

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Easter 6A, 5/21/2017, Acts 17:22-21, 1 Peter 3:13-22  
(*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Last weekend during our retreat, the vestry began learning a church development method called "Invite-Welcome-Connect." We routinely receive feedback about how welcoming St. David's is, but how do we get more people through the doors so we can welcome them? We have to *invite* them to come. All of us, not just the vestry and the clergy. We can all get better at this.

So how do we go about that?

An invitation has to come from our heart. If you don't believe that someone you met or like could find something of value here, then you aren't going to be able to issue an invitation from your heart. Before we invite people, we have to know our own story of why our faith and church are important to us. In the words of the first epistle from Peter this morning, we have to be able to account for the hope that is in us.

What is the hope that is in you? How is it fed by your faith? How is it nurtured here, among your church family?

If this is starting to sound a little too touchy-feely for you, get over yourself. Seriously, we need to know our story before we can share our story. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." This is biblical, not touchy-feely.

Think and pray about your life, and how your church and your faith have fit in. Not just fit in, but shaped. Changed. What's the first memory you have of prayer, for example? Who taught you how to pray? Has there ever been a time that you strayed or doubted? What brought you back?

We've had spiritual writing workshops here before, and if there's interest, we can do that again. Our first such workshop yielded some of the testimonies we heard at the evening worship service we used to have. Hearing from each other, as opposed to just hearing from the rector, is inspiring.

Your story does not have to be a happy one. You don't have to have faith fully figured out. Hard stories can be powerful. Just tell the truth. You never know how your story might touch someone else.

But. Once you know your faith story, I don't recommend you immediately launch into it whenever you go to McDonald's and think the cashier might really like St. David's. If you immediately launch into your story whenever you encounter someone outside of church, you might bore people or irritate them, especially if you aren't speaking from your heart or are just mimicking some formula you think you should be saying. That's where our Acts reading comes in.

Paul preaches to the Athenians in today's Acts passage. The Athenians were tolerant and inclusive, and did not want to leave any gods out, so they set up altars not only to every Greek god they could think of, but one to "an unknown god."

Paul discovered this altar, he says, as he "went through the city and *looked carefully* at the objects of your worship." He looked carefully. He paid attention. He didn't just launch into his story.

It's important for us to tell our own stories in our own way, rather than repeating what someone else has told us to say; but before tell our stories, we have to *pay attention to other people*.

We have to listen. Some of us are better at this than others.

At our vestry retreat, we agreed that we can all work on our listening skills. Now you all are probably better at this than I am, because I'm a preacher, and get to stand up here for ten minutes and talk uninterrupted. But in normal conversations, do you listen to what the other person is saying? Or do you wait for them to finish so that you can have your turn? Or, do you just interrupt?

We can work on our listening skills. We can all do a better job paying attention to others. It's a spiritual discipline we can hone and improve.

This includes paying attention to the needs of our community. We came to the sad realization that what our immediate community needs most right now is not a preschool here. We are listening to other needs that are out there, and hope to be able to share some good news soon.

Listening also means paying attention to other people's stories. At the vestry retreat, we all shared little bits of our story. I learned new things about each member. Why did they come here? Why did they stay at this church? Why did they run for vestry? (By the way, they ran because someone *invited* them.) Asking why you came and why you stayed are easy ways into your story. Ask other people, and listen to their stories.

When you have listened deeply to someone else and believe that you could share some of your story with them in a helpful way, turn back to today's epistle from Saint Peter. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." Always be ready for this. Someone might actually ask you about your faith someday. Maybe it will be in a hostile way. Maybe someone will ask, "how can you believe any of that? Don't you know the bad things Christians have done over the centuries?" Or maybe someone will ask, "Why aren't you more available on Sunday mornings?"

Always be ready. Don't always launch ahead without listening, but always be ready. Working on knowing your story, and then work on really short versions of it that can be quickly told. We even created some cards you can use to help tell the story of our church, that have photos on one side and some quick information, like service times—including our upcoming combined summer

worship—and our Web site, where people can learn more. If you are nervous about inviting someone, carrying a card or two with you that you can hand out at an opportunity could be perfect. Our salespeople carried these along with the change in their aprons yesterday at Springfest, and gave out hundreds over the course of the seven hours.

In addition, people listened to other people, and shared stories. I heard the story from one of our vendors about how she transformed the bad health news that she had to cut salt from her diet into a successful local business creating tasty spices. (I bought three of them.) I heard stories about the dogs who were here as part of Richmond Animal League. Talking to Kay's and Edy's sister Ann, I learned a powerful story one of our shoppers had shared with her about angels. She was looking at an angel someone had donated, and Ann said to her, "Angels are powerful, you know." The woman responded, "I know," and they talked about the communion of saints; and then the one told Ann about a time when she needed prayer, and had a vision of many others around here, praying for and with her.

Always be ready.

The scripture goes on, "yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

Trying to scare people into coming to church, for example, is not gentle or reverent. That's unfortunately a technique some evangelists try: tell people that if they don't come to church, then, they're going to hell. That's not what the vestry recommends. That's not what I recommend, or believe.

I do believe that we all have hope inside of us. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, that he came back to life after being brutally executed—that he was transformed, and encouraged us to live without fear: that story stirs hope in me.

What's your story?