

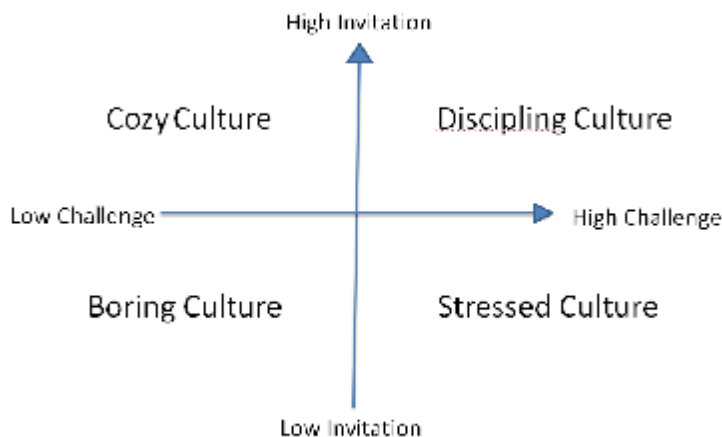
“The Way of the Cross: Invitation and Challenge”

Last week a vision was laid out before you. Using several tools, Pastor Dan challenged us to become a disciple-making community. He shared some illustrations which show what happens when the church, over time, loses its vision and simply becomes a comfortable place, a “cozy culture.” It experiences a loss of member involvement and will eventually decline – unless the vision is re-cast and life is reborn. If vision is not renewed and re-cast, the congregation will die. (This experience of decline and then renewal of vision has happened several times in the life of St Timothy’s, and we are now facing yet another crossroads.) Pastor Dan asked, will St Timothy’s be the last Lutheran church standing in this valley? Is that our goal? Or is our goal to continue to grow and be a vibrant witness to the Gospel? If so, we need to renew our vision and respond to it with renewed commitment. The challenge: to reclaim Jesus’ command to go and make disciples. We need to build a discipling culture. A culture in which we grow as Jesus’ disciples and go out to make new disciples.

Today I’d like to take one image that was presented last week: Invitation and Challenge. I want to build on that concept – in the light of the cross. We will take a closer look at biblical examples of Invitation and Challenge, and how Jesus used it in his disciple-making.

Before we do that, just two reminders. One: if you were not here last week and have not heard that key message, then you need to do so. We all need to be on board. Check it out on our website or pick up a copy of the sermon as you go out this week, in the racks in the entry-way. And two, attend one of the adult classes that are being offered -- twice on Sunday mornings and again on Wed. evening for the next six weeks, beginning today. All the classes are the same and are pastor-led. We are investing our time because we believe it’s really important to work on these disciple-making concepts. As a congregation, we are gearing up to reach out to a world increasingly distant from Christ. We are asking you to make this a priority in your schedules as well.

Let’s get into it. First, a review of this Invitation and Challenge matrix. For some of you, this is a refresher; for others, it may be new.



Invitation means, *Y'all come*. (That's its simplest form.) *Welcome!* But standing alone, it can become ingrown. High invitation and low challenge results in a cozy culture, a church experience that is warm and embracing but which doesn't encourage us to be all God intends us to be.

Challenge means, being stretched beyond your comfort zone. Low invitation and high challenge results in a stressed culture. And these two quadrants go together. You know, it's the old 20/80 rule. It's the way most churches work: 20% of the people do 80% of the work. It stresses out the staff and core volunteers. It's a combination of cozy and stressed cultures. And I guarantee you, if you show this matrix to almost any church around, they will ask, "How did you know?" It's a common picture – but it's not sustainable.

Low invitation/low challenge means boring. Ingrown; clique-ish. No demands; no growth. This is also unsustainable. This church will die.

High invitation and high challenge: this is where you find a discipling culture: High invitation. *Y'all come*. Welcoming, friendly and caring. *And* high challenge: you get stretched. Jesus said, *take up your cross and follow me*. That's high challenge! But you know what? People thrive on challenge. If it's too easy, they're not interested. You know: No pain, no gain. No challenge, no interest; it's not worthwhile. But throw some challenge into the project, and you will get eager participation. Just look at the running and fitness challenges, triathlons and more. They've gone viral! The church needs both invitation and challenge. So let's take a closer look at each.

First, Invitation. Jesus was a master at invitation. It's all over Paul's writings as well. Broadly speaking, invitation is what we would call "grace." Undeserved favor. Gift. (*Y'all come*.) You know, Jesus called his disciples very simply. At the beginning, he just said, "Follow me." And he called all kinds of people. Common fishermen. Religious leaders, like Nicodemus. Women as well as men were included as his followers. Jesus talked freely with outsiders: the Samaritan woman at the well; prostitutes; tax collectors. All these people were generally hated and shunned. Jesus healed lepers – more outsiders. The demon-possessed. He welcomed everyone and healed everyone. He healed the servant of a Roman centurion and the daughter of a Canaanite woman. He even called a man who actively persecuted the church – the man whom we know as the Apostle Paul. Jesus said "...when I am lifted up from the earth – on the cross – I will draw all people to myself." Jesus practiced a high level of invitation.

Jesus calls everyone to follow him, although not everyone answers the call. My friends, hear this: the invitation to salvation is an evite sent to every person in the world. It has your name on it. Your sin, that rebellious and selfish tendency we all share as humans, is completely forgiven by what Jesus has done for you on the cross. At the end of your life, being right with God that is the only thing that's going to matter to you. Even today, now, whatever burdens you carry because you have done wrong, or failed to do right, are lifted because of the cross. Not by what you can do to earn it, but as God's free gift, yours simply through faith in Christ. That's it. It's *what God has done*, not what you must do. It's grace. That's high invitation – in its broadest form; it's all about gift.

But salvation is not the end game. It's only the beginning. Salvation is the door that opens to a whole new life, lived (from now on) for God (and not for yourself). If our message were salvation alone, then once everyone got saved, we'd be done with our job. But it's only the beginning. Once God has saved you from the consequences of sin, you are given a new life. Now the question is, how will you live that life? Once freed – what will you do with your freedom?

This is the question addressed by all our texts today. In our first reading, God had rescued his people from slavery. He did it, in Old Testament language, with a “mighty hand and an outstretched arm” – in other words, by God's power alone. What did the Israelites have to do? *Nothing*. Simply walk out of Egypt. God did it all. Now that they have arrived at the edge of the Promised Land they are challenged: *how will you now live?* Will you continue to follow God's ways? It's a life/death proposition. *How will you now live?* In Romans, Paul had just said, “There is nothing you can *do* to be saved.” Remember? End of chapter 7: “...the evil I don't want to do I do; the good I do want to do I don't – wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” And in the next breath he proclaims: “Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! There is therefore now *no* condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” *Free gift!* Now then, Paul continues, if you live by the Spirit, then walk in the Spirit. Don't go back to your old ways. Live, not under the control of your sinful nature, but under the control of the Holy Spirit. As children of God and followers of Christ, saved by him alone, our obligation is now to live a life that pleases him. This is the challenge.

It's a high challenge that balances the high invitation. And your motivation is key: you take up that challenge, not to earn salvation (because that's a gift already freely given you). Rather, you take up that challenge out of gratitude. Profound gratitude for the rescue Jesus has provided in such a costly and grace-filled way.

My friends, if you've been around here long enough, you know what the word *redeemed* means. Today, we may think of it as a rather “churchy” word but in the first century, it was a very common word. It came out of the slave market. Here's how it worked: A slave is brought in chains to the auction block by his old master. He will be sold to the highest bidder. A new master will lead him away, still in chains, to work for him. And that's what happened, 99% of the time. But now and then something different happened. A slave would come to the auction block, chained and without hope. The bidding begins, and soon a new master wins the bid. He pays the price and the slave is handed over. But this time, the master unlocks those chains, and gives the slave his freedom papers. “You are now free,” says the new master. “I have *redeemed* you -- bought you back and set you free. You are no longer a slave.” When the Apostle Paul saw that, he said, “That's it! That's what Christ has done for me! He has bought me back from slavery to sin and death, and now I have a new life. I am free. I am redeemed.”

Now, what will that slave do with his new life? Will he not seek some way to show his gratitude to the man who freed him? I mean, how do you even begin to pay for that? The best way, Paul says, is to give your life freely to that new master. He does not enslave you. You give him your service, freely, forever. Why wouldn't you want to serve such a master? What better way to live your life?

That's the challenge. Jesus says, "If you want to follow me, you must take up your own cross." High challenge. He makes it even stronger: "Whoever does not take up his cross to follow me is not worthy of me." His challenge is *very* high: "Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me." Jesus wants to be the #1 priority in your life. Number one. Not somewhere down the list, as in "when I have time" or "after I've been successful in my career and launched my kids." *Now*. For it is when you lose your life in this way – giving yourself back to the One who redeemed you – that you will find it. A new life. A life of following Jesus. Discipleship.

High challenge? You bet. But – really – what's the alternative? Go back to your old ways? Enslaved by sin? If you don't serve one master, Jesus taught, you will surely serve another, whether it is money or ambition or home and security or whatever. Once, as the crowd stopped following him because of the high challenge Jesus had set before them, he asked his disciples, "Will you also leave me?" And you know what they said? They said, "Lord, where else shall we go? What other master offers eternal life?" And it is precisely when you crucify your own ambitions and desires, that you find new life. When you lose your life – carrying your cross, for it is the instrument of your death – then you will find real life. Abundant life in this world, and eternal life in the next.

High challenge. A life given to Christ. Putting Jesus first. It may seem daunting. But remember, the invitation came first and continues to uphold and sustain you. Listen again to some of Jesus' inviting words:

- Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.
- I will never leave you or abandon you.
- I will give you life.
- I will give you my Spirit; I will do a new thing in you.

Throughout Scripture, you will find invitation and challenge woven together. Always, the rescue first, and then the law. Always, the prior invitation and *then* the challenge. And then, along the way – forgiveness when we fail, renewed encouragement and hope, always the promise that it is not by our own strength or courage but by his might and Spirit. It's is God's mighty hand and outstretched arm that finally win the day.

My friends, we are building a discipling culture. It will require change, but we're in this together. As disciples serving the same master, we will support and encourage one another, reminding each other of Jesus' words. And if you, today, are feeling burdened and weighed down, bring your burdens to him. He carries the weight. He takes the load off your shoulders and frees you. Let his words of invitation sink in and heal your heart. If you find yourself, today, incredibly blessed, keenly aware of the gifts you have been given; then in your gratitude, give him your life. For it is when you lose your life -- in grateful service to him -- that you will find it. A new life, a redeemed life.

Invitation and challenge. Taken together, these two words mean *discipleship*. It's the life we are called to live. And there is no better life. Amen.