

John 1:35-51 + Mission Work Starts with an Invitation
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY
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The handwriting on the envelope is in an elegant script. You open the envelope to pull out a specially-designed card. As you flip open the card, the elegant script catches your eye again. “You are cordially invited to attend...” In your hands is an invitation. You have been “cordially invited to attend” a wedding, a baby shower, a graduation, or a special dinner in someone’s honor. That invitation provides you with an opportunity to celebrate, to rejoice, to give thanks for God’s blessing. Of all the billions of people out there in the world, you are one of the select few who received that particular invitation. Your participation at that special event starts with that invitation. The people who invited you hope you will attend and celebrate with them.

This morning we’re talking about mission work, about reaching out to people in our communities, in our region, in our country, in our world with Christ. We’re talking about sharing the gospel not just in faraway places or faraway lands, but right here at home in our own circles of family and friends with people we know. Yet as it says in bold letters on the cover of your worship folder, **MISSION WORK STARTS WITH AN INVITATION**. It starts with receiving Christ’s gospel invitation ourselves and then sharing that invitation with others.

Shortly after Jesus’ baptism and the beginning of his public ministry, John the Baptizer introduced the crowds to their Savior. **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** (John 1:29) John knew Jesus had come to bring forgiveness and eternal life to all those people in the crowds through his own sacrifice. John had gained quite a following as the prophet preparing the way for the Lord, but John wanted all of his followers to follow Jesus.

It didn’t take long before two of John’s disciples—Andrew and John—did just that. **“The two disciples heard him say this and followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and noticed them following him, he asked them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which means “Teacher”), ‘where are you staying?’ ‘Come and you’ll see,’ he replied. So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day.”** Because John introduced them to the Savior, those two disciples became the first recipients of Jesus’ invitation. Mission work started as two souls received Spirit-created faith in Christ and started a lifelong journey to heaven.

...But that invitation also started something else inside Andrew. **“Andrew...first found his own brother Simon and told him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated ‘the Christ’), and he brought Simon to Jesus.”**

Andrew couldn’t wait to share the gospel invitation he had received with his brother. That’s why the first thing Andrew did after he spent time with Jesus was find his brother Simon to tell him about Jesus.

You see, Andrew wanted his brother to meet Jesus, so he made that his top priority. He literally brought Simon to Jesus. He didn’t text or message or call his brother. He didn’t wait a couple days or weeks for the “right time.” No, Andrew wanted Simon to have the same hope, the same forgiveness, the same eternal life he had received right away. Andrew loved his brother so much that he wanted to share Jesus with him. Mission work started as another soul received Spirit-created faith in Christ and started a lifelong journey to heaven.

The next day Jesus took a little more direct approach with a man named Philip. We’re simply told, **“He found Philip and told him, ‘Follow me.’”** Jesus took the initiative with Philip. Jesus’ direct invitation was simple and unembellished, but packed with power. **“Follow me.”** Mission work started as another soul received Spirit-created faith in Christ and started a lifelong journey to heaven.

Like Andrew, Philip couldn’t wait to share that gospel invitation with his friend Nathanael. Now Nathanael knew his Old Testament, but he was skeptical about Philip’s invitation. **“Philip found Nathanael and told him, ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law (and so did the prophets): Jesus the son of Joseph, from Nazareth.’ ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ Nathanael asked him. ‘Come and see,’ Philip answered.”**

Nathanael was skeptical about the invitation, because what Philip told him didn’t seem to make sense with what he knew. There weren’t any direct prophecies about the Savior coming from the lowly backwater of Nazareth. The Savior was to come from Bethlehem and the royal line of King David!

Yet in spite of Nathanael’s skepticism, the Lord blessed Philip’s insistence. His invitation was as simple as the one Jesus gave Philip, **“Come and see.”** Nathanael didn’t continue arguing. He accepted Philip’s invitation and

came to see Jesus. Philip cared so much about his friend that he wanted Nathanael to know Jesus, and Jesus had all the answers that Nathanael needed. Mission work started as another soul received Spirit-created faith in Christ and started a lifelong journey to heaven.

“Come and you’ll see.” “Follow me.” With simple invitations, Jesus started something amazing. Unbeknownst to them, Jesus would make these disciples his witnesses of how he would complete God’s plan to save our sinful world. Jesus had sought each of them out like a shepherd carefully searching for lost sheep. With Jesus’ invitation, they started enjoying his forgiveness through faith in him. That invitation started a change in their lives and the lives of many others, not just their loved ones, but even your life and mine!

You see, we too have received Christ’s gospel invitation! Jesus doesn’t come to you in a dream or while you’re driving down the road. No, he comes to you through his Word, inviting you like he did those siblings and friends centuries ago. **“Come and you’ll see.” “Follow me.”** From infants to the elderly, Jesus extends that invitation of grace and forgiveness and life, but like those first disciples, none of us deserve to receive Christ’s invitation.

By nature, you and I despise it. The simplicity of Jesus’ invitation sometimes seems simplistic. It seems insufficient to change your life, when you want answers right now—answers for your financial woes, your family conflicts, your thankless job, your spiritual struggles, even our winter weather. To our souls, which are by nature “lost,” Jesus’ invitation seems too abstract, too simple, too irrelevant for our lives today, tomorrow, and next week.

Then someone introduces you to Jesus. They share his Word. A pastor, a Sunday School teacher, a friend, a loved one in Christ comes to you with God’s Word and brings the fulfilling answers you need, even if they’re not necessarily the answers you want. You hear how God hates sin and therefore hates you because of your willing disobedience and rebellion. You see how selfish thoughts, hurtful words and loveless actions only prod the holy Judge on to greater condemnation. You stare into the depths of hell and realize why it would be better to be separated from God for all eternity than to be separated from his love for eternity, which is what hell is really all about. You’re crushed with guilt because of your selfishness, your envy, your pride, your lust, your greed.

Then you hear those blessed, burden-removing words of invitation, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** You hear how God loves you, not because of your decision or merit on your part, but because of Jesus. Through his Word, Jesus invites you, “Follow me and see what I have done for you! See me in the manger, weak and lowly, yet God made flesh—that’s what I did for you. See me grow into a teenager and an adult, never once disobeying the holy will of my heavenly Father—that’s what I did for you. See my great miracles and hear my powerful preaching—that’s what I did for you. See the long road through hell that I traveled to give up my life for you on the cross—that’s what I did for you. See my outstretched hands pierced with nails and my blood poured out, but with a single word on my lips, “Finished!”—that’s what I did for you. See my cold, lifeless body placed in a borrowed tomb, a tomb I abandoned alive only three days later—that’s what I did for you. Forgiveness, hope, peace, purpose, joy, eternal life—all earned for you. Come and enjoy what I have done for you.”

With that invitation, your new life starts with a changed perspective, changed priorities, and a changed outlook. **“Come and you’ll see.”** We have! Yet that invitation also starts something else in our hearts—the desire to invite.

Who do you love most in this world? Apart from our Savior, that would probably be your family members, especially those in your immediate family—your spouse, your kids, your parents, your siblings, your grandparents. You want what’s best for them. You want them to have all the necessities in life and more. So if you love them so much, why not invite them to meet Jesus? Why wouldn’t you want them to enjoy what Jesus started in you?

Surely you want them to have their sins forgiven, to have purpose for their lives on earth, and to see them with Jesus in heaven someday. Yet so often you overlook them as people who need Christ’s gospel invitation. When you take a real look at the spiritual condition of your family, are there loved ones who don’t know Jesus or who have strayed from his side and are spiritually “lost”? Are they crushed by the guilt of past sins or a continuing sin of weakness? Have they lost hope or purpose? Have you shared with them what matters most to you? Have you invited them to meet Jesus? That’s what Andrew did when he brought Simon to Jesus. That’s what we do when we bring our loved ones to Jesus. Andrew wasn’t going to change Simon’s heart. Jesus did. We’re not going to change any hearts either. Only Jesus can do that through his Word. That’s why we need to bring our loved ones to him.

Now your friends or family might react like Nathanael. They might be skeptical about what you believe or what God's Word says, but that need not stop you from extending Christ's gospel invitation. How will your friends know about their Savior if you don't tell them? Through you, Jesus extends his invitation to the people you love and care about. And don't worry—he provides the answers. Don't worry—we don't change hearts, Jesus does. Your task and mine is simply to extend Jesus' gospel invitation to the people we love.

You might wonder, "Where do I start?" In your worship folder is a chart¹ for you to fill out to help you identify people in your circle of family and friends, people who need Jesus, people with whom you can share Jesus' invitation of grace. Put that chart someplace where you can see it regularly. Put it on the fridge or on a mirror or bulletin board or in your Bible in your home. That way you can be reminded how your mission work starts with your invitation. By his grace, Jesus has made us special recipients of his gospel invitation, and now it's our turn to share it. May Jesus bless you and others as you share his invitation to eternal life! Amen.

¹ This chart is available from Pastor Gumm @ pastor@nycrossofchrist.org.