

INVITATION

*A Chat for Faith Teams
Accompanying the Devotional Series
“In Everyone You Meet: Encounters with the Risen Christ”*

By The Rev. Dr. Walt Lichtenberger

Gathering Together - (10 minutes: 0:00- 0:10)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, your invitation to us comes fresh and new each day. Your love beckons us to follow the path of Jesus. Empower us to live according to Christ's compassion and mercy. Help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (5 minutes: 0:10- 0:15)

Driving through South Dakota, you start to see the road signs hundreds of miles away. Wall Drug; Get your free Ice water and five-cent coffee. Some billboards have pictures of cowboys on them while others have dinosaurs. There are hundreds of them, one after another, letting you know exactly how many miles until you reach the famous tourist trap.

On each of my trips west along that prairie land highway, I stopped for my free ice water. How could I not? Wall Drug was persistent in inviting me.

As Jesus encountered the broken lives of the crowds along his journey to Jerusalem, he shared a different way of life. Instead of demanding their spiritual submission, as the Pharisees were apt to do- Jesus lovingly invited others to follow him.

Christ encourages, appeals, begs, cajoles, calls, and beckons. Jesus's call to discipleship allows for freedom of movement, knowing that when others turn and head in its direction, relationships strengthen, grow, and blossom. According to God's way, life is abundant and filled with joy. Jesus trusts in others to decide, accept, cherish, and delight.

In this third and final Chat accompanying the series, *In Everyone You Meet; Encounters with the Risen Christ*, we explore INVITATION. Today we will listen together to Jesus's invitation to "repent."

It is not a summons to moral perfection. Repentance - from the Greek word *metanoia* - means "a turning around." Instead of heading in the direction of self-interest, social programming, economic interests, or ideological bent - the call to repentance involves aligning ourselves with God. When we repent, we stop and head in God's direction.

What does it mean to travel along God's path?

Jesus's life, death, and resurrection gives us both the invitation and the example for such living. Through his teaching, healing, preaching, table fellowship, and interactions, we find guidance. Applying Christ's values of grace, forgiveness, kindness, hospitality, and mercy, we claim his way of life for our own.

Of course, we are going to have road troubles along the way. No doubt, we will find ourselves detoured and lost. That is par for the journey. Our repentance is never a once and done prospect. Instead, we need daily adjustments and alignment. Repent - again and again.

Each time we repent, it is not so much a recognition of failure as it is an opportunity to embrace the life that Jesus offers for us. Embodied within Christ's invitation is God's steadfast and untiring love that comes to us. By the loving grace of God, our journey continues further down the road.

In Christ's Light,
Pastor Walt

Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15- 0:20)

Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Responding to God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

Initial reactions (5 minutes)

What stands out for you in Jesus's words to his disciples? What initial questions emerge?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about Jesus, God, and the invitation to life in Jesus's name?

Exploring Connection (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion.

Option A: Digging Deeper into Scripture:

Throughout the teaching and ministry of Jesus there is a persistent invitation to discipleship. Ever grace-filled, Jesus invites us to follow. There are no threats or demands. Although in later centuries, the church to bear Jesus's name to the world would take a more stringent approach, fanning the flames of hellfire and casting certain categories of sin into the outer darkness, we are hard pressed to see such condemnation in the words or deeds of Jesus. In fact, Jesus forgave the very soldiers who crucified him.

Instead, Jesus's approach was one of invitation to a better way of living. He promises an abundance of life to those who follow his teachings and apply them to their life. Repentance - as defined as turning one's heart and mind to God - is an important step of discipleship. Initially, repentance moves us in the direction of God. But it is not a 'one-and-done' proposition. Our need for repentance is repeated. Again and again, Jesus invites us to realign our lives with his own. Step by step, we walk in God's way.

These are additional readings from scripture to broaden the conversation on invitation. You are invited to read them and then answer the questions below.

“As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”

Matthew 4: 18-22

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Matthew 28:8-10

“When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.” And he said to him, “I will come and cure him.” The centurion answered, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And to the centurion Jesus said, “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” And the servant was healed in that hour.”

Matthew 8: 5-13

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Philippians 2:5-11

"As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.""

Questions for discussion:

Which of the passages above resonate with you the most? How does that text relate to Matthew 11:28-30?

Which of the passages make the least sense to you? Why?

What do we learn about the invitation to discipleship from the above scripture? What promises are made? What is not promised? What invitations does Jesus expect that his followers will make and nurture? What invitations are not consistent with the gospel? What does it look like to be invited to follow Christ?

When have you experienced the invitation to discipleship? Was this experience what you had prayed for or was it different from your expectations?

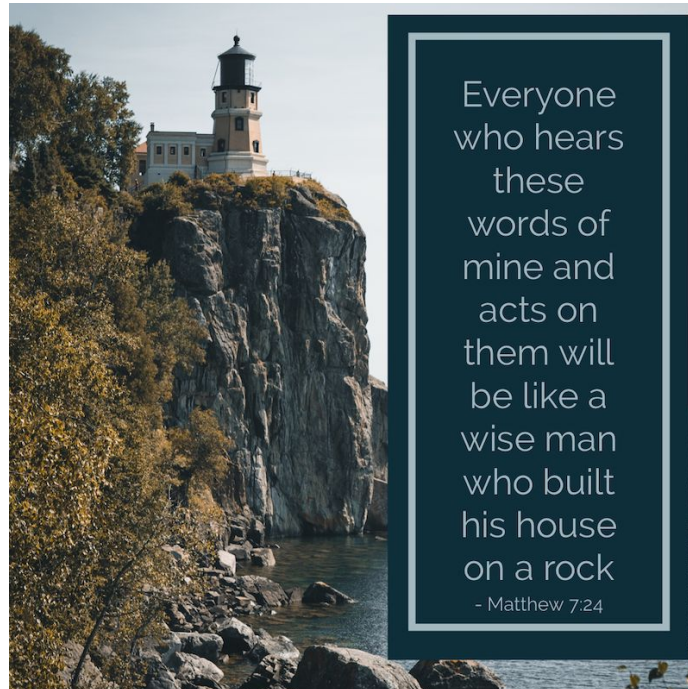
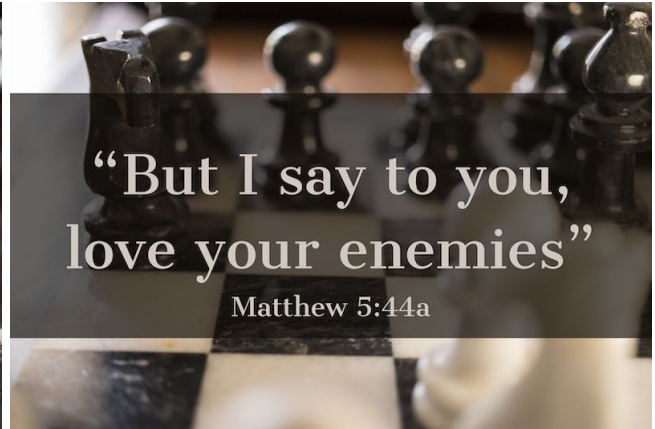
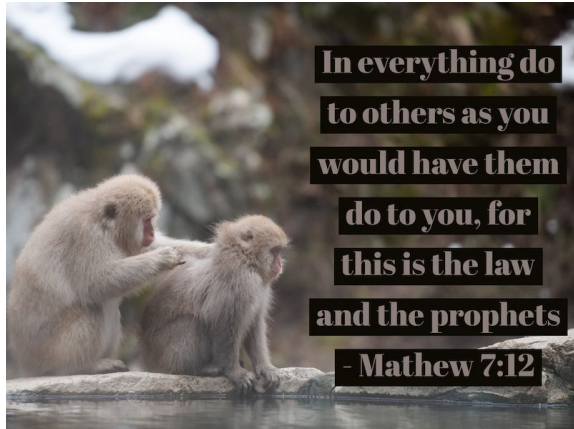
Option B: Connecting Bible Stories to Our Own Story

When Jesus invited folks to follow him, it occurred in situations of everyday life. Jesus called Levi to leave his tax booth, and the fishers to leave their nets.

Imagine you were on that road or beach. How do you think you would have felt to hear Jesus invite you to leave those familiar settings and to follow him?

What does it mean to you to have God invite you to follow the life of Jesus today? What might the metaphor of “leaving your nets” mean for you? What does it mean for you to follow Jesus?

Option D: Inspirational Images



Discuss the Inspirational Images above. How do you connect or disconnect with them? What do they say about invitation and discipleship? What images would you choose to go with these scripture texts?

Option E: Gleaning Wisdom from Experience:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for the recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

Where do you experience invitation in your life? Where is it most absent?
What issues are you dealing with that could be reframed through God's invitation to abundant life?
What concerns you most in our community as a person of faith? Where are we most in need of invitations? Why? What can be done about it?

CALL to ACTION (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Based on your conversation as a group, consider the following questions:

What action does God's grace-filled invitation inspire in you?
How might you be able to share your time, talent, and treasure in response?
What might we do as a community of faith together in response?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Sharing of appreciation for learning: *Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.*

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Appoint someone to be recorder of the prayer requests. At the start of next week, the recorder can remind the Faith Team of the previous week's prayer concerns. This will allow for updates. Your Faith Team might also want to send a note to those for whom it prays.