

There is a *Peanuts* cartoon that starts with Lucy at her five-cent psychology booth, where Charlie Brown has stopped for advice about life.

"Life is like a deck chair, Charlie," she says. "On the cruise ship of life, some people place their deck chair at the rear of the ship so they can see where they've been. Others place their deck chair at the front of the ship so they can see where they're going."

The good "doctor" looks at her puzzled client and asks, "Which way is your deck chair facing?"

Without hesitating, Charlie replies glumly, "I can't even get my deck chair unfolded."

Have you ever felt like Charlie Brown? Do you wonder if you will ever get your deck chair unfolded? I do.

When I look around on the cruise ship of Christianity today, I see all kinds of people who are willing to explain how we should have our deck chairs oriented. When I listen to many of the experts, I find myself confused at just trying to get my chair unfolded.

For the longest time this bothered me about the church. Until I realized that there are a lot of people like me, just trying to figure out how to get their deck chairs unfolded. There are a lot of people like me, who don't feel as if they have life together. In fact, there are a lot of people like me just trying to figure out how to hang on to some semblance of life that they have. *Then I realized that it was to people like us, those trying to just hang on, that a life of faith really takes on meaning.*

Today, we are continuing our sermon series called, *Who Are We? Reclaiming an Identity*. This series is based upon our mission statement as a church, which says *The mission of Sun Prairie United Methodist Church is to invite and welcome people to be committed and compassionate followers of Jesus Christ through worship, through spiritual growth, through fellowship, through service to others.* Today, we are going to talk about the importance of inviting others.

By now, you might be ready to get up and leave. You might be sitting here saying, "I like this idea of coming to church. It is good for me. But, I am not ready to invite anyone. I don't want to turn people off."

What I want to say, before you get up and walk out is, inviting others to church, doesn't have to turn people off. *In fact, it might be one of the most important things you can do for another.*

In our scripture for today Jesus is walking into a city called Jericho. There are all kinds of crowds surrounding him. While they are walking along, one of the people on the side of the road, a blind man hears the crowd and says, "What's going on?"

Someone, almost brushing him off as a non person says, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

The Blind man must have thought, "Jesus, the one who heals people. The one who can heal me!" And he started shouting out, "Jesus! Son of David! Mercy, have mercy on me!"

But the people around him say, "Be quiet. He doesn't have time for you. Be quiet, you and your deck chair don't matter."

Have you ever felt like you don't matter? Have you ever felt like you are on the outside looking in?

Many of us know the feeling. We have a hurt going on somewhere in our life and it just eats away at us. It leaves us feeling like we are on the outside, looking in.

In the church, when we choose to not invite, when we choose to mind our own business, it is almost like telling the hurting people around us, "You don't matter. You are a non-entity. You are not like us."

And that ends up reinforcing the notion that people have of the church that we are made up of people who don't care. But you and I know that this isn't true. We do care. We do want to share the love of God. We do want to help others figure out how to unfold their deck chairs even as we are figuring it out ourselves.

So how can we invite, in a way that doesn't turn people off? Well, let's look at our scripture again.

When Jesus heard the man scream, he stopped and said, "Bring him here."

And the crowds came to him and said, "Get up! He is calling you!" And they helped bring him to Jesus.

When Jesus saw the need of this man, he invited others to get him. I believe that when we take time to get to know others, when we take time to talk with others, we will discover what their need is, what their hurt is. And when we discover their place of need, we can invite them to church, to help meet that need.

Here is what I mean. Studies have indicated that when people go through a change in their life, they are more open to being invited to church. Here are some of the changes that cause people to be open to an invitation to a church.

- ✚ Having a baby.
- ✚ Having a child go to school/leave home.
- ✚ Having a change of jobs.
- ✚ Moving.
- ✚ Getting married.
- ✚ Getting divorced.
- ✚ Getting a pet.
- ✚ The death of a loved one.
- ✚ The illness of a loved one.

Anytime, someone faces a change in their life, it is a good time to invite them to worship, because they are more open to a message that God cares about them and wants to be in a relationship with them. *It is like we, get to bring those who are blind or hurting to the one who can touch us and heal us.*

Jesus said, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said, "I want to see again." Jesus replied, "Your faith has saved you and healed you."

Brennan Manning tells the story of a recent convert to Jesus who was approached by an unbelieving friend. "So, you have been converted to Christ?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know a great deal about him. Tell me, what country was he born in?"

"I don't know."

"What was his age when he died?"

"I don't know."

"How many sermons did ye preach?"

"I don't know."

"You certainly know very little for a man who claims to be converted to Christ."

"You are right. I am ashamed at how little I know of Jesus. But this much I know: Three years ago I was a drunkard. I was in debt. My family was falling to pieces; they dreaded the sight of me.

"But then, through rehabilitation I had an experience of Christ that was real and it changed me. Now I have given up drink. We are out of debt. Ours is a happy home. My children eagerly await my return home each evening. All this Christ has done for me. This is what I know of Christ."

I love that story. This man may not have had the knowledge of all Christ had done in the world. But he trusted what God was doing in his life. And that is what he was willing to share.

You and I might struggle at times, just to get our deck chairs unfolded on the cruise ship of life. But we are not alone. There are others who also struggle.

When we learn to trust the good things God has done for us. When we learn to celebrate the grace given to us, then we can be willing to share our faith and invite others to come to the One who loves us so much, that we were given Jesus Christ.

May we seek to be faithful, as we invite others to the faith.

Amen