

WWW.2010

Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 3:1-10

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When was the last time you invited someone to our church? I suspect some of you regularly invite others, and bless you for doing so. I also suspect that many of us do not regularly invite others to our church. By not doing so, we are missing the most effective tool available for growing our church. So I've been pondering this. Why don't we invite people to our church more than we do? It may be complacency. We love our church and perhaps have grown a little too comfortable. Or it may be the sense of awkwardness we feel. People's religious beliefs are personal, and we feel like we're being a bit too forward by inviting them to our church. And then some of us frankly have been turned off by others who were too aggressive and even rude. We've all had a religious zealot of one stripe or another attempt to force his or her religious beliefs on us. We've seen so many of these pushy, canned approaches that some of us have retreated to the opposite extreme. We don't talk at all about our faith and neither do we invite anyone to our church.

Whatever the reason, I want to challenge our church to do a better job of inviting newcomers to Weatherly in 2010. Through this year, most of us will have new residents move onto our street. New employees will join the department where you work. New people are coming to Huntsville, and I believe many of these folks will be looking for a church just like ours. So let us get over our reticence and extend a warm Weatherly welcome to these folks.

WWW.2010 is a plan for doing just that. It stands for Weatherly Welcoming the World in 2010, and it is a plan for church growth. I would describe our present approach to church growth as organic. We don't talk about it a lot. We don't make a big deal of it. It issues naturally out of the reputation of our church and the quality with which we do things. Today I'm saying that we've got to do better. Today I'm challenging you to be more intentional about church growth this year. Now, you don't need to worry that we're going to get crazy about it. We're not going to inflate a giant gorilla out front and hang an "All Welcome" sign on him. Some of you

have been pressuring me to make a commercial, but I don't plan to. We're not going to erect a flashing neon sign or have Handy parachute out of an airplane, though that might generate some interest! We'll have to evaluate that.

I want us to have an approach to church growth that has biblical integrity. It will focus on in reach, reconnecting with our own members who have become inactive, and out reach, connecting with new people. For example, next month we will be saying that February is for Fellowship. We're going to encourage every Sunday School class to have a fellowship event and invite every member of your class. You may be thinking, "Ole Sam hasn't been in over a year. I doubt he'll come, so there's no need in even calling him." No, Sam may be waiting on a way to re-enter gracefully, and this could be it. This could be the contact that re-connects Sam to the life and ministry of our church. We need to be intentional about reconnecting with our own people. That is in reach. Later in the year the choir is going to present a special musical event on a Sunday morning. It will give you and me an excuse to invite our friends and neighbors to our church. It's less awkward when there's something special happening. We need to be intentional about connecting with new people. That is out reach. We will have events like these every month, and they will require your participation, if they are to be effective. The Deacons are already supportive. The Church Council is supportive. The church staff is supportive. Now, I'm asking you to join us in welcoming the world to Weatherly in 2010.

Biblical integrity is critical. We see a good model for this in the actions of Peter and John in Acts 3. My friend Rev. Wayne Snodgrass, pastor of the Progressive Union Missionary Baptist Church over on the north side of town, used this text for his community Thanksgiving sermon a few weeks ago. It was a powerful message, and he titled it, "Something Ugly at the Beautiful Gate." Many of the clergy who heard the sermon wished we had thought of that title. There was indeed something ugly at the Gate called Beautiful at the Temple in Jerusalem. Luke says that Peter and John, the two most significant apostles, went to the Temple for evening prayers. It was actually the "ninth hour," or three o'clock in the afternoon. Beggars often gathered at the gate at this time and asked for alms from those entering the Temple.

Luke says that as Peter and John entered the Temple they encountered a beggar. Listen to this description of the beggar. Luke gives so much detail here that I have to think he was making a point. First, he notes that the man was “lame from birth.” Next he says that he was “carried in” to the Temple by “people.” It doesn’t say family or friends, just generic people. The people laid him at the gate, and there this poor, lame man begged for money from those going into the Temple to pray. You need to know this. He wasn’t permitted inside the Temple. No, he was placed outside the gate. His physical condition and destitution made him unclean and unworthy. What’s Luke’s point? Luke was describing a man who was completely an outsider, one fully outside the community of the righteous. In other words, Luke is describing a man who was in desperate need a savior.

As he likely had done to dozens of others, when Peter and John walked by, the beggar made his plea for money: “A little help, please! A little help for a poor, lame beggar, please!” He didn’t even look up. He was on autopilot, beaten down by the circumstances of his life.

Notice what Peter and John did. This is an important part of this story. They *looked* at the man—intently. They *noticed* this poor, lame outsider. They actually noticed this human being sitting there beside the Beautiful Gate. He wasn’t just a beggar to Peter and John. They asked him to look at them. Listen to what Peter told him:

I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.

Luke says that Peter then reached down and took this man by the hand and raised him to his feet. A miracle occurred so that muscles that had never been used were immediately strengthened. The man leaped into the air. He began walking, and notice where he walked. He *entered* the Temple. Leaping and praising God, he entered the Temple. The man who had always been on the outside, helped by generic people, in desperate need of a savior, went inside the Temple that day. All the people who saw it were “filled with wonder and amazement.”

It’s a powerful story about how an outsider became an insider, how a man in desperate need of a savior found what he needed. And embedded in this wonderful miracle story are some biblical guidelines that we can use as we welcome the world to our church.

Here is the first one. *If we want to practice church growth with biblical integrity, we must notice the human beings around us.* My biggest complaint about the church growth movement is that people sometimes are treated like numbers instead of people. If our church growth efforts in 2010 are only for the purpose of boosting attendance and bringing in more money for the church budget, then count me out. If we do that, we are seeing numbers and not noticing people. Weatherly Heights Baptist Church is in the people business. We always have been, and we always will be. I want us to be intentional about noticing the people around us, men and women, boys and girls, who may be in need of the sense of community and challenge that we can offer them. They're not numbers. They are people, human beings, with needs, hopes, and gifts. That's the first thing.

The second thing is this. *As we notice people, we then must be careful to give them the most valuable thing we have to offer.* It's not silver and gold for us either. The most valuable thing we have to offer is a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ. Had Peter and John simply tossed a couple of coins at the beggar and proceeded into the Temple, he would have gotten what he expected and wanted, but he would not have gotten up and walked. He would not have entered the Temple and been made whole by his encounter with the Savior. Let us give the most valuable thing we have to offer. That's the second thing.

Finally, the third thing is this. *As we notice people and give them the most valuable thing we have to offer, then we can rejoice at the wholeness that comes to their lives and to our church.* Imagine how this man must have felt. My friend Rev. Snodgrass was right. There was something ugly at the Beautiful Gate. And on this day, when Peter and John went to the Temple for evening prayers, it was made right. A man was made whole, and that was cause for rejoicing.

Do you ever wonder what our church will look like in five years? Ten years? What are we building for little Sophie Ada and the other children of our church? We are deciding this year what our church will look like in the years ahead. Let us unite around this challenge to welcome the world into our church. No gimmicks. No over the top antics. Just sound biblical principles for in reach and out reach. Are you ready? 2010, here we come!

Closing Prayer

Lord, we were formed by your grace, and it is by your grace that we move into this new year. Help us now and always to be faithful your challenge and leadership. Amen.