

Yesterday I shared the ministry of Invite Welcome Connect in a workshop here at St. Paul's with clergy and lay leaders from here, as well as a few from nearby churches. I am honored to bring the sermon to you this morning.

The ministry of **Invite Welcome Connect** includes **three vital essentials**:

Invite = Evangelism **Welcome** = ministry of Hospitality **Connect** = ministry of Belonging

Invite/Evangelism is about inviting people not only into a relationship with you and others in this congregation; it is inviting them into a **relationship with God through Jesus**. One of the most important things I emphasize in this work is that we must create a culture of evangelism in our churches, and it starts with modeling the very behavior we are asking of our parishioners. C.S. Lewis wrote “we must form people to be little Jesus Christs in the world”, and our leaders must lead the way, starting with our clergy & lay leaders, helping people move out of their comfort zones, willing to invite others to church...willing to share their faith story. Inviting someone to church **through a personal invitation** is the most effective and essential act of reaching out, and research tells us it continues to be the number one reason people come for a first-time visit to our churches.

The **deep truth of INVITE is Courage versus Fear**. It takes courage to invite someone to church – it takes courage to share our faith stories with others... but the bottom line is that evangelism isn't so much about offering something that's ours to others so much as extending the invitation and getting out of the way, leaving the rest up to the Holy Spirit. **If** we believe in the truth of Jesus Christ...the Holy Spirit will **EMPOWER** us and give us the **COURAGE** to invite others to church....to share our faith journey....to discern our own individual giftedness.

For years my personal go-to scripture has been: **2nd Timothy 1:7 – For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind**. So I was thrilled to see this verse in today's epistle readings – (a slightly different translation) **For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.**”

As I have taken the work of **Invite Welcome Connect** around the U.S., Canada, & Europe, I share my story of how I came to be in the Episcopal Church. How I grew up in Natchez, MS, in a loving Southern Baptist home, went away to college & got married & had 2 children....Fast forward 20 years...and a woman with whom I sat on several boards with called me one day out of the blue and invited me to go to church with her...to an Episcopal church...overwhelmed!!! Unbeknownst to her...rooms of Al-Anon...therapist-Episcopalian, books...healing..CALLING...early 40's, woman, divorced, Baptist, no college-degree....JUST SAY YES to God.... St. Stephen's.....Episcopalian

Courage....it took Courage for this introvert, Sally Dooley, to invite me to church.

Welcome is the ministry of hospitality & the deep truth of Welcome is Seeing the Other.

Welcoming the stranger is welcoming Jesus. Jesus asks us to see one another in a new way, in the way of love, compassion, and forgiveness. Jesus modeled this for us, and we are called to do the same. We are called to really **SEE** every single person with whom we have contact on a daily basis, and also every single person who walks into the doors of our churches. **Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive...A community which refuses to welcome the Stranger, the Other, whether through fear, weariness, or insecurity is dying spiritually.**

Yesterday I shared a deeply personal story of a time when my family was not welcomed in a church, a time when they desperately needed a faith community. So I can tell you that I know first-hand what it feels like to attend a church and not be welcomed nor seen.

I've taken this work around the country, Canada, & the Episcopal Church in Europe in the last 15 years, and I've heard countless heartfelt, painful similar stories of people who've walked through the doors of our churches & who've left feeling as if they've been neither seen nor acknowledged. Truth be told, how many times have you entered a room of people here at St. Paul's and you've spent time visiting with your friends & acquaintances instead of going over to the stranger in the room and introducing yourself?

I believe that when people come through the doors of our churches the Holy Spirit brings them to us. **OUR WORK....YOUR WORK.....**is to create **safe spaces of welcome** for people to become vulnerable to the workings of God's love. And **we are to do this for ourselves first**, making sure we understand **God's call** to us as both lay and ordained ministers.

CONNECT is the ministry of Belonging This essential starts with offering a safe space where newcomers can share their stories of what brought them to church. Then through the **holy gift of listening**, we help them discern their giftedness and encourage them in their journey of faith. **CONNECT** is offering clear pathways to belonging where newcomers are guided into the life of the congregation, where both new & long-time members are empowered and **equipped to live into their individual God-given gifts and talents, and where we help them hear God's call in their lives.**

The **deep truth of CONNECT is the Sacred Act of Listening**. When we relate to those around us by **HEARING THEIR STORIES** and then connecting them with others, we build the loving communities of faith that God intends for us. When newcomers come into our church, the last thing we need to do is to tell them all the things we can do for them. **INSTEAD...we need to LISTEN** to them....to hear their story....and find out what brought them here.

At yesterday's workshop I shared a news story based on post-pandemic research that was published a while back on all the major networks. Spoken of as a '**loneliness epidemic**' the research says that Loneliness has become one of our nation's most widespread health issues. Loneliness has physical consequences, including increased risk of heart disease and stroke, and loneliness isn't just about the number of people around you, but the quality of your connections. So what do you think is one of the top suggestions in this report for this loneliness epidemic? It's **belonging to a church or faith community!**

At the end of the day, Invite Welcome Connect is all about **relational ministry**. We were created and we exist in the image of a relational God, and our spiritual and human connections are what give our life meaning. Neuroscience research confirms that we humans are hard-wired for connection, and that our nervous systems actually want us to connect with other human beings. **So it should not be surprising to us that when people join our churches but do not find those relationships or connections so vital to their spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being, they go right out the back door in search of this deep longing!** The ministry of Invite Welcome Connect is focused on transformation, and that transformation begins first in the heart of an individual, as you say yes to Jesus and yes to a deeper life of following him. Invite Welcome Connect simply offers a framework to assist clergy and lay leaders in that transformation.

As I close my message this morning, I want to circle back around to the Deep Truth of Invite – Courage vs Fear – and the words of the epistle - *For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.* Let those wise words sink in. Fear is all around us in today's world...we are fearful of so many things...in our personal lives, in our children's and grandchildren's lives, in our work, our schools, our government, our communities of faith. But we need to remember, and really believe, that God gives us, NOT the spirit of Fear, but of Power and of LOVE, and of a Sound Mind.

May this be our prayer today. May we ask God for courage.....Faith not Fear. May we Risk seeing and welcoming the Other & deeply loving one another. May our communities of faith become sacred havens, sacred places of listening & belonging. May the world see the light of Christ in each of us – for that is our calling. Amen.