

Welcoming guests to the church family

Message for Sunday, July 13, 2014
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Mark 2:13-17, Matthew 15:30, Mark 12:37, Mark 6:34

Part 1: Mark 2:13-17

Jesus calls Levi to become a disciple. Levi invited Jesus and the others to his home for dinner. Many tax collectors and other sinners came, “for there were many who followed him.”

Levi was a tax collector. The Jewish people in that day despised the Roman soldiers who occupied their country. But they *hated* tax collectors, because these were fellow Jews who had turned traitor and were working for the enemy. Levi was one of these.

No one wanted to be around tax collectors. Except Jesus. Jesus wanted the person whom no one else wanted. Jesus became his friend.

Can you put yourself in Levi's shoes? Try to imagine how that felt. Amazing. Wonderful. New life.

Levi invited his new friend to his home for dinner. The other disciples were invited, too, of course. Levi was part of the group now. And there were lots of other tax collectors there as well. Probably some were Levi's colleagues and friends. I can picture Levi saying to them, “Come over to my place for dinner tonight. I want you to meet someone who is different from any other Jew. He wanted me as a friend.”

That something that you and I can all do. “Come with me to church. I'd like you meet someone who is different from anyone else. He accepts me just as I am, and forgives the wrong I've done.”

But there were many others there as well, not just tax collectors, but others whom the “good people” looked down upon as sinners. Verse 15 in this passage tells us “for there were many who followed him.” The Bible tells us there some of the Jewish upper class who followed Jesus – people like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea. But the common people and the outcasts thronged to hear Jesus. He was giving them new hope, new life.

Part 2

1) Experiencing church for the first time is weird

Would you all stand up with me, please. It's important to be safe, to know how to defend yourself. So I'm going to

take a couple of minutes right now to teach you some basic karate moves.

Stand with your feet wide apart; that gives you good balance. Pull one arm back, and then punch forward. Now the other arm. Go back and forth.

In boxing, you want to follow through with your punch, to get a maximum hit. However, in street fighting that's dangerous, because your opponent can grab your arm and pull you off balance. So in karate you snap the arm back right at the end. That also gives a snap to your punch. Try doing that.

Just as the fist strikes the other person, twist your hand. As the fist contacts the skin, the twisting will tear the skin. The goal is to inflict maximum damage on your opponent.

Finally, add a yell to your punch, like “Aieeee!” This gets your adrenalin pumping, plus it frightens your opponent.

OK, thanks, you may sit down. How do you feel right now? Like you're in the wrong place this morning? Wondering what on earth is going on here? Is Bruce out of his mind?

I'm trying to help you get a feel for what it's like for someone who has never been part of a church to come for the first time.

There are many people today who have never been to church, who have never seen a Bible, who have no idea who Jesus is. Imagine what happens when someone like this comes with a friend to church (by the way, you can be sure this person would almost *never* come by himself or herself). It's like walking into a different world!

- The way we are downstairs here, it looks like a café or a pub, but there's no server. If we were upstairs, they might think they were at the movie theatre, but there's no screen.
- There are groups of people here and there, talking with one another, obviously friends. Part of you hopes that someone will talk with you, and part of you wants to hide in a dark corner.
- People here at St. Paul's speak in tongues, using strange words like “the Upper Room” and “UCW” and “sin.”
- They talk about having love, joy and peace — and they look like they really *do* have it — and that's what you want in your life, too. So you decide to come back next week to find out more.

I'll come back to this later in the message. First, let's take a look at how Jesus made people feel welcome.

2) Jesus made people feel welcome

a) He met their needs

Matthew 15:30, New International Version:
Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them.

b) His teaching was practical and interesting

Mark 12:37, New American Standard Bible:
The great crowd enjoyed listening to Him.

Mark 11:18, New Living Translation:
[The leading priests and teachers of religious law] were afraid of [Jesus] because the people were so enthusiastic about [his] teaching.

c) He loved people

Mark 6:34, New Revised Standard Version:
As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

In each of these items, the focus is on the other person: how can I help this person? What does this person need? Jesus was not focussed on himself, but on the other person. That last item is especially important, for it tells us Jesus' motivation: he did this because he loved them.

So often churches are focussed on themselves:

- We need more people coming
- We need more young people
- We need more money to pay the bills, especially repairs to an the building.

Jesus shows us the better way: focus on others.

3) Put yourself in the other person's place

Presbytery is the group of United Churches in a region. Back when we lived in Prince Edward County, I was going to a presbytery meeting in the retreat house operated by Grace United Church in Napanee. The house is located south of Napanee on River Road. I wasn't happy about having to drive all the way to Napanee and the same distance back again to get there. As it turns out, it's right across the water from the eastern shore of the County. So I decided that I would take our canoe and paddle over.

That's when the problem began.

The chairperson gave everyone instructions on how to get there... by car. Go off highway # 2 at this restaurant, turn right here, turn left there, go 16 km, and look for # 3267. "Davis" is the name on the mailbox.

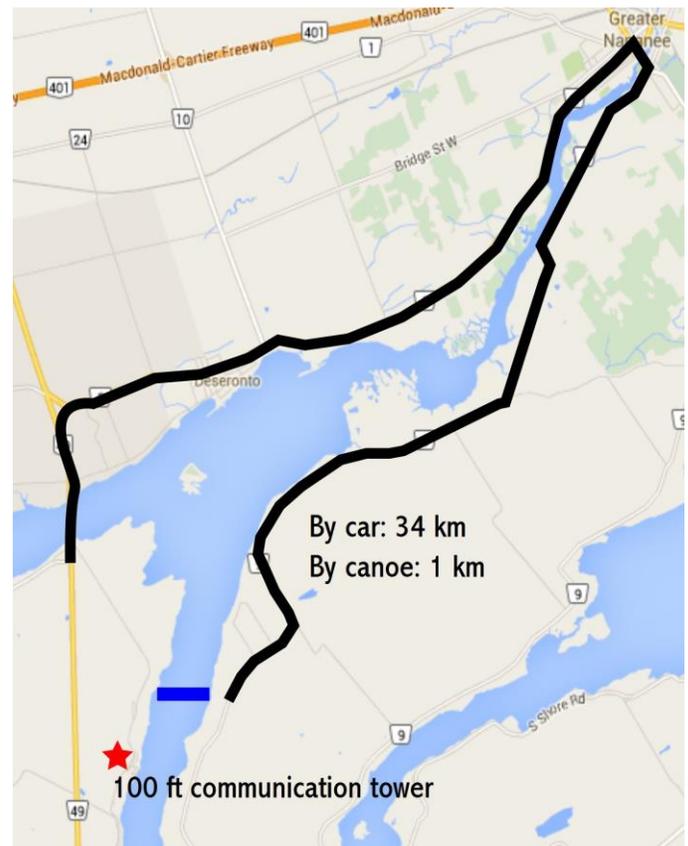
So I called him and asked, "I'm coming by canoe. Are there any landmarks around there?" He said that next door is a long, grey, two story building that looks like a motel.

So I set out on my adventure. Do you have any idea how many grey buildings there are along that shore?!!

Directions like that tell me what to look for when I've arrived. But they don't tell me where to go in the first place.

When I to the other side of the bay, I stopped at one place and asked for directions. They had never heard of this retreat house, which made sense because it's very new. I asked to use their phone, which they graciously let me. I phoned the retreat house, told them where I was. I was about two kilometers away from them.

Now get this: when I finally arrived, about half an hour late, we were directly across the water from the great big radio tower at the top of the hill at Green Point! You can see in all directions it from 20 km away! It would have been a perfect landmark.



First of all, I would have started from a much closer spot. And then I would have known with confidence where I was going.

When people travel by water, they see things very differently from people who travel by land. In order for them to have given me better directions, they would have had to think like a boater, see things from a boater's perspective.

When you're used to looking at the world from one point of view, it's hard to change and see things differently.

Let's try an exercise here. Pretend that you have never been in church before. (Maybe you really *haven't* been here before and you're a first-time guest! That's great! I'm glad you're here.) Put yourself in the place of a newcomer. Can you feel the awkwardness?

- 1) What would it take for you to feel more comfortable?

Share ideas with people at your table

- 2) What can you do to make this happen?

Share ideas with people at your table

Tell you what: let's try these ideas! During this next week, invite a friend or a neighbour to come to church with you. Tell them we're meeting downstairs, and we get to drink coffee and have snack during the service.

Next Steps:

- Invite someone to come with you as a guest next week
- Look for ways that you/we can meet others' needs
- Help in whatever way you/we can
- Love others, especially strangers and newcomers