

### **“Contagious—Part 3”**

Today we're finishing up the message series called *Contagious*. We've been looking at how to be contagious in the best possible sense, and this is about our faith. We could boil this whole series down to one statement and question: **[SLIDE...]** **"People matter to God. Do they matter to me?"** More specifically, **[SLIDE...]** **"Lost people matter to God. Do they matter to me?"** The purpose of our church is to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. But leading people to an active faith in Jesus Christ is not just the church's mission. That's not just an organizational purpose statement. That's your mission. That's your mission and mine. And Jesus tried to make that clear. About the last thing he said to his followers after his resurrection was, **[SLIDE...]** **"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"** (Matt 28:19-20, NIV).

So the question today is, "Are you on mission? What's the mission statement written in your heart personally?" Because ultimately the mission statement that matters is not one that's on a brochure or in a message or part of a curriculum someplace. It's the one in your heart. So, are you on mission? Do lost people matter to you like they matter to God? Unfortunately, it's just too easy to stray off the mission and get distracted, and get selfish, and think, "It's all about me." And that's why we have spent this whole series looking at what it means to be a highly contagious Christian. Because if we're on mission it's so much bigger than us.

We talked about the first habit, which is that we're going to develop relationships with people who are far from God. Then last week we looked at the second habit. We said, "We're going to learn how to share the gospel, explain how to become a Christian in the clearest, most compelling way that we can, even though that's a stretch for a lot of us." But it's so very important that we share the good news.

There are so many people with so many hurts, and our invitations matter. When Christ-followers learn how to share their faith, how to explain the gospel, things happen. But today we talk about the third and final habit of contagious Christians. After we work at developing relationships with people, we have spiritual conversations, and we explain about the gospel, here's the third habit: **[SLIDE: "Contagious Christians invite seeking friends...]** We commit that we will invite seeking friends to an event or worship service, designed to help them take the next step in their spiritual journey. But listen, people rarely come to an event or worship service unless a friend invites them. Yes, we do a lot of advertising, but that's not a substitute for your invitations. Our advertising just makes it easier for you to do your part. You see, we are an invitation-dependant community. That's just the truth about us. And if you don't do the inviting, then it won't get done.

Jerri Sargent wrote this last week: "I had three different friends from Saint Paul's that continued to invite me to come as a guest. Stephany Pace invited me for a couple of years. Sherry Baker kept inviting me to Alpha and Deb Bainbridge also invited me several times to go to Saint Pauls. All three have different circles of friends, so I guess God was really working on me.

"Over the last 1-2 years I had been fighting severe depression and stress. Stephany [and I] had worked [together] several years before and as we continued to be friends she would mention the church and kept asking me to come with her. Last year, she shared with me how much things had improved in her family life due to her commitment to church and constant prayer. I could see a difference in her and that's what finally woke me up. I needed something in my life to fill a big void. I visited the church a couple of Sundays... Each time I was there, I would break down crying either during worship or during prayer.

"I felt welcome at Saint Paul's. When you have a deep depression and low self-esteem, it can be very difficult to be in large crowds. You always feel like you are not good enough or someone is going to judge you. I never felt judged or stupid. Which was a relief because until this past year, I had never studied the Bible. I had to even learn the Lord's Prayer.

"I continued to come to Saint Paul's. I love it! It's amazing that there are so many times when you hear a sermon and it feels like Aaron is talking directly to you. I can relate to his stories and you can tell he sincerely wants people to feel God's love. I have heard many other members say similar things.

"I am in my second Alpha class and I joined the church not long ago. Every week I can't wait until Wednesday, and then I can't wait until Sunday. I have become a happier person. I always believed in God, prayed to him as long as I can remember - but now I spend a lot more time praying and especially prayer for others. I look forward to becoming closer to God and helping others find him as well.

"I have brought one friend to Saint Paul's...She already knew God but didn't have a church home where she felt welcomed. I am still working on a couple of other friends - hoping they will join me even just one Sunday and then they can decide for themselves. Thanks for everything, God Bless, Jerri Sargent"

Christianity is an invitation-dependant faith. It always has been. Go back to the beginning in the Gospel of John, chapter one. Andrew meets Jesus and his world is turned upside down. The next thing Andrew does is go to Peter. The text says, **[SLIDE...]** "And he brought him to Jesus." He brought Peter to a place where Peter could find out about Jesus. And then we read about Philip, and Philip meets Jesus, and his world is rocked. He goes to Nathaniel and says to Nathaniel, **[SLIDE: add to previous]** "Come and see." Come and see. I want you to come to a place where you can learn and see more about Jesus." That's what believers do. Christ-followers for 2,000 years have been going to seekers and inviting them to a place where they can learn about Jesus, "Come and see, come and see, come and see." And when they do that amazing things happen.

Listen to this: A major poll by George Barna found that 25 percent of Americans said they would attend a church **if invited by a friend**. Twenty-five percent! Think about what that means. If this is true, if it's even close to true, over 60 million Americans are one invitation away from launching out on a spiritual journey that could bring them home to God. You think of the difference it would make in this country if every Christ-follower and every church would take that seriously.

But I want to tell you, it all hinges on the mission statement in your heart and mine. So in the moments that remain in this talk, I want to think with you about how to cultivate this third habit, how to be inviting followers to Christ.

I'll run through a few principles on this one. Here's the first principle, and I hope this just becomes a mantra for all of us. The first principle when it comes to this business of inviting people is **[SLIDE: "Principles for inviting people: 1. Never say no for anyone.]** This principle is fundamental to the spread of the gospel in the New Testament.

In Jesus day there were people that everybody had given up on, but Jesus didn't give up on them. And tax collectors and Samaritans and lepers and sinners and Gentiles and people that everybody else was sure would say "no" to God, said "yes" to Jesus. You never know. We say "no" for people a lot when they've been atheists in the past or have another faith heritage or have been openly critical of churches. We stop inviting them and in the process we say "no" for them. But don't give up on anyone and here's why...**[VIDEO: Lisa Slicznotza's story]**

Don't say "no" for anybody, even if they've been saying "no" for a long time. Think of your world. Is there anybody in your world so far from God that you're just ready to give up on them? Listen, don't give up. Don't say "no" for them. Because you never know when the situation will change. You never know when a crisis will hit. You never know when a hurt will open a door. You never know when a heart is going to soften. You never know when some ice will melt. You never know what God can do. You just don't know. So don't you ever say "no" for anyone. That's the first rule of being contagious — never say "no" for anybody because you never know.

The second principle for effective inviting, being contagious, is to **[SLIDE: add to previous slide] 2. Put yourself in the shoes of the person you're inviting.** This is very important because a lot of us have been around church for so long, we forget what it's like to be a stranger.

A couple of years ago I went out to a conference in California and I stayed with an old friend of mine out there in the Los Angeles area. He's been exploring other faiths so we had some great conversations. He invited me to go with him to a Hindu temple he goes to occasionally, so I made a deal with him. I'd go with him if he'd go with me to church on Sunday. We had a deal, so on Saturday morning we went to the Hindu temple.

I got an insight into what it's like to go into a place of worship where you're a stranger and you don't know the customs, and it's kind of intimidating. You go in and have to take off your shoes. You begin to wonder, "Do they have a good system to make sure I'll get my own shoes back? What if I end up with a Hindu pair of shoes? What do I do with those?" I certainly did not want to offend anyone by doing something wrong or. It was unnerving! It can be kind of an intimidating experience when you go to a place of worship, and you don't know the rules, you don't know the customs, you don't know the people.

A lot of us forget what that's like. So you need to put yourself in the shoes of the person you're inviting. Like when you invite someone to come, offer to pick them up and drive over together. That's both a gesture of friendship, and it makes it more likely that somebody will feel comfortable to actually come.

Another thing that helps is put an invitation in their hands. Give them something tangible that will remind them of what it is that you're inviting them to. If you're inviting them to worship, give them the last week's program, or if you're inviting them to Wednesday Night Live, give them a flier for that. We have tons of fliers at the information center. And for special events we produce invitations for you to hand out. Use that stuff as you invite.

Then offer to go out after the service and eat together or have coffee afterward. And again, that's a gesture of friendship, and it also gives you a chance to debrief what it is the other person might be thinking. An effective inviter puts themselves in the shoes of the person that they're going to invite. And that leads me to the next point.

You need to recognize that this third habit of invitation is a process, not a one-time event **[SLIDE: add to previous slide: "3. Remember that this is not a one-time thing.]"** The deal is not that you invite somebody one time and then say, "Well, I can check habit number three off my list." It doesn't work that way. It's a process. The Bible teaches us this when it says, **[SLIDE...]** **"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9, NIV)**

This last summer when I was on my break I started a friendship with a man that had closed the door on God. I first met him in the parking lot of a car dealership and struck up a conversation. He recognized me as a pastor and we started to talk. He shared that growing up was a difficult and devastating time for him. He was surrounded by things and influences that swallowed him up. Later

in life he began to resent people and God for allowing all that had happened to him. He was afraid that he was going to lose his present family because of his past experiences and addictions. He had some deeply spiritual questions and some even deeper pain and doubt. Tears were streaming down his face as he told me his story, and tears were streaming down my face too. I asked him if I could pray for him and we did. I told him it was OK to close the door on God, but just don't lock it. Because God would never give up on him.

I told him about the church and what he could find here. He was straight up with me and said that I'd never see him in church on Sunday. And I haven't yet. I had the chance to visit with him several times and I invited him to Alpha and he came. And his life was changed. I invited him and his wife to be in our small group, and he just wasn't ready for that. I've extended other invitations and he has accepted those.

Now he's still not ready to worship here on a Sunday. And that's OK, because this is a process, and I'm going to be around for a long time and I'm going to be there for this man for a long time. So if you think about invitations as a one-time event deal, it's not going to be effective. Think in terms of a process.

The next principle for effective inviters, in being contagious, is to **[SLIDE: add to previous slide...]** **4. Be creative in how you invite.** And there are so many opportunities here. There are things besides Sunday worship to invite someone to. We've had people connect with Christ because of hands-on events like Hearts and Hammers. That's when we work with other churches and business and blitz the community repairing homes for those who aren't able or can't afford to do it themselves. Sometimes people will accept an invitation to do that, long before they'll accept an invitation to worship.

You can now invite people to The Salvage Yard. Now, you probably ought to check it out yourself before you invite anybody there on a Thursday, Friday or Saturday Night because it might not suit everybody's taste. But for younger people, who are looking for something with that sort of feel. Invite, invite, invite.

We have so many tools around here. We have opportunities to serve people. We have small groups and support groups and recovery groups. We have basketball on Monday nights that could be a great front door for a lot of people. We have regular small groups with open chairs. We've got so much to invite to, but it all rests on whether or not we're on mission.

And so that leads to the one final thing I want to say for those of us who want to be inviting followers of Christ, and it is this: Keep your heart right. Do what you need to do to keep it soft and tender and to have written on it that mission statement — "that lost people matter to God and they matter to me too." So pray bold prayers.

You know, between now and Easter is an important time. People are very receptive to invitations. So I want to challenge everybody in this room to have at least two people or families that you're praying for on a regular basis. Maybe God will lead you to pray for a whole lot more than that, but pray for at least two. Think of what it would be like if they were here now, knowing and loving and worshipping God with you. Pray for the chairs they'll occupy.

Well, we can all pray. And we can all invite. We can all do that. And if you ever wonder, "Is it worth it? All of that prayer and energy and nervousness and the risk and the rejection and the effort, is it ever worth it?" The answer is "yes!" Because there are so many people, many of the hurting, wondering, wandering, waiting to be invited.

Nancy Booth tells her story.... "God brought me to St. Paul's. It was about three years ago. I was going through a very deep dark depression and cried all of the time. I did not want to go on.

Nothing mattered. People would say I had so much, a wonderful job, a wonderful family, my health, my job. I had it all.

“Nothing mattered, absolutely nothing. I did not want to live, everyday was a living hell. The world was a blur around me that I could barely see or hear. I read everything I could on depression including the Bible looking for answers, [but] we were not active in any church at the time. Bertie Tilberg was a contagious Christian in my life. She is my walking partner and my ‘special friend,’... who I can tell everything to. We would be walking and she would so try to help me out of this hole that I was in. She would quote scripture, she would tell me tips that got her through the catastrophes in her life. For example, she would say she would say, You Need to pray, ‘Jesus help me to be more like you.’ And she would tell me about this Aaron Brown and almost every week she would relate the ‘life’ lessons that she learned through his sermons....I wanted to hear more about what she was talking about, hear it and experience first hand.

“Well, the week that Gary and I finally went you'll never guess the series that week: ‘Bringing Anxiety to Joy.’ I sat there and tears ran down my cheeks. My husband would say, ‘If you're going to sit there and cry I'm not bringing you back.’ But, I told him that I had to be there. The messages changed my life. It was a big part of why I am ‘alive’ today. Aaron's sermon led me to get the help that I needed.”

Nancy goes on to tell about other Christians who were a part of her healing. There were friends at work who prayed with her. And her doctor who's a Christian who listened and helped medically. Nancy wrote, “It's strange you never know where you'll find those ‘contagious’ Christians--not just in church but on a walk, at work, and even at the doctor's office.”

Does being a contagious Christian matter? I don't have any doubt. You read a story like that and you know that an invitation can literally change the course of a life. It's worth it. It's worth every prayer you pray. It's worth every tear you shed. It's worth every spiritual conversation that you launch into even though it may be difficult and awkward sometimes, and sometimes you don't do it all that well. It's worth every question that another person had even though you couldn't answer them all. It's worth every time you invited them to an event here and waited and they never showed up and you had to go through that sense of rejection. It's worth it all. It's worth it to be able to see the change in a life, in a marriage, in a family, in a neighborhood. It's worth it to see people whose lives have been redeemed by Jesus Christ and know they will spend an eternity with Jesus Christ. It's worth it. That's the mission. That's why, if we call ourselves Christians, we're to be contagious. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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