

“The Walk: Invite”

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2 Timothy 1:1-7 (CEB)

¹ From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will, to promote the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus.

² To Timothy, my dear child.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³ I’m grateful to God, whom I serve with a good conscience as my ancestors did. I constantly remember you in my prayers day and night. ⁴ When I remember your tears, I long to see you so that I can be filled with happiness. ⁵ I’m reminded of your authentic faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice. I’m sure that this faith is also inside you. ⁶ Because of this, I’m reminding you to revive God’s gift that is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ God didn’t give us a spirit that is timid but one that is powerful, loving, and self-controlled.

Acts 1:6-8 (CEB)

Those who had gathered together asked Jesus, “Lord, are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now?”

⁷ Jesus replied, “It isn’t for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ Rather, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Who introduced you to Jesus?

Some of you may be able to name a specific instance when you experienced God’s love in a new and personal way and the person who made Jesus real for you. For others, that may be harder to answer. Perhaps you grew up surrounded by strong Christian examples in your home or your church, and following Jesus was something you inherited more than decided. It might not be one or two individuals, but a whole community of people who helped you to know Christ in your life. Even so, I’ll bet there are a few people who stand out for their witness and influence, people who had a particularly powerful impact on your faith. We learn in the first scripture lesson today that for Timothy, Paul’s young partner in ministry, it was his mother and his grandmother who passed faith on to him. Perhaps you can relate.

During my first week at the Academy for Spiritual Formation, we were encouraged to write a spiritual autobiography. A spiritual autobiography is an exercise that traces one's spiritual development over the course of time. One way of doing that is to create a timeline of life changes, spiritual awakenings, and the people who helped us in pivotal moments. All of that felt like too much for me to record in an hour, so I decided instead to make a list of the major chapters in my life and the people who shaped my faith in each stage of my journey. I listed eleven places I lived and worked, along with four major faith experiences. As I began to think about the people who had shaped my faith at each stage I thought of my parents, who remain a source of inspiration and grounding for me, even at 50. I thought of people like my maternal grandmother, a lifelong devoted Roman Catholic who gave me my first Bible – a KJV with a Jesus and the children on the cover and a brass zipper with a dangling cross. I thought of Mike and Sue McHale; Mike was the pastor of the first church I remember attending and the primary influence on my dad's discernment to enter ministry. Beth Ferrell and Candie Wilson, who, during my elementary and middle school years, taught me and demonstrated how much Jesus loved me. Bud Miller, our family doctor and church member, who shared both his wisdom and his honest questions on our many drives to community band concerts when I was in high school. I listed pastors, advisors, classmates, students, and friends. As I worked forward, I kept going back, realizing another influence I'd overlooked. Within 20 minutes, I had nearly filled the page, and I knew my list was far from complete. Some people on that page were more influential than others, there by God's grace at pivotal moments in my faith life. But all of them are part of my story in a meaningful way. I found myself overwhelmed with gratitude, through smiles and tears offering a prayer of thanks. Who would I be without their witness in my life?

Think of who those people are in your life who have shaped your faith. Recall their faces if you can. Say their names now in the silence of your memory. Who would you be today if they hadn't shared their faith with you? And, after you ponder that for a moment, let me ask you another question: Are you that person for someone else? Whose faith are you helping shape?

Nothing strikes fear into the heart of a well-meaning Christian like the E word: *evangelism*. The word *evangelical* has become associated with coercion or politics. Evangelists are often thought of as fast-talking, self-righteous, overzealous hustlers. White Evangelicals are considered a major voting bloc, courted by the Right and associated with a conservative social agenda. No wonder we don't talk much in church about evangelism anymore. Our fifth essential practice of faithful discipleship is *Invite*. Of the five, it is the one that makes people the most uncomfortable – and that's after we've already talked about giving! We use the word *invite* instead of *evangelize* because it sounds less churchy and is a better reflection of the way we share our faith. I wish we could reclaim the real meaning of evangelism, though.

- *Evangelism is NOT proselytizing*. Proselytizing is about inducing someone to convert from their faith to your faith, about how many souls can be saved. *Evangelism IS about sharing our faith with others*. The Greek word *evangelion* means "good news," a word used in the ancient world to describe a favorable report from the battlefield. It's all about passing along good news.
- *Evangelism is NOT judgment*. In order for it to be the Gospel, it has to be *good news*, not a word of criticism or an attempt to shame someone into conversion. *Evangelism IS gentle and genuine*. As I remind our leaders often, our goal in sharing our faith is to be invitational, not confrontational.
- *Evangelism is NOT about having all the right answers*. Who wants to hang out with a self-righteous know-it-all? *Evangelism IS about humbly sharing and listening*. 1 Peter 3:15-16 reads, "Whenever anyone asks you why you have hope, be ready to defend it. But do so with gentleness and respect." (paraphrase mine) D.T. Niles once said evangelism is like one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find bread.¹

¹ D. T. Niles, *That They May Have Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 96.

Some people say to me, “I don’t know enough about the Bible to talk to people about Christian faith,” or “I feel like a hypocrite sharing my faith when I’m so far from perfect.” Sometimes, we worry about the wrong things. Think back to when you were in school. Did you ever study with your friends or do homework together? You didn’t have to know everything about how to balance an equation or have all the vocabulary words committed to memory or know the sequence of every historical event. You just shared what you had already learned and helped each other figure the rest of it out. That’s what faith-sharing is like when it’s done well.

We’re all struggling through life trying to do our best, seeking God’s guidance to direct us as often as we remember. None of us has it all figured out, least of all the people who want you to think they do. Look at the disciples in the lesson from Acts today. When Jesus was arrested, they scattered. When he was crucified, they hid. When he was resurrected, they doubted. When Jesus appeared to them before he ascended, they still didn’t get it. But he didn’t say, “Get your act together, boys. Shape up. Pressure’s on. You can’t afford any more mess-ups if this thing’s going to work.” No, even knowing how far they still had to go, he told them, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and to the ends of the earth,” and he promised that the Holy Spirit would give them strength to do it. He was right, of course. They went on to share what they had seen and heard and experienced, and their witness gave birth to a world-altering movement. I believe that’s our call today, too. And so is the promise.

How does your faith impact who you are and how you live? How would your life be different if you didn’t have faith? How does your church help you to be more faithful in your walk with God? Start with just those simple questions. Reflect on what God has done and is doing right now in your life. Then ask yourself: *Who might benefit from hearing this?*

Like the other practices, *Invite* has two components – a shared practice and an individual practice. Together, we *share the gospel by how we live*. Our best witness for Christ is to follow his example as often as we can in every moment of our lives. St. Francis of Assisi is quoted as having said, “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” Our *example* is the most attractive part of our faith. If people see us as joyful, hopeful, and living with purpose, they will be drawn to Christ. Conversely, if we’re unpleasant, miserable, and angry, they’ll take a pass. Live like Jesus: Be kind. Be generous. Be compassionate. Be forgiving. Be encouraging. The church is like the front porch of the kingdom of God. We are called to be a place of hospitality and welcome and inclusion, inviting everyone to experience God’s grace.

The individual practice is to *invite five people every year to come to church with you*. Worship is probably the default, since it happens every week and is the first of our practices. But for some people, walking into a worship service is too intense for a first start. So, maybe it’s an invitation to a special event, like a concert or today’s chili cookoff and big game watch party, or a service project where we can work together. Holidays can also be easier points of entry – Ash Wednesday is coming up and Easter isn’t far off. If you invite five people to one service, you’re good for the year. Or you can spread it out and invite one or two friends now, and another later. Do the math. With about 450 people worshipping at Church of the Saviour every week in person or online, that would mean at least 2,250 people invited to church this year. While not all of them will come to a life-changing faith experience, some of them will. And they will come to know Jesus because *you* invited them.

Some of you may be thinking, *but all my friends already go to church*. If your friends already have a church in which they actively participate, that’s great. But how do you know? Do

they still attend? Are they active in a faith community, or is their name just in a list somewhere? (That goes for COTS members, too. If you have friends you haven't seen in a while, invite them back.) How do you start that conversation? *Do you have a church home?* is a perfectly appropriate question to ask. If not, invite them. If they do, ask them what they love about their church – invite them to share their story with you. Do *not* try to convince anyone to leave their church and join yours – this isn't a competition. If they're practicing their faith, that's great. That's the goal. Now, if every friend you have is already part of our congregation, you need to make some new friends. That sounds like a joke, but it isn't. I encourage you to get out there. Meet new people. Expand your circle. Inviting people to faith is an essential practice of discipleship, but it's hard to practice it if you don't have anyone to invite.

Today, we're concluding our sermon series on *The Walk: the Five Essential Practices of Faithful Discipleship*. Let's take a moment to review all five:

- *Worship*. Worship every Sunday that you can, whether here or somewhere else. With the ability to livestream and access archived videos, we can all worship every week. Worship gives us the opportunity to gather in community and express our praise, hope, and gratitude to God. Pray five times a day – even a simple word of thanks to God – to nurture your relationship with the God whose image you bear.
- *Grow*. Participate in a small group to build relationships and grow in your faith through study, fellowship, prayer, and service. Read five verses of scripture a day – about the length of most daily devotionals – to keep expanding your knowledge of the Bible.
- *Serve*. At least twice a year, make it a point to offer yourself in hands-on mission through your church or other community activity. Serve both *inside* and *outside* the church, to make space for others to experience God's hope and to make the world closer to the world God imagines for us. Perform five acts of kindness each week, large or small, to spread kindness in a world that sees far too little of it.
- *Give*. Give a percentage of your income to God's work through the church. Work to grow that gift to a tithe. Giving back to God is an expression of gratitude to God. And be generous toward others – five times a month, do something unexpectedly generous.
- *Invite*. Be a witness for Christ by the way you live. And invite five people every year to come to church with you.

We refer to these five as essential practices of faithful discipleship – not five *good* practices or five *recommended* practices, but five *essential* practices. We see all five in the life of Jesus and the people who follow him, in scripture and throughout Christian history. We're called to practice not just one or two of them, but all five. That may sound a little methodical. What can I say? We are *Methodists*, after all. But doing these five things regularly builds a life in Christ that brings joy and hope in our lives and in others.

Who introduced you to Jesus? Think again about the names you brought to mind a few moments ago. Who would you be if they hadn't poured into you the way they did? I want to invite you to do one more thing. This afternoon or sometime in the next couple of days, write them a note to tell them how grateful you are for what they did for you, for who they have been for you. Send it in a card or even an email – gratitude is one of the best gifts you can give. If they are no longer living, write it anyway. It still matters – honor them with your memory and your time. Then offer a prayer of thanks to God for the gift they were in your life.

Worship, grow, serve, give, and invite. Five simple practices to form a life deeply rooted in Christ and pursuing God's hope for every life. Let's live every day to be the people God made us to be. Amen.