

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
September 15 & 16, 2012
John Crosby
The Invitational God: God Sends Us to Invite Others
John 4:28-30**

“Tis music in the sinner's ears, tis life and health and peace”...Is that what most people think of when they think of church? I think we are in danger, because sometimes a story you have known forever can become so familiar that it loses its juice. It loses its power to surprise, but that's what the Gospel is supposed to be. It is supposed to be a surprise, a reminder of something you had forgotten. This morning I'd like to give you about four minutes to hear our Scripture in a very different dialect. This is from the Gospel of John, chapter four, but I imagine you have never heard it like this before.

(Video begins)

I'm a woman of no distinction, of little importance. I'm a woman of no reputation. You pass by and cast your judgments and glances, but you don't take the time to look at me or get to know me. But to be known is to be loved, and to be loved is to be known. I want to be known. I want someone to look me in my face and see more than just two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two ears; but to see all of me and all that I could be, all of my hopes, loves, fears.

Is that too much to hope for, to wish for, to pray for? So I don't. Not once. Now I keep it to myself, and by that I mean the pain, the pain that keeps me in my own private jail, the pain that is brought here at mid day to this well. To ask for a drink is no big deal, but to ask it of me, a woman, unclean, ashamed, used and abused, an outcast, a failure, a disappointment, a sinner; no drink passing from these hands to Your lips could ever be refreshing, only condemning, and I'm sure You condemn me now.

But You don't. You are a man of no distinction, a rank of the utmost importance, a man of little reputation, at least so far. You risk to come here and tell me, to my face, what all those glances have been about. You take the time to look at me, but You don't get to know me.

To be known is to be loved, and to be loved is to be known. If You know me, You actually know me, all of me, everything about me, every thought and sigh, every hair on the top of my head, every hurt stored up, every hope, all of my past and future. You know all that I am and could be. You tell me everything. You tell me about me. That which is spoken from another would certainly bring hate and condemnation. Coming from You, it brings love, mercy, grace, hope, salvation. Are You a present of one who has to come to save a wretch like me? And I care about presents. You say, “I am He, who to be known is to be

loved, and to be loved is to be known.” Yet I just met You, but I love you. I don’t know You, but I want to and need to.

Listen, I must run back to town. This is way too much just for me. There are others, brothers, sisters, lovers, haters, the good and the bad, the sinners and the saints, who need to be what You showed me, to hear what You told me, who need to take what You gave me and to feel how You forgave me. To be known is to be loved and to be loved is to be known. They’re our needs. We all need it. We need it for our own.

(Video ends)

When I saw that the first time, I realized that I had put the woman at the well story sort of on autopilot. It had become a Sunday School lesson for me, and what this did was remind me of all the emotions in that story, in those people. On her side, the pain and the shame and the anger under the surface. You catch a lot of that. On Jesus’ part, He’s tired, He’s thirsty, and He probably just wants to be alone, and then the conversation starts. The second thing that it reminded me of was that I know a lot of those people. I’m surrounded by people like that who believe that nobody really loves them, that God is mad at them or that God is irrelevant. They hunger for a love and hope and forgiveness, just like me, just like you. They want that living water, but they probably won’t come here to get it, and why is that? Why wouldn’t they come here?

I read something this summer from Tim Keller, a Presbyterian pastor in New York. He said, “The difference Christians keep forgetting between Christianity and all other religions is very simple. The difference we keep forgetting is that almost all other religions are based on good advice, on laws that tell us what to do and what not to do in order to get into heaven. Christianity is not about advice. Christianity is about news, not what you have to do but what’s been done for you.” Christianity is not about what you have to do but who you need to get to know. It’s an invitation. It’s not arguing people into heaven. It’s not beating them up over the head or guiltting them. It’s introducing them to somebody who can offer them a different way. It’s inviting them to something that you are slowly discovering yourself, something without all the answers but at least you are taking a step toward the idea that there might be a God, that God might actually love you, that God might actually want to help you, and it’s changing you slowly. You are just inviting somebody else into the process.

We’re going to start a new member class next week. I think I mentioned that as one of the 14,000 different announcements this morning. In that new member class, we’ll probably have 60, 70, 100 people and in the pattern of the last 14 or 15 years, almost certainly about 10 percent of them will be here because this is the closest Presbyterian church to them. About 10 percent of you traditionally join because it’s a Presbyterian church that fits in. It’s the label on the front, the Presbyterian label. About 7 percent of the new member class will be the result of church shopping, primarily to find a compromise church. One of you is Catholic or Lutheran or Presbyterian. The other one is Assemblies of God or, God forbid, Baptist, and—just kidding, just kidding. Honest, just kidding, okay? And that compromise brings you here because it feels like the middle ground. That adds up some years to about 20 percent, other years to about 35 percent, all the rest, 60 to 75 percent. Sometimes 80 percent of the people who come here are here because they have been invited here.

Somebody has invited them to come to CPC. Now it's not always that they were invited to church. Many of them were invited as kids to the Wednesday night program or to sing with the other little kids on Wednesday night. Many of you have invited people to come and be in one of the small groups where there are lots of different churches represented. Many come here for the first time through the church door. Let me just ask, how many of you can remember, were you invited here? If you were invited here, raise your hand. Just look around. Okay, a little more than around half. Now can you remember who invited you? Okay, almost all of you. A fascinating subject for me. It's about invitations.

Laura and I were at dinner at a local club the other day with some friends of ours we've known for years. For years we've said, "We ought to play golf and do dinner," and finally we just put it on the books and did it. Had a fun round of golf and then grabbed a sandwich afterwards. One of our friends is Jewish and the other one is sort of an indeterminate, a not-sure-what-she-believes kind of person but they are a neat, neat couple. In the process of getting to know each other, one of them asked Laura how long we'd been here. "Twenty-four years," Laura said. Then this woman said, "You know it's all about politics. How does your church deal with all of the politics and this talk about God? How does that work whether it is about the gay marriage amendment or immigration or whatever?" And before Laura could answer, the other one said, "Wasn't that church pretty small and now it's bigger? How did it grow?" When it was my turn to talk, I responded, "Because it's not my church. It grew because the people at this corner have found out that we are all screwed up people." I turned to them and said, "You're messed up, and so am I. We are broken people. And the people who come in these doors admit that and when they come here, they find the presence of love and forgiveness and hope centered around the idea that we are not here to be condemned. We are here to receive grace and the possibility of living in a better way. That's why I think people come."

Then one of the women repeated to me something she had said in the parking lot a couple of years before. She said, "You know, if I wasn't Jewish, I'd come to your church." We'll see. I'm pretty sure that she won't come though without somebody inviting her, because we can look pretty scary and we can look pretty self-satisfied, but it's about inviting. This series is about the invitational God. Remember last week, God wants to invite us to heaven so He comes down to invite us in person, in the person of Jesus. Here's how Jesus invites people.

⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and ⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Then comes the first of the invitations. I think there are three invitations in this story. The first is, Jesus goes past her you-don't-like-me, I-don't-like-you thing and talks about the gift of God. That God wants to offer not a get-out-of-hell free card. **God wants to offer you a gift.** Jesus and the woman talk about living water.

¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

¹³ Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

¹⁷ “I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

Another religious person who has busted this woman, this black woman, and made her feel black, made her feel ashamed. That’s why she comes out at noon. To change the subject, she goes,

¹⁹ “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Jesus says, “None of that matters. It doesn’t matter where you worship. At the end, what counts is, have you met the Spirit of God?”

²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Jesus declared to her, “That’s me. I am He. Let’s talk.” This whacks the woman upside the head. For once a person who talks about God is coming and not making her feel worse but making her feel hopeful and is saying, “I have a gift for you from God. Here it is.” That leads to the second invitation. He invites her to take the gift.

²⁸ Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, ²⁹ “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”

She not only is surprised to hear about the gift of God, not just another religious thing to make her feel if she bends on my knees and beg for forgiveness, maybe she’ll get it, but **Jesus invites her to a new life**. She tells the people in town, “You’ve got to see this guy. I think He is different. Could He be the one?” That’s the invitation that Jesus is talking about, not let me out-argue you, not let me guilt you into coming, not let me do my religious duty and have you come to church with me. Boy, that sounds appealing. She says, “Could this be the one?”

Jesus’ disciples had come back and seen the woman. She almost runs away. The apostles are really curious, but they don’t want to ask why Jesus is talking to her. They say, “Hey, let’s get some food. I’m starving here. Rabbi, eat something.”

³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

Jesus says, "I'm not hungry any more. I am fine."

³³ Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?"

³⁴ "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

"My food is to invite people. When I invite people, I get filled up." Then comes the third invitation.

³⁵ Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.

That's the third invitation. Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "**Help me with the harvest.**" Who is going to talk to all those people? Some of the commentators think that when Jesus says, "Look at the fields. They are ripe for the harvest," the disciples look out into the fields and what they see are people starting to walk toward them because of this woman running around like a crazy woman. "You've got to go to the well. You've got to see who's there." Many of the Samaritans believed in Jesus because the woman said, "He told me everything, and He still loved me." The people told the woman, "It's not just because of what you said. Now we've heard for ourselves. We *know* this man is the Son who is the Savior of the world." And because of Jesus' words, many more became believers.

She invited. God did the rest. That's the important thing. We are not supposed to persuade. We're not even supposed to make converts. All we have to do is say, "Hey, I'm on this journey, and it's good. Why don't you join me?" Only God is the transforming one. It's about inviting. It's not about telling people that they are messed up. It's not even asking them to join. There is a difference I think between asking somebody to come or asking them to join and inviting them.

Feed My Starving Children is changing. These are the people who make all the food packets. They are changing their messaging strategy from asking people for money and asking people to pack. They are changing that and are saying, "No, no, no. We are going to *invite* you to join us in the journey." They say when you ask somebody, they have to decide, "If I say no, are you still going to like me?" If you invite somebody to come to something, they feel special. When you invite somebody to do something, whether they can come or not, they feel special. They feel honored that you think they are worth the time.

We want to invite people to come along, but I've got to tell you, inviting is not rocket science. We avoid it because we are scared of it. We are scared of evangelism. We don't do evangelism. We're Presbyterians. People stumble in here, and we don't lock the door on them. We let them come in. There are two kinds of people, I think. There are the people who just avoid inviting because it's scary and messy and all that kind of stuff, and there are people who are not avoiders, they are erupters. You don't want to sit next to an erupter on an airplane because they will go, "Are you saved? Do you absolutely know that you're saved? I've got this 17-page booklet, and if we can go through it together, God will save you." And you go, "Oh, dear God, please save me. Crash the plane." Avoiders and erupters, neither one of them are inviting.

I think Jesus showed me a little bit of **how we can invite people to what He is doing**. The first thing is that when you invite somebody, you are developing a friendship. That is what Jesus is calling us to do. He's not telling us to pick a target audience. He is not saying, "If you get these

people, you will get—” No, He just says, “**Develop relationships.**” Jesus develops a relationship with this very unlikely woman, who is so used to having people skirting the other way that she is shocked when He wants to talk to her. There are people all around you who would like to talk to you, who would like you to notice them and care about them. When you and I develop friendships, not targets but real relationships, we have already started the process. We have said to you, “You have value. I’d like to get to know you.”

And that’s the second part of inviting. You develop a friendship and **out of that friendship, you discover the stories.** Everybody has a story. The woman had this story but nobody had heard it. Nobody knew her story because nobody stopped to talk to her, and when Jesus stopped and talked to her, He knew her story. If you ask somebody, “How did you get here?” you give them the privilege of opening up their hearts. When we discover somebody’s story, we are inviting them not only into our lives, but we are inviting them to share their lives and if we are good, we make it a two-way thing. Again, this is not our patient, this is our friend so we tell them some of our story. That’s where this inviting thing becomes much less weird because you can say, “Yeah, you’re right. I’ve always believed in God, I guess, but lately it’s been coming to life.” Then leave it. Stop there. You shared a little bit of your story. We develop a relationship and discover their story so they know we care about who they are.

Then, **third, because we have a friendship and we have discovered their story, we discern the best thing that would honor them.** What’s the best invitation we could offer? Maybe all they want is to have a cup of coffee. Maybe they would like to help you do flowers because they are nuts about flowers too. Maybe you could invite them to come here and be part of this crew that does flowers at CPC. Maybe they would like to come to church, and you can invite them. Maybe their kid hasn’t been to Sunday School ever, and you can say, “Hey, look, why doesn’t Johnny go with Joe to Sunday School.” Don’t even invite them to church. “I’ll take the kids to Sunday School.” Discover their story so you discern what the best invitation is. Maybe that invitation is to just to come over to your house and meet some other non-weird religious friends, if you have any non-weird religious friends. Inviting is not rocket science, but it’s a little bit of a gulp. Can I just show you for three minutes how invitations work.

(Video starts)

The reason we are here is because somebody stepped outside of their comfort zone and invited us.

I had a friend introduce me into the church, and she invited me to Upper Room, and it was a totally new experience. I was learning something I had never learned in 15 or 18 years.

Well, actually, Mary here, she invited me into small groups on Wednesday night, and I started in sixth grade.

I was invited to Mom’s Morning, and Mom’s Morning became a huge turning point for me.

I picked a fight with John Crosby in a basketball game, and for guys that’s a way to kind of bond. He invited me to church, and I’ve been coming ever since. That’s probably 20 years ago, and it’s changed my life.

It changed me in great ways. When Laura invited Keith and me to come, it was for the young married couples and singles. Then Laura also invited me to a women's Bible study, so I got to meet more people in the community that way. I went off to college and when I moved back to Minnesota, I remembered I had this connection here. It stuck, and I've been here ever since.

My friend invited me. I just stayed with what he gave me and invited other people and my family. I think it's great having someone who invites me. Another thing is, it's really fun.

We showed up and got hooked after the first service. Now we are deacons and just love being of service to people. None of that would have happened if that great young lady hadn't chosen to be a channel of the Holy Spirit and just bring us in. It makes us want to invite others, which we've been doing, because this is our church home and we want people to come home with us.

It can be nerve wracking to invite because you think, "Oh, will the church deliver or will it be a good sermon?" But, you know, that kind of a thing is really not up to us. To invite doesn't mean to convince. It really just means to invite, and the rest is up to God. I picked up a brochure this morning for a mom I know, who I think would benefit tremendously from Mom's Morning. I'm going to invite her to Mom's Morning this week.

Through time I became more and more involved. People invited me to a small group. I'm an elder now. It's changed my relationship with my wife, my children, my coworkers, everything. My whole outlook on life is completely different because of an invitation.

We come to The Table most often. We have a play date or friends over during a Sunday sporting event or whatever and we say, "Hey, we go to church at six. Do you want to join us and we always go to D'Amico afterwards." We don't think D'Amico's is the draw. We think potentially CPC might be part of it too, but it's fun to combine both worship and then some fellowship afterwards. I like a church that isn't just hymns and boring sermons but one that's really fun. It's gotten to be a really important part of my life.

I know my life has changed since I was invited here and I would like other people to have that same experience. I just want to set a good example for everyone, like at school, and show that God is who I believe in.

When people have an invitation, it makes them feel special, and it makes them feel like they can be a part of something. When you feel special, you *want* to be a part of something, so a lot can come from an invitation. Whether it's a cup of coffee or joining the group you're with. I just feel like it's very important for each and every one of us to step out of our boxes and be a spokesperson for God.

Jesus said, "I came to heal the sick." The healthy don't need a doctor. At one time in my life, I was very, very sick. I'm still sick now, of course, but at that time, I was a mess. I didn't quite know it, but I knew there was something missing in my life. Those are the people that we need in the church the most.

I love CPC so much. It has become such a huge part of my life and my family's life, that I want to invite more people to come and experience what we have been blessed with as a family.

And how many times have you come to CPC now this past year do you think?

About 15.

And are you going to keep coming back?

Definitely!

(Video ends)

Was it just me or did four people actually say, "I really hope when they come, we don't have a boring sermon" or some variation of that? I think I heard it. Can you think of somebody who feels thirsty? Do you have anybody in your life who is like that woman Jesus met at the well who needs love because they are lonely, or needs peace because they are anxious, or needs help because they are at the end of their rope? They might need real faith instead of religious answers or feeling religious. Do you know anybody who is skeptical about God, who would like to have more than that? That's the person I think God wants to use you to bring a little living water. Not the whole bucket. Not to throw them in the well but a taste of the living water.

I brought this out to show you. It's what I call a fool's bench. Now some people say a fool's bench is from Medieval Europe, where on April Fool's Day the pastor would dress up like a clown and it was the one sermon of the year that people could understand. I don't like that story. It's possible that the idea came from Middle Ages Europe though, where there were churches that had pews elaborately carved on the ends with people. That was the fool's pew, the fool's bench, because the people were fools for Christ. Most commonly though, in North America in the first century, the fool's bench was used out on the frontier where churches like ours would spring up. The churches would be filled with pews facing the front but in the little narthex, there were one or two pews facing the doors going outside. If you invited somebody to come to church, they were never there on time, of course; they didn't know how to get there, or they didn't realize the traffic was going to be bad, or they weren't really sure they wanted to come, or they thought, "Well, maybe I'll miss those songs at the beginning. I don't like those songs." But for whatever reason, they weren't there. The person inviting them could be seen sitting on the benches in the narthex, looking outside, waiting for them. Everybody else has gone into church but have seen you, knowing exactly why you were sitting where you are because this person was not as good a friend as you thought, right? And you felt like a fool, and so it was called the fool's bench.

Churches that believed that the Gospel was all about living water put out more and more fool's benches because it became a mark of honor to invite somebody to come. Not just to come to church, but to come and see whether this God that I'm talking about might be the real deal or might not be for you. Last night after I finished the sermon, a guy came up to me, someone I didn't know, and he said, "Okay, okay. Next week that's me. I'll be on the bench, all right? You going to be there?" I said, "I'll be there." Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for all these women who've been at the well and the men who You have loved. You have given them the gift of God, living water. Hope and forgiveness and grace and love and life the way it's meant to be. I thank You that they are not cheap and hoard it to themselves. I pray that You will help them invite others, that they will say, "Come. Come and see," so they can decide for themselves. Bless us as You blessed that woman so long ago. Bless us as You blessed the disciples so long ago. Bless us because You love us as much as You loved them. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.