

R.S.V.P.

Series: The “Re” Words

Acts 14:1-4, Luke 9:57-62

October 15, 2017

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Sometimes when I read the Bible, I am impressed and, honestly, also a little jealous, of the response to preaching and teaching. It is astounding how many sign on to become believers after just one sermon. I am not jealous when I read about Jesus. After all, he is the Son of God. His teaching and preaching were amazing. Toss in the eye-popping miracles, and it is easy to understand why so many said count me in. I guess I should not be jealous of the apostles, or anyone really, but it is hard not to be. Peter gave one sermon on the day of Pentecost and three thousand accepted Jesus as Lord. He would go to the temple each day and large crowds gathered to hear him speak, many becoming believers. Philip did some one-on-one teaching with an Ethiopian for an afternoon, and immediately the man wanted to be baptized. Paul wandered into Greek towns as a total stranger and within a few weeks had enough converts to start a church. I don't know whether I should be inspired or feel like a slacker.

I'll go with being inspired, but a closer reading shows it was not all rosy. Paul was able to gather followers of Christ in many towns he visited, but not all. Folks in Athens, for instance, showed interest, but no more. Even in the towns where he stirred a response, the response differed. Some came to believe in Jesus and some told him to get out of town. We see exactly that in our lesson from Acts this morning. Paul and Barnabas were in Iconium and, as was their custom, they went to the synagogue to speak. Luke tells us that they spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks became believers. So far so good. But as we read on, we discover that some reacted with hostility toward them and spoke against them. Our lesson ends with the statement, “the residents of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles.” Those against them plotted to mistreat them and stone them, so Paul and Barnabas had to flee town. This was a pattern repeated in town after town. I'm not jealous of that part.

The fact is that the same can be said concerning Jesus himself. Many, primarily in Galilee, chose to be his disciples. They did not travel with him as the twelve did, but they believed in him and called him Lord. A larger group followed, though, only because they got something out of it, primarily healing or food. Once they were healed or their loved one was healed, they went home, never to be heard from again. Once, after feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread, the crowd followed Jesus across the lake. This is what he said to them. “You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” In other words, you are following because you want

another meal. He went on to explain that he was the true bread that they should desire. John tells us that because of that many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. Indeed, so many deserted that Jesus asked the twelve if they were going to leave also. We know that in Jerusalem, many not only did not believe in him but also hated him so much that they crucified him. Even with Jesus, some listened and said yes to the invitation to follow, some listened and said no, and some listened and reacted in a hostile way.

Don't think that Jesus was unaware of people not believing in him and rejecting him. He put it out there in a parable. The parable is about someone throwing a large banquet, inviting the usual suspects. But when the time came to come to the table, the invited guests started saying that they could not come, giving any number of excuses. The host thought, "Well, if they won't come, I'll invite others who will." He sent his servants to invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. These folks never got invited to a fancy banquet so they were happy to come. Read into this parable Christ's dismay that the religious leaders and the religious synagogue goers were deaf to Christ's invitation of grace and salvation. It was the outcasts of society who heard and accepted.

It is the same thing Paul often said. On his evangelistic missions he always started in the synagogues. He was Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. The apostles were Jewish. Paul believed the invitation should start there. Sometimes it went well. But when it did not, he would simply say okay, I'll take the invitation to the Gentiles instead.

It seems to me that the same scenario can be seen in every age, including ours. From the Day of Pentecost on, the gospel has been preached, which is to say the invitation to be saved by the grace of Christ has been given. Granted, sometimes it has been preached spectacularly, sometime terribly, most times somewhere in between. Still, the invitation has been given. The couriers of the message in Jesus' time in Jerusalem could be counted on a few hands alone, but here we are over two thousand years later in a different country with churches on every corner. The fact is that there is no place in the world where the gospel has not been taken. And just as in those earliest days, the days including Jesus himself, some receive the invitation, accept, and give their lives to the Lord; some receive it and shrug and give no response; and some resist it and fight against it. The banquet is set for all, but not all come.

This is hard for me to understand. I am baffled when I think of people walking away from Jesus. With just a word, he could give sight to the blind, legs to the lame, calm the wind and sea, and send demons running. How do you see that and walk away? He taught with the very authority of God. How do you hear that and walk away? His holiness had to emanate from his very pores. How can you be in the presence of that and walk away? Baffling. And people like Peter and Paul were so full of the Holy Spirit that the truth of their message should have been unmistakable, not to mention that they backed

up their words with amazing miracles, just as Jesus did. How is it that the towns were divided? Baffling. Today messengers of the word, like myself, are hardly Peter or Paul and certainly not Jesus. We are bumbler and stumblers looking for the words, but in our imperfect words the perfect word resides – the word of invitation to be embraced by Almighty God, loved, forgiven, and accepted, with a place at the table of the Lord and a room in the very house of God for all eternity. We all get invitations we decline, but it is hard to understand why anyone would decline the gospel invitation.

Charles Wesley expressed this same amazement in a poem that is also sometimes sung as a hymn. It is called, *Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die*. Throughout the poem, found on page 346 of our hymnal, by the way, Wesley points out that God specially made each one of us; that Jesus died for us and has showered us with grace; that God still waits for us, and we have God's word in scripture to make the invitation clear. He asks at the end of each stanza essentially, why would we refuse this invitation of love?

I do not have an answer and, of course, there are probably hundreds of answers, not just one. I just know that there is a rapidly growing number of people expressing disinterest in the invitation. For the most part, they are not hostile toward religion or God or Jesus, but neither are they interested. They speak of faith, church, and religion as things that are quaint, nonessential.

I take that personally, not in an attitude of judgment, but as a matter of self-reflection. Daily I ask myself what I can do better, how I can be better at communicating that God is throwing a party that no one wants to miss. I constantly wonder what we, as a church, can do better so that others grasp just how great an invitation this is. I get that not everyone will accept. History proves that. Not everyone responded to Jesus himself. But Christians are either communicating the wrong message or communicating the message wrongly, because across the country, far from gaining believers, we are losing believers, and it is heartbreaking.

God is not at risk here. God is God even if no one believes. God's existence does not depend on us. Our existence, though, depends on God. And God has offered us life, not only on this earth, but for all eternity in heaven. God, with amazing love, has poured out grace upon grace. We do not have to do anything to earn this grace. It is a free gift of God through Jesus Christ. We do, however, have to accept it. An unreceived or unopened gift is a lost gift. The Lord has said I will lead you into God's love. Follow me. Believe in me. Put your life in me. R.S.V.P. A reply is needed. A response is needed. This makes me think that as evangelists, something that every Christian should be, we need to both tell the good news and encourage people to say yes to the invitation. I am convicting myself here as much as anyone. As I worked on this message, it struck me that for decades I have done a good job telling others about Jesus but not a very good job closing the deal, so to speak. I have not been forthright in saying hear the good news,

now what are you going to do about it? Will you say yes to the invitation? Will you give your life to your Lord and Savior? Maybe you have been better at that than I. Maybe not.

I don't know. I just know that in the parable, folks had other things they wanted to do than show up at the banquet. When they were ready to come, if they were ever ready to come, it was too late. The party went on without them. While I cannot make, we cannot make, others say yes, any more than Jesus or Peter or Paul could, we at least have to make the effort to make sure they know about the invitation and encourage them to reply. Given the eternal consequences, there may be nothing we do that is more important.

Wesley asked the question 250 years ago. The question remains. "Sinner, turn: why will you die? God, your Maker, asks you why." Why, indeed. The invitation to salvation has been given. R.S.V.P.

Amen.