

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Boldly Extending the Invitation | 2 Kings 6-7

We tell a lot of stories here. All different kinds of stories. Part of the reason we do this is because Jesus told a lot of stories. And the reason that Jesus told a lot of stories is because when you have a lecture, things come into your brain, but when you hear a story, it comes into your heart. It can change your heart long after the brain forgets. I think that's why stories have power. So what I'd like to do this morning is just tell you two stories that I think pull together what we've been trying to say all winter. The first of the stories happened to me and Laura several years ago.

Some people, some friends actually from another city, had come to Laura and me asking if we would be open to leaving CPC and helping them start a church in a new city. And they invited us there and said, "We've been praying. We'd like you to pray about this." What are you going to say? "No, I'm not going to pray about this." So we ended up going to that city and it was wonderful. You know, they put you in the nice hotel, you have the nice dinners, you hear the dreams, and the last day that we were there the head of this group of people got us in the car. It was a beautiful summer evening. We drove through the city. And I had a convertible—drove through the city and talked about what could happen there. And then as darkness fell, we drove out to this little point where you could look back at the city. It looked like this. It was just beautiful.

Now I know you. You're trying to figure out what city that is. That's Singapore. Ha, ha, ha, I'm not telling you. But they all look alike. This beautiful skyline just stretched out as far as we could see. We got out of the car and this guy said, "I've come here over and over, because I have to tell you, I've had this dream. I've had this dream that there is a man over there, a man from Macedonia, and he's calling out to you. He's calling out, "Laura and John. Come over here. Come over here and save us." At that point most of you probably would have said, "Thanks. Taxi." But what Laura and I knew was that this guy had been praying, and he was remembering a story from the Scriptures.

It's a story that happens right after Jesus is having His word spread, and Paul and some of his companions are going all around the Roman Empire. In Acts 16 it says this:

⁶Paul and his companions traveled through the region of Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

Wouldn't you like to know what that was about? Were there flames there? Were there guards? Did somebody get sick? What happened? The Spirit of Jesus wouldn't allow them.

⁸So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia, standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us. ¹⁰After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. [Acts 16:6-10]

That's the story this guy was telling; he felt that's what God was calling us to do. I've never forgotten that skyline. When he was telling that story, and talking about the people on the other side, I was reminded for the first time in a long time that the gospel is called "Good News" because people live with bad news. I was overwhelmed by the scope and the power of human need; of a need for grace from God. Now, in the end, Laura and I decided that God was calling us even more strongly to stay here. But when I looked out my window, I felt like I wanted to see that same need. So that's the first story.

You know, the difference between a talk with good information and a word from God for you is need. It's need. Because I think that people don't follow without need. I think you can believe in Jesus and you can affiliate with Jesus people. But when Jesus is an add-on to an already pretty good life, there's no need. And without need, you don't follow. You stay where you are because it's comfortable. But when there is need—either your need or somebody else's need—then you're willing to sacrifice and to go to a different place. And so I guess the first story is about "Do you see anybody in need around you?"

This week I was meeting with a guy and he said, "I have messed it up so bad. My marriage is over isn't it? I can't fix it." And I said, "No, I don't think you can. I don't think you can fix it, but I don't know what lies ahead." This guy...there is need in him and his family all over. And then on Tuesday, I was talking with one of our youth staff. She was telling me about a seventh grade boy in our youth program who feels like he's on the outside looking in. You ever have that feeling of being on the outside looking in at everybody? And they don't just make him feel excluded, they make him feel like a loser. This kid is one aching need. Friday I walked in for something and bumped into a guy that I know here. Of course we started talking about the campaign. I said, "How did you get here?" He said, "Well, it was either that or I would drink myself to death. I was a drunk; I was an alcoholic, and I was out of control. And somebody brought me to the AA meeting that's here. And I came here for a month, and I got to the place where I could admit that my wife was right, and my boss was right, and my kids were right, and I had lost them all because I was out of control. I was powerless." He said, "Then I came into the Sanctuary and you started talking about this grace."

Ok, can I just tell you—that's why they call it "Good News." Because people who feel

pretty good about their life or their own efforts, they can believe all about Jesus. But only people who remember what real need felt like or who see the real need will sacrifice and follow. Whether it's a capital campaign or inviting somebody out for coffee, Laura and I decided we're called here and we want God to open our eyes to the needs of people. And I want God to open your eyes.

Second story. This one takes place a long time ago. It's from a part of the Bible you probably never read—it's from 2 Kings. It tells how Israel has been split in half after a civil war. The blue part in the north is called Israel, and the yellow part in the south is the Kingdom of Judah. They each have their own kings, they each have their own prophets, they each have their own problems, but what they have in common is that all the nations around them hate them. When this story takes place, bad things are coming to our friends in Israel in the blue. In 2 Kings 6, we read about Elisha who is the prophet up there. He is living in Samaria, the capital of Israel. And what has happened is that one of the surrounding countries, the Arameans, have invaded. This is the story.

It says that some time later, the king of Aram mobilized his entire army and laid siege to Samaria. The siege lasted so long that there was a great famine in the city. People were literally fighting over who would eat whom next. And when the king heard that story, he tore his clothing and he said, "This is all Elijah's fault, that prophet. I'm going to kill him today." But when Elijah came to him, the prophet told the king, "Hear the word of God. This is what the Lord says. By tomorrow there will be so much food you won't even be able to sell it. You'll have to give it away." But they mocked him. Now in another part of the city, there were four men with leprosy, out at the city gate. They had been pushed away, and they were starving at the city gate. They turned to each other and said, "Why are we standing here? We're going to die. Let's go surrender to the enemy. Maybe they'll spare us and give us something to eat. And if they kill us, well we're dead anyway." So that night, that same night, they got up. And they went to the enemy camp. When the lepers reached the camp there was nobody there. It was empty. The Lord had caused the Arameans to hear the sound of horses and chariots and a huge army. So they left the camp just the way it was and ran away for their lives. Well, the lepers entered one of the tents and they ate and they drank until they were ready to burst. Then they took all the silver and gold and armor, and they went off and buried it. And they returned to another tent and they took more stuff, and they hid that. And then they turned to each other and said, "Oh, this is not good. This isn't right. What we're doing is not right. This is a day of good news and we're keeping it to ourselves. If we wait till daylight more will die, and punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this. So they did. They yelled over the walls. And after the king made sure that it wasn't a trap, people flooded out of the gates. They ran right over the guards. They flooded over the gates out to the enemy camp. It happened just as Elijah the prophet had said to the king: God will give you so much food you won't even be able to sell it; you'll have to give it away.

I love that story. I think it's a great story of hope. The first story was about who gets invited...the people who are saying *help me*, which is everybody. The answer is everybody's invited, but don't be surprised if it's mostly the needy and the hungry who respond. This story answers the second question, "What are we supposed to do? What are we supposed to be doing in a hungry world?" This is a story of how God uses needy people to invite needy people. God says broken people listen best to broken people, not superstars. God uses lepers with a little extra bread in their hands to invite. To say, "Come on." That's the heart of Christianity, right? The heart of the Christian message, from the start, has been the idea of invitation. But you know what happens? When you get inside the church, somehow you don't feel superior, but you feel good. *This is where I belong. This is what I hoped for.* You feel good. And you know what happens then? You don't want it to happen, but church becomes the cool kids table. *I love it so much I want to be here.* The challenge for every church, whether you're six-years-old or sixty-years-old, is that when the church starts, it's all about service. God calls us to service. We want to serve the world. People do service and others come and you know what happens? Service turns into serve us. Service. Serve us.

When you get more people, it's about serving us. And reaching out is fine. It's a good idea for other people to do. That's the challenge for CPC. We're all about service, but we're really in many ways about serve us. It's human. We all fight it. I absolutely want the pastor to invite more people to the church. Wait, what's wrong with that? I absolutely want more people to come as long as they don't sit in my pew. I absolutely want this church to have organ music and classical hymns as long as I don't have to listen to it. I absolutely want there to be small groups for everybody, but that person shouldn't come into my small group because we all know each other. Service. Serve us.

How does that change? I think it only changes when you change the story. There was a pastor named D.T. Niles who heard this story in 2 Kings 6 and said, "That's Christianity." He said, "That's Christianity. Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found the bread. Christianity is one leper handing a loaf of bread to another leper." It changes what we mean by inviting. Inviting in our church does not look like evangelism. Evangelism is almost a swear word in our culture isn't it? It's a bad word. It's about rallies, and TV preachers, and you're going to hell tracts. Because I'm not too sorry that you're going to hell. But when we invite, if we're a starving beggar offering bread to somebody else, that's what gives life. That's what turns a church into a bread factory.

Tim Keller is a pastor in New York and Keller says, "When the world sees us doing evangelism, they just see us recruiting. They just see us wanting to fill our church or have more people in our club. When the world sees us doing evangelism, they just see us recruiting. When they see us doing justice, they see the glory of God. When we are inviting instead of evangelizing, we're inviting people to experience mercy, to share with us a passion for justice." Inviting to unconditional acceptance whether you are black or white, republican or democrat, whether you are gay or straight, whether you are

confused or faithful, we believe the invitation is for all of us to hope, even in the face of death. Outreach is not supposed to be solving their problems because they're wicked. It's remembering that we are all lepers and some of us have been blessed with bread. We hold it out.

Last week was great. I don't know if you remember but John and Maggie Keller—young couple—were up here, talking about what they were going to do. And Maggie said last week that when people invested here twenty years ago in another campaign, they had absolutely no idea that they were building a house for Maggie, and for Maggie's kids to come to. But since they did, she said, now it's my turn and I have no idea who will come in. Last week we talked about how God is the restorer of the world and wants to send you out to bless the world. Today, I want to say that God is the rescuer of the starving. And he does it by sending out the starving.

So now we are at Jesus. It always ends up with Jesus. Jesus invites people to come, and not listen to him. Invites people to come, and not like him. Invites people to come, and follow him. And when people come to him, and they decide to follow him, they tell other people. Philip hears about Jesus and goes over and tells Nathaniel, "Hey you got to hear this guy. He's from Nazareth, but he's the Messiah." A woman gets met at a well in the middle of the day, and she goes and tells all of her friends, "Come and listen to this guy who told me everything about me and loved me anyway." Jesus meets a person who is filled with demons and heals them. And then the guy wants to come with Jesus and Jesus says, "No. Go tell all the people that you scared off what happened to you. Invite them."

One of the great stories: Jesus tells a swindling, tax cheating, criminal that he can come and follow. And the guy says, "I'm giving away half of my money right here. And I'm going to have a party for all the other crooks in town. Please come." And Jesus comes. I think that that's the fulfillment of a story that began a long time ago. That broken people get blessed and then they get taught to share. That lepers get healed, that beggars get fed, and there's extra bread to share, if you dare.

Lord Jesus I thank You that this church keeps getting reminded that we are not the cool kids table. We keep remembering that You came to so many of us in ways that changed our lives. I pray, Lord God, as we invite others, they would sense Your love. That we would remember what You have done for us. And that you would do it for them. In your great name, we give thanks. Amen.

This spoken word, by Heather Hammond, followed John's sermon:

Can you remember the first time you said yes to Jesus? Maybe it was a walk to the altar, a Sunday school room, kneeling on the steps of a church. Or maybe you were alone in a hotel room reading a Bible. Or sitting beside a quiet creek in the woods when

you heard a small voice inside you. And for the first time, you began to listen. Sometimes our life gets clouded. We forget what propelled us to God that very first time. In all our business, we can forget why we said yes to Jesus. And what was that first yes? Something inside you that begged for more. More than the to-do lists, the laundry piles, the mid-terms, the growing list of files to be dealt with, checked off and washed away... finished and forgotten.

You had a feeling that life is more than what we see. More than our hurts, more than our disappointments or deep sadness, more than our lingering fears or growing loneliness that we never let on. More than the heartbreaking brokenness of the world in the daily news, of the hurting world of our daily lives. And somewhere deep inside, you felt a call to a bigger story. A life well lived, where you know that you are welcomed just the way you are. And you are loved, just the way you are. Remember now in this sacred space, the space you set aside in your week to meet with God. Remember that you are a child of God. Beloved son, precious daughter. And you bring a piece of God with you wherever you go. You are God's very own. You are called to live the light, to be the light, to shine the light. You took a step toward God and He came running to you to wrap His arms around you, to throw you a party and to celebrate, because you were lost and now you are found.

This is the invitation of God to you: Remember the joy of your first yes to God. This is the invitation to the world. The joy, peace, hope, and love of falling into the arms of God. You are the light of the world. Like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket. No they put it on a stand, so that it gives light to everyone in the house.

And that's the invitation. In Him, was life, and that life was the light to all. And the light shines in the darkness wherever people are calling out. And the darkness cannot overcome it. We have been invited into the light and to share it. And it shines out through all the little cracks in our lives . . . from inside of us. God dearly wants other people to share in the light, and to experience love, and joy, and hope.

So as we sing our last song, I'd encourage you, as the offering plate goes by, if you want to make this your invitation, to do so boldly. There are a lot of different ways to invite people. This isn't the only one. This is just one we're doing today. But we're excited that God is calling us to do this together and God will take care of the rest.

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.