

***"Who'd You Invite?"***

***Psalm 14: 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10***

***September 14, 2025***

***Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut***

***The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor***

Who'd you invite to church today?

It's September. Much as we might yearn for the "lazy, hazy days of summer," most of us are back with routines of work, school, co-curricular activities and.....church.

Who'd you invite to church today?

"Friends and Family Sunday," we call it here, a time to invite our friends and family to come see where many of us spend Sunday mornings and to experience why we do it.

Who'd you invite to church today?

The question is not intended to engender guilt if we didn't invite anyone. And certainly our guests, many of whom came as a result of your invitations, did not invite anybody. At least, they didn't invite them here. The question "Who'd you invite to church today?" is designed to make us think. It's intended to probe the idea that no one has to tell us to invite people to the things we are passionate about. Right? As the Nike sports franchise says, we "just do it."

I mean, if you have ever gotten on Chris Shay's radar for music ministry, that guy will track you down! Think about the things you are passionate about: football, baseball, trains, travel, knitting, trains, music, art, trains, theatre, history, reading...and did I mention trains? No one has to tell you "Tell some people about your interest." You just can't help yourself. The joke among my sons is to ask "How long in a family gathering before Dad mentions trains?" It's usually not long!

So what's up with some of us? Why isn't church on the list? Yes, there are bad church actors and boring preachers and church disagreements, all of which detract from the vital ministry of Jesus Christ and his love and salvation. And it is also true, as Bishop Jane Middleton says, that our spirituality is as unique as our fingerprints. Which is part of my answer to why there are so many different churches. PEOPLE are

different, with different needs and preferences and ways of expressing the best of Christian faith. There's nothing wrong with that.

But maybe, just maybe, we've gotten complacent in the church. The reason Jesus told these two stories in today's Gospel from Luke is because he scandalized the religious people of his day with who he invited to be part of God's party. Jesus proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was at hand and invited people to join him in preparing the way for, as we say in the prayer he taught, the *"kingdom to come...on earth as it is in heaven."* What that meant for Jesus is that the kingdom—God's love, peace and justice—was available to all. "All" means all.

That annoyed—or worse—the religious leaders of Jesus' day who thought there should be a litmus test on who's "in" and who's "out." They "grumbled" at Jesus' table fellowship with sinners.

Who'd you invite to church today? Any sinners? If you said "no" but invited yourself...well, good luck with that. You heard Paul's testimony twice, in the Words of Pardon and the Epistle: *"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."* That's us, friends. Again, not a guilt trip, just a fact. We've all messed up.

Of course, there are mess ups and then there are MESS UPS. It's human impulse to think (and maybe say) *"Well, I'm not perfect but I'm not as bad as (fill in the blank.)"* Here's the problem. Three of them, actually.

First, if we're going to justify ourselves we don't need a Savior, do we? Why have a Savior if we can save ourselves? But we can't. Look at the week's news. Columnist and podcaster Charlie Kirk, age 31 was shot and killed on the same day – Wednesday, September 10—that Evergreen High School southwest of Denver had a shooter who wounded two students, one critically, before taking his own life. The shooter was 16 years old. Russian drones violate Polish air space and scramble NATO jets. Vaccine protocols are eliminated for Florida school children and the COVID vaccine is limited in distribution from, among others, school teachers and medical professionals. We can't save ourselves, and thinking we can blocks us from the redemptive love that Christ freely offers.

Second, looking at the failings of others divides us from our common humanity. Jesus told LOTS of stories about this. Don't try to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye when you've got a log in your own. If you're feeling blessed and thanking God for it, great. But not at the expense of your neighbor whose circumstance might not be so favorable. Think only bad things happen to bad people? Come on.

But most importantly, the problem with saying "I'm not as bad as..." robs us of the joy of salvation. Jesus got right to the point in the two stories he told to quiet the naysayers. Got 100 sheep? Lose one? You're going to turn the meadow, the valley, the woods upside down until you find it. The 99 will be okay because that's what obedient sheep do: they tend to be okay. The wayward one needs help, and God is about providing it. And I can't help but think that all of us are wayward and need help at one time or another.

Not into sheep? No worries. Jesus has another analogy. Money. Coin. Cash that's king. It's **good** now. In the first century it was **great!** Ten coins were likely a woman's life savings. Lose one of them? She—and we, if it was 10% of our net worth—would turn the house upside down to find it.

In fact, we did. When my son Dan was an elementary school child, I gave him a Susan B. Anthony dollar coin that had been minted just a few years before. He lost it. So search we did. Everywhere. EVERYWHERE! But finding it seemed not meant to be, and we had to let the search cease. Then, later in the evening, it was time for Dan to feed the cat, his chore morning and evening. He opened the lid of the dry cat food container and there, looking up at him, was Susan B. Anthony looking up at him from where he dropped her when he fed the cat that morning. REJOICE, GIVE THANKS AND SING!

And THAT, Jesus says, is the nature of God: to seek and save the lost. And that is why we invite. Not because we presume to know who is lost and who is found, but because we all need that amazing grace, that love of God that never gives up and never gives out and never gives in; and enfolds us with assurance and strength and hope that the world can never, ever give. And that is what the church, in every time and place, is to be

about: being the community that shares that love, that speaks that love, that acts that love.

So if you invited someone today, great. And, yes, I did. Practice what you preach, preacher. But whether or not those you invited came, you extended a good word and an invitation of hospitality in the name of the One who ate with everyone and seeks to redeem everyone. Not everyone can respond at a particular time and our faith tells us that our job is to extend the invitation and let God do the rest.

And if you invited someone today and they came, to God be the glory. To those who came in response to such an invitation, welcome. If you have a church home, we hope you will return to it blessed for having been in this one. If you do not know such a community, let us introduce you to ours. Please ask questions and know that our heart's desire is to welcome you.

And if you didn't invite anyone, don't worry. This is not a guilt trip, but it is a call to put complacency behind us. It is a call, as we have said in our once-a-month testimony ministry, to remember that faith without **words** is dead. Sure, the old bromide is that I'd rather see a sermon than hear one. But if we don't speak the name of Jesus we have missed the very heart of why we do what we do. Each Sunday, each event, each conversation is an opportunity to offer love and welcome and to say, "Come and experience the joy of salvation from a God who loves us without fail."

Let's share our experience of joy: the joy of a life that has found hope, meaning and purpose, the joy of knowing a God whose yearning is to seek us wherever we are and bring us home. Amen.