

## The Invitation

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on March 19, 1995, the third Sunday in Lent. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Invitations! We all receive invitations. We all send invitations. Invitations to weddings, for instance. Professionally printed invitations. Beautiful calligraphy. "Come to my daughter's wedding," they say. "Come to the reception." Usually these invitations include an RSVP. RSVP - it means "let us know one way or the other if you're coming. Let us know so that we don't waste food. Let us know so that we'll have enough for you." I like those kind of invitations. They have class. They have beauty. They promise fellowship with friends. They promise laughter, story telling, and lots to eat and drink. This kind of invitation is addressed to friends and family. They aren't addressed to everybody. They're not addressed to postal patrons.

I think of another kind of invitation. It's a little different. It's an invitation that invites everybody. We see them in the newspaper. "The public is invited to a free concert." We often see this kind of invitation in church bulletins. "The 32nd Oxford Community men's Lenten breakfast will be held on Sunday, April 2nd at the Oxford United Methodist Church. Please call our church office to place your reservation as soon as possible." It's a general invitation to all men. What I like about this kind of invitation is that I can take it or leave it. If I really want to go to the breakfast I know I'll be welcomed. I also know that nobody's going to barge into my home and drag me out of bed and carry me off to the breakfast. But it's there if I want it. I like those kinds of invitations. There's no pressure.

But there's another kind of invitation. It's a kind of invitation that we don't

see too much in the United States. It's an invitation that's more like a command. Let me explain what I mean. Last January when we were in Israel, Kay and I were walking through the narrow streets of the old city of Jerusalem. I stopped to look at a chess set in a shop that looked like it had been there for about 2000 years. I just wanted to look. Out came the owner of the store. He had the look of an Old Testament prophet in his fiery eyes. He invited me in to his shop. "Come in!" he said. He took my arm and led me forcibly into his shop. "I show you a really nice chess set." He dragged me to the back of his shop.

Middle Eastern culture is so different from our American culture - especially when it comes to buying and selling. It doesn't matter if your Christian, Moslem, or Jewish. Buying and selling is so different. If I go into one of the stores in Oxford a polite clerk approaches me with a smile.

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"Can I help you?"

"I'm just looking," I say.

"Go right ahead. Take your time. If you need any help, just let me know."

So I feel free to wander through the store looking at whatever I want to without pressure from anybody to buy. If I want to leave, I just leave. I like it that way.

That's not the way it is in the Middle East. I just wanted to look at a chess set. Just look!

"You are my friend. I let you have this beautiful chess set. \$500 dollar!"

"That's a little bit out of my price range."

"How much you can afford? You name the price."

"How 'bout \$5?"

"5\$! You insult me. I hand make this beautiful chess set. But because you are my friend I give you a good deal. 50\$!"

"No thank you."

He squeezes my arm. He puts his face right up into my face. "Not good enough for you. I work hard to make this. \$25! I give it to you for \$25."

He looks like he's angry. I turn to leave. He blocks my way with his body. I can't leave. He squeezes my arm harder. He's convinced that he has what I want. He's convinced that I can't live without that chess set. I have a feeling that I ain't getting out without buying something. I end up forking out \$12 dollars for a chess set missing one pawn. I leave the shop. I feel relieved that I got out alive. I'm not comfortable with that kind of invitation to buy. Forcefull! Intense! Frightening! More like a command than an invitation.

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Now listen to the invitation the Lord makes through the prophet. Most biblical scholars believe that this invitation was directed primarily to God's people living in exile. Living in Babylon. People grown accustomed to living far away from home. People in danger of forgetting who they are. Forgetting that they belong to God. In danger of adopting the ways of Babylon. In danger of developing an appetite for the ways of Babylon. In danger of abandoning the Lord and his laws and his ways. But the Lord is not addressing only His people. The Lord is addressing everyone. Listen to what the Lord says. He says it to us. His voice is the voice of a Middle Eastern shop keeper trying to make a sale.

"He, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;

and you that have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without  
price."

I hear the insistent, persistent, voice of that Middle Eastern businessman in this invitation. The voice of One who will not take "No" for an answer. The voice of One bent on closing the deal. The voice of One who puts his body between us and the way of sin and death. The voice of One who stretches out his arms to embrace us. To block our escape.

"Come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

We try to walk away but He reaches out and takes us by the arm. He pleads with us, "Why? Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

We feel like saying, "Bug off. Back away! Leave me alone! I'm just looking."

The Lord comes closer. He holds our arm! He puts his face to our ear. "Listen! Eat what is good. Delight yourselves in rich food. Bend your head toward me so you can hear me better. Listen! Listen to my commands. Listen to what I say through my prophets. Listen! I want you to live. I care about you! Seek me! Call upon me! Forsake your ways. Follow my ways. Forsake your thoughts. Listen to my thoughts!"

What does this tell us about our God? It tells us that our God is a passionate God. The Lord is not indifferent to our response. He invites us insistently. He invites us persistently. Our God is a God who cares intensely for us. Our God is not a

God who sends out a nice invitation to friends and family. Our God invites enemies as well as friends. All who thirst. All who are dissatisfied. Nor does our God send out a general invitation like we read about in the newspaper or church bulletin. "If you'd like to come, come. But don't feel like you have to." The God who comes to us in Jesus Christ deeply cares that we respond to his invitation.

The Lord invites us. He comes in person to invite us. The Lord God comes near to us in Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus comes near in the word of his prophets. The Lord Jesus comes near in the word of his apostles. The Lord Jesus comes near in the preaching of the Gospel. The Lord Jesus comes near in the sacraments. Jesus Christ comes near in baptism - "Come to the waters". He comes to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion - "You that have no money, come... buy wine without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?"

God comes to us pleading. God comes to us like Middle Eastern shop keeper - begging us to come to him for life. The Lord comes to us as One who is convinced that he has what we need. He has what gives life. "Turn from everything that take you away from me. Turn from everything that leads to death!"

"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near."

The Lord may be found today. Seek him! The Lord is near today. Call upon him!  
~~Let forsake the ways of the~~ Return to the Lord... let the season of Lent be a time of returning to the Lord. Return to the Lord that he may have mercy on us. Return to our God for he will  
Let us pray: Father, you have opened to us the scriptures. Through the preaching of the word we hear your voice. Through faith in Christ we eat and drink at your Table. We thank you for this food from heaven, the life of your dear Son. Grant that we may rejoice in your gifts and that we may go forth from this place to serve you, and that daily renewed by your Spirit we may faithfully walk in the footsteps of your wellbeloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

abundantly pardon. Amen