

## The Invitation

I am becoming more and more convinced  
that the real enemy of hospitality is fear.

We are afraid of the stranger,  
afraid of the new,  
afraid of change.

Yet that is the only way we can grow here at Brentwood –  
by welcoming strangers and making friends with them,  
by doing some new things to attract new people,  
and by changing some of the ways we offer what we value most  
so new people can flourish in the faith in this community.

There is a wonderful quote attributed to Albert Einstein  
that goes something like this:  
*“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again  
and expecting different results.”*

That’s a bit of what’s going on  
in the story we read from 1 Kings this morning.  
The widow is reluctant  
to offer hospitality to Elijah, the ambassador for God,  
because she is afraid.  
If we follow the conversation carefully,  
she just wants to keep what she has  
so she and her child can die in relative peace.

There is a lot more going on in this story,  
as there is in most stories,  
but I want to focus on this fear and fatalism  
and how Elijah, this ambassador for God, responds.

The widow has given up.  
Things are so bad that she’s convinced  
it’s time to simply let go and die.

And Elijah’s first words are clear and simple,  
“Do not be afraid!”

When she moved through and beyond her fear,  
abundance and flourishing returned.  
Food was plentiful,  
her hopes were revived,  
and she and her household began to enjoy life again.

Now, I think Brentwood as a community of faith  
has heard the word from the Lord  
and been converted from fear to hope.

The enthusiasm with which you all participated  
in our process of holy conversations  
about the future of this congregation  
was heartening.

The ideas you generated in our congregation consultation  
were clear and powerful.

Last Monday, Session reviewed that material  
and put some final touches on the invitation  
we are crafting to capture  
what Brentwood wants to offer those  
seek to encounter Jesus Christ in this community.

Here's the wording we arrived at:

***The friendly folk at Brentwood Presbyterian Church  
warmly invite you to  
get centred in Jesus Christ in worship and learning,  
enjoy community with Jesus Christ in fellowship,  
and experience the compassion of Jesus Christ in service.***

We think this captures,  
in a few powerful words  
(37 to be exact)  
who we are and what we offer to this neighbourhood and city  
in Jesus Christ's name and for Jesus Christ's sake.

And that is absolutely critical to keep in mind  
as we seek to grow.  
Everything we do,  
we do as ambassadors of Jesus Christ.  
We stand firm in our witness to his grace  
and its importance for our lives  
and for the lives of all who live on this earth.

We are confident and articulate  
in extending this invitation in Jesus Christ's name  
and for Jesus Christ's sake.  
We are his people inviting others to encounter him  
in our midst.

You've probably heard it before,  
but it's worth repeating.

All the studies of church growth over the past 4 decades  
have concluded the same thing with about the same statistics.

80% - 90% of church growth happens  
because someone invites someone else to come  
and enjoy what they are enjoying at church.

What we are inviting people to enjoy  
is what we are trying to capture  
in the invitation we've crafted.

Listen to it and read it again:

***The friendly folk at Brentwood Presbyterian Church  
warmly invite you to  
get centred in Jesus Christ in worship and learning,  
enjoy community with Jesus Christ in fellowship,  
and experience the compassion of Jesus Christ in service.***

My hope is that we can memorize this  
to keep it clear in our minds and hearts.

My hope is that we will begin to print it  
on our orders of service,  
make banners and signs of it  
to put up around this church,  
and, most important,  
begin to extend this invitation to our friends and neighbours.

This invitation captures who we are in Jesus Christ  
at our best.

It is the promise of God  
that is taking us through our fears into genuine hospitality  
that points to a new future in Jesus Christ.

It is a future that will probably include  
Burnaby Taiwanese Presbyterian Church,  
so we need to continue to seek earnestly  
how best to extend the hospitality of the Gospel to them.

It is a future that will include new members and adherents  
in our own congregation,  
so we will need to figure out how to welcome genuinely  
those who choose to grow in the Christian faith with us.

All of these things are happening now,  
but flourishing will require continued attention  
and continuous improvement  
on how we are doing them.

God is providing the resources for our renewal.  
But we must step up and use those resources  
faithfully, effectively, and wisely.

The key in all of this  
is to deliver on the promise we are making  
in the invitation.

We serve Jesus Christ well when we provide  
powerful and positive worship and learning experiences  
where people can meet and grow in Jesus Christ.

We serve Jesus Christ well when we provide  
warmth and welcome to all who come  
in search of Jesus Christ and his grace.

We serve Jesus Christ well when we provide  
service to others and opportunities to serve  
in the name of and for the sake of Jesus Christ.

There is a story I have used often  
in working with congregations  
who are seeking to flourish,  
like this one is.

Several years ago,  
the Anglicans in British Columbia  
hired a professional advertising firm  
to develop a series of ads  
that would run at Christmas and Easter  
to attract lapsed Anglicans back to church.

You may remember them from local newspapers.  
One had a picture of the earth from outer space  
with the caption  
“Concerned about the fate of the earth?  
Why not come and talk to the original owner?”

In the focus groups that the ad firm ran,  
the most popular ad  
featured a picture of a note scrawled on a wrinkled piece of paper

and posted on a fridge door.  
It read, "Come home. All is forgiven. Jesus."  
The caption under it read,  
"Sometimes the simplest truths are the most difficult to accept."

When the representatives from the ad firm  
met with the bishops and presented their findings  
from the focus groups  
on which of the ads conveyed the most powerful invitation,  
one of the bishops sat back and said,  
"So what happens if someone comes?"

And that's the real question for us  
moving into the future.  
If this church is going to grow and flourish,  
as everyone in this sanctuary has said they want it to,  
we're going to have to deliver on our promises  
in ways that new people will appreciate  
and in which they will want to participate  
on an ongoing basis.

Witnessing to,  
making available as best we can,  
delivering on  
the promises contained in our invitation  
is the key to our future.

We need not be afraid.  
God is with us.  
Out of gratitude for that presence and power,  
we will do best to focus our energies  
on helping people get centred in Jesus Christ,  
enjoy community in Jesus Christ,  
and experience the compassion of Jesus Christ.

That, I am convinced, will generate  
a flourishing future here at Brentwood.

Amen.

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