



Trinity Dove + Supplement

August 28, 2011 + Pentecost II + Change
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

23 Church Street + New Hamburg + Ontario + N3A 1J1

+ From Welcome to Invitation

The other day, Pastor Anne and I were in conversation about our journey together and about the future of our community. At some point, she mentioned that we had done a pretty good job around the areas of “welcome” and “hospitality”. She also went on to speak of doing more than insuring that our doors are open (welcome) and that the lights are on and the table set inside (hospitality).

“We have to look at the question of invitation.” she said. How do we *invite* people through the open door to gather with us around the table? Since then, the wheels have been turning.

In recent days, Anne and I have had some great conversations about the question of *invitation*. In my mind, two interrelated themes are emerging in our conversation.

Theme 1: Invitation

The first theme has to do with how we might do more than simply open our doors to the wider community (“welcome”) to offer a clearer and more concrete expression of that welcome (“invitation”). Our offer of welcome has been clear for some time, and our hospitality, once people are here, is second to none. (Think sandwich lunches at funerals; pot-lucks; There Will Be Cake Sundays”; etc. We do great “welcome”. We do great “hospitality”.



But what of our invitation? Is it equally clear?

So the doors are open and the table is set. What would make someone want to venture inside?

With the theme of “invitation” in mind, Pastor Anne and I took the following motion to Council on August 17: “It is moved that we adopt the theme “Faithful Journey: from Welcome to Invitation” through 2012.” The motion was carried unanimously.

In the near term, this direction will be reflected in a number

of programs designed to form our community in the direction of offering a better invitation, including...

- Back-to-Church Sunday. On September 25, we will participate in what is an international observance (England, US, Canada...) hosted in local congregations.
- Messy Fiesta. This is a November 12, area-wide event, hosted by Trinity and supported by the Synod. Stay tuned!
- Invitation to Easter. This is a Lent, 2012, adult-learning series which will look at concrete ways to give expression to Trinity’s invitation.
- Faithful Journey: Expressions of Church. This will be an Easter Season area-wide event hosted by Trinity in which we look at alternative models for gathering in community.
- More.

Theme 2: Audacity

The second theme that has run through our conversation is reflected in the wonderful and challenging August 14 sermon that Bob Thaler preached at Trinity. His theme was “Audacity”. His text was the story in Matthew 15: 21-28 wherein a Canaanite woman pleads for Jesus to pay attention to her sick daughter.

On the one hand, Bob was inviting us to hold God to God’s promises: “Wake up, Lord! Rise up and help...” Audacity. On the other hand, Bob was also effectively reminding us to pay attention to those around us who might need to have us make their case before God. In Bob’s text, the woman pleads for help *for her daughter*. Audacity, plus...

It’s relatively easy to hang out the “welcome” sign. Setting the table is no problem. It can be a little harder —scary, perhaps— to actually tender the invitation and a little harder still to invite people once counted at the margins of God’s world and of congregational life.

Put another way, how might we interpret “all are welcome” in ways that engage the likely and unlikely; the strangers and stragglers; the disaffected and disconnected; the vaguely aware and the totally unaware? It’s about welcome, hospitality *and* invitation.

Part of it has to do with audacity. Not simply, however, the

audacity to tell the truth to God and to hold God to God's promises, but the audacity ("chutzpah") to make the circle a little larger and to remind God who else is out there, who else might be counted among God's children. This piece is all about stepping out in faith.

Learning how to give concrete and real-world expression to our stated welcome is what *Faithful Journey: from Welcome to Invitation* is all about.

— *andré lavergne*

+ A Great Sermon on "Audacity"

The following sermon is based on Matthew 15: 21-28 and was delivered by Pastor Bob Thaler at Trinity Church on August 14, 2011.

(Bob sings)

Jesus loves the little children,
All of the children of the world
Red and yellow, black and white
They are precious in his sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Do you remember the picture from Sunday School days? Jesus, gathering the little children to him -yellow, red and black and white —or if you are politically correct, as you should be— Asian, Native American, African and Caucasian. Let the little children come to me. In the loving arms of Jesus, there is room for everyone.

So Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman has to shock you. Jesus is rude. Jesus is heartless and cruel. He is racist and sexist. Go away, woman, you are bothering me. This is no Jesus you'd take home to meet your mother.

But this is the Jesus of the text this morning. Along comes the Canaanite woman and she is frantic. Her daughter is possessed by a terrible demon. Maybe it's schizophrenia —she is tormented by voices that want to destroy her. Maybe she has epilepsy and is racked by seizures that are wearing away at her life. Whatever, here is a mother whose daughter is slipping away from her and she is frantic:

Son of David, Lord, have mercy on me!
— *Matthew 15:22*

But Jesus doesn't answer her. Silence. Not a word. Apparently Jewish rabbis are not supposed to talk to strange pagan women in public. It all has to do with the holiness of God. Never thought that Jesus would succumb to the norms and culture of society but he says not a word to the woman.

Have you ever come to God, desperate with something tearing at your heart? Maybe you are losing your job or your marriage. Maybe your kid has gone off the rails or someone you love gets a very bad diagnosis. You come to God, lay all it out before him and... silence. Not a word. No miracle, no comfort, no strength, not even a rebuke

—just silence. Where is the God who promised to love and shelter us? Where is gentle Jesus meek and mild? Jesus says not a word.

The woman follows after, crying out, crying out. "Jesus, get rid of that hysterical woman. She is driving us crazy." Jesus shrugs his shoulders.

What concern is she to me?
I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.
— *Matthew 15:24*

Canaanite women are none of my business.

You are here, sitting in church this morning but was there ever a time when you didn't feel welcome here? Maybe you had fallen off some sort of moral wagon and people were giving you the cold shoulder. Maybe you had a falling out with one of the old stalwarts or the minister or maybe you were having doubts about God, asking too many tough questions. There didn't seem to be room at the table for you anymore, seemed that people were saying to you, their Jesus was saying to you: this town is not big enough for the both of us. We are the chosen group of the joyous beloved and I draw the boundary line to exclude you. It startles us that Jesus can be quite exclusive.

But the woman throws herself at Jesus' feet, grovels in the dust. She is desperate.

Lord, help me!
— *Matthew 15:25*

You have to ache for her. She is a mother who is losing her child and we can scarcely imagine her pain.

But Jesus, he drives her off with an insult:

It is not good to take the children's bread and cast it before the dogs.
— *Matthew 15:26*

In the 21st Century, it is hard to grasp the depth of the offense here. We like dogs. We let them sit in our laps. We talk to them like babies. We feed them enough food to keep a starving child in Somalia alive for the day.

But in Jesus' Palestine —and in most of the world today— dogs were vicious, ugly bones covered with skin. You kept a dog to eat your garbage and keep away rats. To compare someone to a dog, well, it is as if Jesus called the woman that ugly word for a female dog that people use too freely today. It takes your breath away with its crudity.

If the woman has any shred of humanity, let alone dignity, she wouldn't abide it. She should get up and walk away. Who wants to deal with that Jesus, even if it means a miracle?

But... but we can't have that in our Bibles. Where would we be, where would the church be, where would God be if we just walked away? This problem can't be with God or Jesus. It must be with us. So we try to redeem the story.

We make excuses for Jesus.

Oh, Jesus is just testing the woman. Rabbis often do that —put their disciples through difficult exam to determine if they are deserving of honour. Will the woman respond correctly? Can she prove herself worthy to be called a true disciple of Jesus, a sheep of Israel, a child of God? There is a reward if she wins through to the end, a miracle for her daughter.



Or maybe Jesus is putting her through a refining ordeal. He really loves her deeply so he only appears to be heartless. He is teaching her, bringing her down to the proper level of humility so that she will surrender her will to him. Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs... Yes,

Lord, I am lower than a dog before you. I can do nothing. I must trust in your grace and love for you alone can save.

(Bob sings)

Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.

Some people would say that we are misreading Jesus altogether. He doesn't really compare her to a dog. The word Jesus uses rather means puppy than dog. Everyone knows that puppies are cute, puppies are loveable. They need discipline but they are eventually fed. Happiness is a warm puppy. Jesus does love the woman tenderly.

We need to twist the story to make Jesus look nice because we can only trust a consistently good and loving Jesus.

(Bob sings)

Yesterday, today, forever,
Jesus is the same.
Things may change, but Jesus never,
Glory to his name.

We make Jesus nice so the inevitable outcome of the story must be that the woman gets her miracle. I make Jesus nice so that the inevitable outcome of my mustard seed of faith and goodness is that I get my miracle, I have a good and blessed life.

But do you see the problem? You can't change the story to make Jesus be any old Jesus you want him to be. You can't make God or Jesus or the story nice. Jesus is what Jesus is. Today, Jesus is rude and insulting and cruel. Period. You can't get around it. Can't go over. Can't go under it. Some days this is the God you have to face, as good and loving as you know God to be. I don't know why, and God is not telling me why, and he is not telling me how it fits together, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The woman comes to Jesus and says: My child is possessed by a terrible demon. Help me! Jesus says: It is not right to cast to the dogs the bread of God's chosen children. The woman says: What about my child, Jesus? Is she not worthy of a small crumb of your attention? Is she not worthy of a small crumb of your miracles? Is she not worthy of a small crumb of your love?

The woman has the audacity to answer back to this fancy pants rabbi from Galilee. She has the audacity to answer back to the Messiah, the Son of David who has been rude to her. She has the audacity to answer back to God who is indifferent and exclusive.

Do you remember how that old trickster, Jacob, was coming home and Esau, his brother riding out to meet him, armed and dangerous with 400 outriders? Remember how he wrestled God by the brook, how God tested him but Jacob held on.

I will not let you go until you bless me.

— *Genesis 32:26*

He would not let God go even if it wounded him and God gave him a new name, Israel, which means one who struggles with God.

Remember how Moses said to God: God, you want to kill all the Israelites? That's just plain stupid. All the nations will laugh at you. You might as well kill me too. Remember how Job stood up to God: God, what did I ever do to deserve all this pain? The story of God is a long tradition of people with the chutzpah enough to take God on.

Wake up, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?

— *Psalms 44: 23-24*

The Canaanite woman takes Jesus on, fists and audacity flying. She takes a hold of God and she will not let go. She just doesn't keep on asking and praying with persistence. She argues with Jesus. In defense of her child, she will not take "no" for an answer, not even from Jesus.

Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.

— *Matthew 15:27*

Jesus, why are you so mean as not to give even a little crumb to my child?

Who knows why God can be a blank wall, sometimes rude, cruel and indifferent? Who knows how to resolve the good and loving God with the bad and the ugly? What you have to do is hold on to God —not with some simpering humbleness but with an outraged audacity. Like the woman, follow behind God and drive him crazy with you questions:

Why, God? ... What are you going to do about it? ...

What are you thinking?

You must stand up to the God who moves heaven and earth and tell him about the sick child, the starving child, the tortured child and ask him why he doesn't move heaven and earth for that child? God, what is your problem?

Long ago, when we lived in Africa, we were on retreat with a group of white people when this story was the focus of a Bible study. We went around the circle, telling each other what the passage said to us. One sweet, kind soul said, "This passage reminds me that I am a lowly sinner, nothing much more than a dog before God. I need his grace and love to live.

Bless her heart. I suppose that was how she was able to get up every morning, go to her clinic and care for the stream of sick who came to her door. Trust and obey, submit to God's will. He will do good, more than you can imagine.

But... outside her door the stream never ended. Women torn apart in child birth, malnourished children full of parasites and malaria, measles epidemic, young people going blind, and on and on and on. This poor humble nurse was working herself to death but the line never stopped. At what point does the anger bubble up and you shake your fist at God? Lord, help me!

Wake up, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?...
Rise up and help us;
redeem us because of your unfailing love.
— Psalm 44: 23-26

You must stand up and call God into question in the name of God's promises whenever one of the little ones are threatened. (*Fasching*, pg 52)

Such audacity is dangerous. God could blow you off the mountain, open up the earth and swallow you. Who are you to question God? Who are you to call him to account?

God speaks to Job out of the storm:

Who is this that obscures my plans with words
without knowledge? Prepare to defend yourself.
— Job 33: 1-2a

But then, what else can you do? These are your children. Faith is not some acceptance in meek trust but rather the audacity to say: You said you would be our God and you said that we are your people and I will not let you forget it. And Jesus says to the Canaanite woman:

Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted. And her daughter was healed instantly.
— Matthew 15:28

Why audacity rather than simple, humble patience?

Because God promised and time is running out. Children in Somalia are dying as we speak. The tumour in your gut is growing and you can't get a scan for three weeks. The phone rings in the middle of night and you've got to get up and answer it now. People are being gathered up off the streets of Syria and disappearing into the depths of the prisons.

Will the Lord reject us forever?
Will he never show his favour again?
Has his unfailing love vanished for ever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?
— Psalm 77: 7-9

It has been suggested that since Auschwitz and the Holocaust when six million of God's beloved and chosen children were gassed and burned while God was silent, outraged audacity and tenacious questioning have been the only proper response to God. To be meek, humble and patient is to let the terror flow on and on. Other than audacity, the only alternative is to walk away from the insult.

But we will not walk away. We will hold onto God. There is too much at stake, the promises of God. Standing before the face of God, the only response available to us is *chutzpah*, audacity. We will remind him of those promises. God is good. God is loving. We are his people. We will badger him. Wake up, God! Have you forgotten? If God is good and loving and if God acts, then we will place ourselves in the centre of his action and will wrestle it out with him. My child, Lord, my child. Who knows? Maybe God will change his mind. Maybe God will relent as he did for Jacob and Job, and Moses.

I don't know. Maybe all we will get is Jesus, on the cross with us, our panic and our pain filling him, the heavens dark and empty, the Father silent and absent. But he loves us so much, he will not let that Father go but, with audacity in the face of God and death, cries out for us: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Wake up, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself...
Rise up and help us;
redeem us because of your unfailing love.
— Psalm 44: 23-26

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