The Chosen: “Invitations” S1E7 Memory Verse: 2 Corinthains 5:17

Oct. 22nd, 2023 Scripture Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

Last week, we talked a lot about healings and miracles in general. We saw Jesus heal a man with leprosy as well as a paralyzed man who was brought down through the roof. These events amazed those who were present. They walked away praising God remarking, “We have never seen anything like this!” People restored and made well! And wasn’t there something he said about sin and forgiveness? We don’t want to forget that the miracles of Jesus served as signs. The miracles pointed to a kingdom that was coming, a place where suffering and death are no more.

Well in episode seven, we are going to hear even more about this kingdom as we track with two characters, Nicodemus the pharisee, who is a great teacher of Israel, but who is struggling with questions he cannot understand. Mary Magdalene describes him as “earnest”. The other character is Matthew, the wealthy tax collector who is seen as a betrayer because he works for Rome. He has money and protection from soldiers but he is utterly alone. His father has disowned him and as we saw in an earlier episode, he shares his Sabbath meal with a dog. (SCREEN SHOT)

The name of this episode is “Invitations” and I think it is a very fitting word to consider when it comes to talking about Jesus. I have a little bit of baggage surrounding the idea of invitations. When I was in the seventh grade, eating lunch with my good friend Chris, two eighth grade girls walked up to us. Jennifer and, well all I can remember is Jennifer. I almost choked when I heard her ask us if we would go with them to the upcoming Halloween dance at school. I would go with Jennifer and Chris would go with whoever the other girl was. It was like a dream…I never imagined the possibility of going to a dance with this amazing woman of the eighth grade. I would never have mustered up the nerve to ask her myself, and who needs that kind of disappointment anyway? I swallowed my bite, I glanced over at Chris, wondering if he just heard what I heard. It seemed real. I gazed into her eyes and the light gleaming off of her braces. “Uh, yes.” I must have said something more than that right? “Great,” they replied, and they turned and went back to their table. And as they walked away, my world caved in. I was distraught and destroyed. As they walked away, I realized that I was not allowed to go to the Halloween dance. My parents had forbidden me to go. Here I had been given this exquisite invitation, something totally undeserved and unexpected, an opportunity to die for, but it was an invitation I could not accept. Shamefully, the next day, I had to shuffle up to Jennifer and tell her I wasn’t able to make it.

Invitations come in all flavors in our life, don’t they? Sometimes you receive it with excitement, sometimes you roll your eyes a bit knowing you are obligated to accept. Sometimes you really don’t know what to think about certain invitations. And sometimes, due to circumstances outside of your control, you are forced to regrettably decline a date with a beautiful girl. But no matter what the situation, all invitations have one thing in common…they put the ball in your court. They leave the decision up to you. They present an opportunity and the one who has been invited gets to either accept or decline.

In John chapter 3, we find the most famous bible verse embedded in a most unusual conversation. Nicodemus has come to Jesus at night. He has seen and heard about what Jesus is doing and he has some questions. This appearance in John is the first time we see Nicodemus in the gospels. There is no back story presented about him, but we do know he is a Pharisee and I think the way he has been portrayed in this series is very well done. I think it is clear from what John reports, that Nicodemus is not coming against Jesus in any sort of tirade or vendetta to stop what he is doing. I think we can say that he is earnest…he truly wants to get to the bottom of things and understand what Jesus is all about. READ John 3:2

He honors Jesus with the term “rabbi.” He acknowledges a fellow teacher of the faith, he acknowledges that God must be with Jesus, as evidenced by the signs that he performs. But Nicodemus cannot harmonize all these facts.

Jesus tries to explain. READ John 3:3-4

Now Nicodemus is not an idiot. He understands Jesus is not speaking literally, but what is being highlighted here is the impossibility of the proposition. Entrance into the kingdom of heaven is not open to all. One must be, impossibly, born again. Nicodemus is intrigued. He wants to hear more, so Jesus explains. READ John 3:5-9

Again, this question of possibility. What does it mean to be born of the Spirit? It’s like the wind? There is the sense in Nicodemus of someone who is smart and a more than capable student coming to the teacher after school to get a little extra help with math. Just a quick little issue that needs tweaking, a detail that had been missed or a step taken out of order. The little correction should then put everything else in place and he could move on with a better understanding. An “Oh, okay, I get it now,” sort of moment. Nicodemus is realizing that, all along, he has been misunderstanding what the textbook says. He has been off on his most basic calculations. The film adds some dialogue to this scene, but one of the helpful lines they included was a shocked Nicodemus, when the light bulb goes on and he says, “So this has nothing to do with Rome?” You almost feel bad for the guy. But Jesus compassionately continues. READ 10-18

This man, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Son of God, sent to save humans from sin and spiritual death. We cannot loose this dichotomy: there is the Spirit and there is flesh, or as Tom read for us, there is poison and there is relief, there is life and there is death, there is heaven and there is hell. This is reality. And this man, Jesus, sitting across from Nicodemus, is the way. All can be eternally saved through him. Behold, the one lifted up, the man on a cross, a dying God who offers life.

The filmmakers add an extra step here that is not in scripture. In the movie Jesus asks Nicodemus to follow him. And just like that seventh grade Pastor Andrew in the lunch room, his heart leaps at the opportunity, but then reality kicks in. I had my parents and their rules in my way, and Nicodemus has his people and their rules and certain expectations and relationships to consider. He says to Jesus, “You’re inviting me to give up who I am?”

Now this is question the writers have inserted into the conversation. Nicodemus did not ask it as far as we know, but I want to assess the accuracy of this question. When Jesus invites us to follow him, does that mean we are to give up who we are? Parts of who we are or all of us?Part of my flesh or all of my flesh? Part of my sin or all of my sin? And what do we get in return for this giving up? Paul helps us out here. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 he writes this week’s memory verse, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (NRSV). And let me pick on our pew bibles again this week. The CEB says that a person is made a *part of* the new creation, but that is not what Paul says. He is clear here, we will, individually, be made new. Every part of us…this is an all or nothing proposition.

Nicodemus can’t accept at the moment. He is drawn to the idea, but his list of reservations is too long. He admits Jesus is someone special, in the film he bows before him and kisses his hand. Nicodemus may be a believer, a convert, but he declines to be a disciple. And Jesus puts into words the grand mercy of God when he says, “The invitation is still open.” We have the ability to RSVP at any time and any place. Remember an invitation puts the ball in your court. How will you respond when Jesus says, “Follow me”?

The next day, Jesus walks down the street past a tax booth. Matthew recognizes him and stares. Suddenly Jesus turns around as well, his eyes meet with Matthew’s. He smiles and issues another invitation. “Matthew Son of Alpheaus…follow me.” Matthew, the math whiz, the betrayer of his people, the rich boy, the Roman pawn, the least wanted man in all Capernaum, just received an invitation. The ball was in his court.

Simon steps in, “Whoa, whoa, whoa…this is a mistake, this cannot be happening. Do you even know this guy Jesus, do you know what he has done? Not him of all people!”

Matthew drops everything, leaves his booth, leaves his protection under Rome, leaves a premium salary and he accepts the invitation into who knows what kind of future…he hasn’t got a clue. The only thing he knows is that Jesus will be there and that is all Matthew needs. So, we have two invitations: one declined and one accepted.

I want to close with a parable Jesus tells while at a swanky dinner party hosted by one of the leaders of the Pharisees. Someone there made a remark about how great it will be for those who feast in God’s kingdom. The Jesus launched into a story READ Luke 14:16-24

There are a few things going on here, but what we have at the heart of this story is an invitation. The party has been prepared, everything is ready, the servants go out to announce to the guests that it is go time. Yet, there is no excitement, there is no clamoring to get in, there is no anticipation. One by one these guests, who have already accepted the invitation, decline with a bunch of excuses. Have you ever been there? You’ve worked hard to get everything ready and the as the time nears, you begin to anticipate a fun night with some friends and sure enough, you get a text saying, “Something else came up. Can’t make it. Isn’t that just like me, LOL.” Disappointing right? It is a great dishonor, especially in Jesus’ day to accept an invitation and then back out. Well, the host is more than disappointed, he is angry and he opens up the doors to any and all who are willing to accept his invitation. “Go get the lame the blind, the outcasts, the back-alley dwellers, the smelly ones, tax collectors, the ones you would not expect. Go get those who are never invited. The Matthew’s, the pastor Andrew’. I have all this bounty and I want to share it. Those others who have snubbed me, well, they will never eat at my table.”

We have been offered an invitation to join Jesus, to follow him and see what his kingdom is all about. We have not been invited because we have some sort of special status or because we are any good, We have been invited because God is good. This kingdom stands in Jesus’ mind as a celebratory feast. It is a great time of wonder and joy and camaraderie and flat out fun! That is what we are invited into. As commentator William Barclay puts it, “A gloomy Christian is contradiction.”

We see that joy on Matthew’s face when he says, “Yes” to Jesus. We see that sadness on Nicodemus’s when he has to regrettably decline the offer. The feast is ready, the doors are open, the God who hosts is looking to fill his house, the Son who came to this earth is issuing the invitation, “Follow me.”

So the ball is in your court. You can pick it up and play, join in the fun and joy of the kingdom, or you can pretend the ball is not there and continue on your way, or you can stare at the ball and think hard about what to do with it. What must you give up to follow Jesus? What do you gain? Where is life found? Where does purpose lay?

Simon had some hard lessons to learn about who was going to receive an invitation to the kingdom. But, at one point, people start to desert Jesus and he asks his disciples, “Do you also want to leave?” And Simon hits the nail on the head when he answers, “Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life.” We know this eternal life is found nowhere else. We know all the pleasures that his world offers are short-lived and fleeting. We know deep down that what Jesus offers is better than anything we could ask for or imagine, but what about all these excuses? What about all the things I would have to give up?

The invitation still stands. The kingdom still stands. But our time is not indefinite. A decision must be made, and no one can make it but you. And as a party goer myself, I can tell you, this a celebration that is not to be missed. Following after Jesus is a joyous adventure, one that will never end if we would only decide to follow him.

I am going to have the band come up and we are going to sing “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus”. It’s an old classic, but I acknowledge that the words themselves may not necessarily reflect the truth of where you are currently in life. If that is you, if you are not fully on board with following Jesus, I want to encourage you, to hear the words of this song, sing them as a vision of what could be, and I would also encourage you to pick up the ball and seriously consider Jesus’ standing invitation. We here at this church would love to encourage you and support you toward that end. Let’s sing, amen?