

## **Come and See: A sermon on radical hospitality**

**Rev. Steven T. Savides, October 4, 2009**

**Texts: Genesis 18:1-14 and John 1:35-51**

Let us pray for illumination: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Come and see. Come and see. I don't know if there are three more significant words in the English language. I'm pretty sure everyone here has used them at least once in their lives. (Bending over, prodding the ground) Woe Mom, come and see this. Look it, there's something under the rock. Hey sweetheart, come quickly, you've got to see this – she's crawling! Quick come and see, Youk is at bat. We haven't lost yet. Come and see.

Have you heard these words? Have you said this phrase? Who here has never heard or used this phrase? Come and see.

Have any of you said to a friend: Look, I know it's on a Sunday morning at 10 a.m... but just come and see? Have you ever said to a relative, friend, neighbor, colleague, or even a stranger you've just met for the first time on the bus: come and see! Come and see where I worship, come and see where I praise God every Sunday, come and see where week after week my heart is converted to Jesus, come and see where holiness is embodied in a group of people dedicated to serving God. When was the last time you said anything

like this? When was the last time you invited someone to your church, to experience worship.

Did any here come for the first time because someone invited you and said: “come and see”? Maybe they used other words. Did any one here come for the first time because you responded to an invitation from a relative, friend, neighbor, colleague or even a stranger? Anyone?

Come and see! Three such simple words. They’re the basis of a gracious, intriguing, almost irresistible invitation. There’s nothing in them that seeks to coerce . They’re not: You will come and see! That wouldn’t work! And if it did, oh dear, you’d be a powerful tyrant or the other person would be a self-deprecating submissive. Oh, but come and see, come and see for yourself what I love to experience each week.

Come and see! That’s the answer Jesus gave Andrew and Simon when they asked where he was staying. Come and see. It was an open invitation for them to experience who Jesus was and I’m mindful of that scripture in Luke’s Gospel: “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Luke 9:58) I wonder what they saw – where Jesus was staying, what convinced them that he was the Lamb of God? And when Nathanael objected to Philip’s invitation to meet the Messiah because Jesus came from Nazareth and nothing good comes from Nazareth, what was Philip’s response? Come and see. Make up your own mind.

In his enlightening book *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, which we'll be using to guide us, Robert Schnase says that the reason churches grow is because their pastors and laity are prepared to joyously offer the invitation to others: come and see. Schnase is a bishop in the Methodist church and draws on a concept by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church. The concept is called "prevenient grace." And prevenient grace is a very complicated phrase for a very simple assurance. Each and every one of us and all of humanity are ready – to some extent – to respond to God's goodness and the unconditional love God has for each and every person. There's an innate ability in person to want to respond to God's prevenient grace. Sadly, many religious traditions have focused on God as a vengeful, bitter old white guy on a cloud who loathes those who do wrong, who wants the wicked to burn in hell. Many a minister or priest has tried to use scare tactics to get people to believe in God. But God's grace is so big, and so powerful, and so overwhelmingly real that even the hardest criminal can find it in his or her heart a desire to turn to God, to return to God and be forgiven in the fullness of God's grace.

But how will people know this unless they are invited to come and see what kind of proclamation is possible? How will even the most hardened criminal know to repent unless he or she is led to a place where they can experience – even if only for the most fleeting of moments – the gentle love of God.

Even we who come to this place of sanctuary Sunday after Sunday risk losing sight of why it is we return. You see it is in the church where we encounter the Body of Christ alive in the world today. It is in the church, this church, we can come and see the world from a different vantage point, just

as God made it to be. It is in the church – when the church is open and invitational and responsive to the needs of others – that we can see first hand the love that is possible in an institution. And let’s face it, who knows better than we do that this community is not the most perfect community out there. And thanks be to God for that! Who knows better than we do that it’s sometimes hard to love the person you don’t even like! Who knows better than we do that in Christ, and through Christ, all things are possible. Who knows better than we do that our hardened, sinful hearts can turn to God and experience even an inkling of God’s love – even when we’re so angry and fiendish that we would rather not go there. Who knows better than we do the full potential of the church of Jesus Christ to overcome divisions, to still the senses, to turn the heart to God, to want return to God just as the prophet Ezekiel calls us to do! In Ezekiel 33 verse 11 the prophet declares God’s word to the people of Israel and to us: “As I live, says the lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die O house of Israel.” Who knows better than we do because of our service in and through the church that God’s will for us is life, and life abundant even when circumstances seem to proclaim the opposite!

In his book on the five practices Bishop Schnase recalls a meeting he had in a congregation where (I quote) “... we discussed the theological meaning of the Body of Christ and delved into the ‘why’ of invitation, welcome, and hospitality. Why do we invite and welcome people into our midst?” This is a critically important question for us. “Why do we invite and welcome people into our midst? So that our statistics look better to impress the Bishop [or in our case the conference or our neighbors or egos]? In order to survive as an

institution or to develop a stronger financial base? [We here have been tempted by this sin! But Schnase goes on:] We discussed the fundamental purpose for which the church exists—to draw people into relationship with God through Jesus Christ—and how this changes lives. To live in community with others is part of God’s plan and intention for us. A congregation is a school for love, the place where God’s Spirit forms us and the place where we learn how to give love to and receive love from friends, neighbors, and strangers. The church is the presence of Christ in the world, the means by which God knits us into community in order to transform our lives and the lives of those around us.” (Schnase 16)

This beautiful statement of what the church is should be written on banner and hung in our sanctuary! It should be emblazoned on our foreheads! It should be the reason why we come and why we keep coming. I love the way he says: “A congregation is a school for love, the place where God’s Spirit forms us and the place where we learn how to give love to and receive love from friends, neighbors, and strangers. The church is the presence of Christ in the world, the means by which God knits us into community in order to transform our lives and the lives of those around us.” Why would anyone want to take a summer off from such a place? Why would anyone not want to honor such a place? Why would anyone not want to be a part of such a reality?

Are *we* there yet? Well, no and yes. We can be willful human beings. We can be stubborn as mules, tricky as monkeys, and mean as only people can be mean. We all have things to work through. So no, we’re not there yet!

**BUT ... and hear me loudly and clearly ... but we are there. Each day, each**

worship service, each worshipful committee meeting, each gift of time, treasure, talent offered, brings us closer to the end which is the full manifestation of the Church as a school for love and the presence of Christ in the world. In the words of that hymn: We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord! So yes, we are there. We are the presence of Christ in the world and God is knitting us into community in order to transform our lives and the lives of those around us. So our invitation into this community needs to be bold. We need to open a space for everyone out there who has the potential to be transformed by God! Our invitation needs to be bold and sincere and simple: Come and see!

Oh, and when people come and see, we need to be prepared to greet them and welcome them like Abraham greeted his and Sarah's three visitors, whom the bible describes as The Lord appearing to Moses. We need to welcome guests and each other as if they and we could be the presence of God entering our home. Abraham ran from the tent to meet them, he invited them into his camp, he brought water for them to wash their feet and encouraged them to rest. Abraham offered these visitors food. Sarah baked the cakes, a servant prepared a calf. They all worked together to sustain and replenish their visitors.

And look what the result was? The three strangers who were blessed by Abraham and Sarah went on to bless them. They promised a miracle: that despite her and Abraham's age Sarah would have a child. She laughed out loud. And who, at that age, wouldn't? But listen to the blessing in the strangers' response:

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

And now I ask each of you this question: Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Indeed nothing is too wonderful for God. God can do anything! Through God we will overcome cynicism and negativity. Is anything too wonderful for God? Through God we will overcome fear. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord our God? God will overcome our timidity, our insularity, and bless us with the gifts of eloquence and courage to declare that this congregation is the school of love! That this congregation is the presence of Christ in the world. So come and see!

All we need to do to get the ball rolling is to say three tiny words to our relatives, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and even strangers: Come and see! Come and see! Come and see!

Amen