14:16-23

Since arriving here several months ago, I've been asking myself an important question. The question is, "Who is our constituency?" In other words, "For whom do we exist?" Most of you here today would probably respond, "That's easy, our constituency is our membership." And, of course, there's a lot of truth in that answer. We spend a lot of time, energy and money around here meeting the needs of our members. Obviously, our constituency includes the members of our congregation. But that's not the whole story. Our church also has another constituency. And that's what I want to talk with you about today.

Which brings us to today's text. In today's parable in Luke 14 the master says, "Go out in the streets and invite all to come, even the poor the crippled the blind and the lame." In this story we are challenged to invite everyone to the house of God. Every church is called by God to be an inviting and welcoming church. The Bible continually tells us to seek out the lost for God. United Methodists don't talk much about lost people. It makes us nervous to use that language. But being lost and then found is a major biblical theme. In fact, Jesus once said, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (John 19:10).

Have you ever been lost before? I mean really lost? Years ago, when my family and I lived in Hawaii, I took my kids on a long hike in a place called Niu Valley. We walked along the trail, having a ball. Along the way we saw a huge bunch of litter. It made us angry that people would litter like that in paradise. As we continued to hike we started to get tired. The mosquitoes were eating us up (yes there are mosquitoes even in Hawaii), and we were getting scraped up by all the branches. We were also hot and tired and thirsty, so we decided to return home. But somehow along the way we got off the trail.

We walked and walked and got more and more lost. My children began to cry. Although I was trying to exude confidence for my children's sake, I was getting desperately scared. After a while I felt sheer panic. I had visions of the newspaper headlines in the local paper. "Minister and children lost in Niu Valley." A few days later it would read, "National Guard sent out to search for missing family in Niu Valley." Then I saw the headlines five years later, "Hikers find

three skeletons in Niu Valley.” Finally, after hours of walking in the forest, we came across that pile of trash we had seen earlier. Thank God for litterbugs! Praise God for people destroying the environment! We got back on the trail and soon found our way home, and home never looked or felt so good. Being lost and then being found—this is a huge biblical theme.

Although most Methodists are not comfortable talking about it, a lot of people are lost. They either don't know Christ, or they are not part of a community of faith. Either way, according to Jesus, they are lost. They may not look lost. They may wear fine clothes, drive a nice car, work in a status profession, have a beautiful family, and own a lovely home. But in their heart and soul, without Jesus, and without a community of faith for the journey, they are lost. And God wants them to be found. Lost people matter to God. And lost people, people who are disconnected from Christ, and people without a church family, these people are our other constituency. We exist, in large measure, for them. God wants us to reach out to them and bring them home. And when that happens, today's scripture reading tells us there is rejoicing in heaven.

Let me make something very clear. We don't seek people for Christ and church for numerical growth. We do this because inviting and welcoming others is at the core of the Gospel. As we see throughout the Bible, God's heart beats for lost people. God's heart beats for people who don't know Jesus, and for people who are not a part of a church family. So our heart must also beat for these people. They are our other constituency. We exist, in many ways, for their sake.

The encouraging news is that millions of people in America are starving for a church like ours. Researchers have discovered that tons of people in our nation are weary of the negative, judgmental, closed-minded faith of many American churches, and are looking for a better option. A few years ago a national study revealed that United Methodists have the highest favorability rating of any faith group in America. We also have the lowest unfavorable rating. Large numbers of people are ready to connect with a grace filled church of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors” like ours. All they need is an invitation.

So this week, we are offering each one of you an opportunity to invite and welcome others to our church. When you came in today, you received a business card. Please take it out. This card tells about our upcoming sermon series. Right after this service, as you walk out the

door, you will see people with baskets full of these cards. We hope you will take as many as you want and hand them out to everyone you know—people at work, in your neighborhood, family members, friends, fellow students. Hand them the card along with an invitation to our new series which begins next weekend. If you will do this, some of them will come. And when they do, they will experience the presence of God, and the welcome of a church community. To further help with this invitation, you will receive an email on Wednesday of this week about this series that you can forward to your friends. A crucial part of our mission here is to reach people for Jesus and for his church. These folks are our other constituency. You and I can reach out to them this very week by inviting them and then welcoming them to our new worship series.

A few months ago I read about a Catholic monk who was asked if Jesus Christ was his “personal savior.” “No,” the smiling monk said without hesitation, “Jesus is not my personal savior. Instead, I like to share him.” May God help you and me to share Jesus and his church with others this very week.

NOTE: For additional sermons on evangelism, see the following:

“A Church of Open Doors” in the series, “More Than a Motto” or the sermon on hospitality in the series, “Core Practices of Healthy Churches.” Both sermons are similar in content.

“How to Share Your Faith Without Turning People Off” in the sermon series from the Sermon on the Mount called, “Jesus on Life, Part One.”

“Holy Hospitality” found under the individual sermon section.

