

EVERYONE IS INVITED! COME AND SEE!

A colleague of mine, Thomas Long, tells the story of a time when he was staying at a MOTEL in a large CITY. And AS he got on the elevator, he noticed a small, handwritten NOTE, posted on the elevator DOOR. It read: **PARTY TONIGHT! Room 210. 8:00 pm. EVERYONE is invited!** Well, that NOTE got Tom's imagination working OVERTIME. He IMAGINED what Room 210 might LOOK like at 8:00pm that night. It would be filled with the ODDEST assortment of people: traveling SALESMEN looking for RELIEF from their BOREDOM; a couple of TEENAGERS sneaking away from their PARENTS' room, hoping for a good time; a few TOURISTS, sick of SIGHTSEEING and wanting some FUN with other PEOPLE; a wary MOTEL employee sent to check on WHAT was going on; and many MORE. Well, the party turned out to be a HOAX, of course. *BUT*, Long writes: *for a brief moment, there existed the TANTALIZING possibility that there WAS a PARTY going on SOMEWHERE to which ALL people were invited, and where it didn't make ANY difference at all WHO you were. EVEN if you CAME to the party out of BOREDOM or LONELINESS, you were still WELCOME.* Yes, it would be a PARTY where it didn't matter NEARLY as much what got you IN the door, as what would HAPPEN to you AFTER you arrived. And Thomas Long decided that: *PERHAPS if there IS to BE such a PARTY, the CHURCH will have to THROW it.*

And friends, I believe that THAT'S the way the church OUGHT to be! ALL people OUGHT to be WELCOME here. And of course, THAT'S the MESSAGE of those *United Church of Christ* TV ads that caused such a STIR a few years ago. And we have a NEW one coming out this fall. Yes, ALL people OUGHT to be WELCOME in the church of Jesus Christ, REGARDLESS of what BROUGHT them in the door. When I PREACH on Sundays, I NEVER assume that everyone is HERE for all the RIGHT reasons. I REALIZE that there are HUSBANDS here, who have been DRAGGED by their wives. I REALIZE that there are CHILDREN here who ONLY come because their parents FORCE them to. I UNDERSTAND that there are people here who have come JUST to appease a NEIGHBOR who keeps INVITING them and WON'T give up. I UNDERSTAND that there are often TEENAGERS here who are more interested in their friends' WHISPERS than in LISTENING to the SERMON or the *Prayers of the Church*. And I KNOW that there are SOME people here who have come PURELY for the MUSIC, and who READ the hymnal or bulletin during the REST of the service. Yes, people come to church for all KINDS of reasons. And that's OK! When I was a teenager, I OFTEN went to youth group meetings at the *United Church of Bernardston, Massachusetts*. And I went there for TWO reasons. First, it was sometimes a good way to LIVEN up a DULL weekend in TINY town, where there wasn't much to DO. And second, I had a SERIOUS attraction to a young woman there, who ended up becoming my WIFE. But BELIEVE me, MY attendance had absolutely NOTHING to do with the CHURCH, OR its faith. BUT, I always felt WELCOME at that church! And THAT'S why, years LATER, I chose THAT church as the site of my ORDINATION. Yes, ALL people OUGHT to feel WELCOME in the church of Jesus Christ, no matter WHAT brought them in the door, for IF you look at the ministry of Jesus, HE welcomed ALL kinds of people, from prostitutes to tax collectors, and lepers to foreigners, EVEN though it really upset OTHER people, mostly the PIOUS people.

Notice ALSO how, in our Scripture Lesson today, Jesus ASKS the 2 disciples of John of Baptist: *WHAT are you LOOKING for?* BUT, He does not JUDGE their response. And I think

that **WE** need to be LIKE Jesus. It's FAIR to ask people WHY they have come here: *WHAT are you looking for?* And obviously, IF they're looking for something that we don't OFFER here, it's important to TELL them that. But it's NOT fair to JUDGE their responses. EVEN if they are people who have chosen PATHS that WE would not CHOOSE, or LIFESTYLES that WE personally REJECT, it's NOT up to US to be their JUDGE and JURY. The CHURCH, after all, is NOT a *haven for SAINTS*. It's a *HOSPITAL for SINNERS!* And EACH and every ONE of us FITS into that *SINNER* category in one way or another. If NOT, then we'd LEAVE, because we DON'T belong in a HOSPITAL for SINNERS! But the FACT is that we all DO belong here! So, OUR job is NOT to JUDGE people, but to LOVE people, ALL people, and to welcome EACH and every one who COMES here with an EXTRAVAGANT kind of welcome. EVERY person who walks through OUR door NEEDS to be welcomed AS IF we were welcoming Jesus CHRIST Himself! AND, as Jesus SAID: we need to leave the JUDGING to God.

A few YEARS ago, in my LAST church, I received an IRRATE phone call from a woman who had been attending that church with her family for awhile. And she was ANGRY for SEVERAL reasons, but PRIMARILY it's because we were an *OPEN and AFFIRMING congregation*. In other words, we accepted all KINDS of people, INCLUDING gays and lesbians and OTHERS who are often JUDGED, and we did NOT say that they needed to CHANGE in order to be ACCEPTED and loved. Well, my RESPONSE to this woman was: *Gee, for a woman who CLAIMS to follow a Savior who said, "Judge NOT, lest YE be judged," YOU seem to be doing an AWFUL lot of JUDGING.* Well, she didn't LIKE my response, so she told me that there would be a *SPECIAL place in HELL just for ME, because I was leading SO many people ASTRAY.* She said: *Ellis, you have SO much going for you in that church. You have a great BAND! You have a fabulous Church School! You have MULTITUDES of wonderful people! But YOU are leading them AWAY from the Word of GOD, and you will PERSONALLY suffer for it!* I said: *WOW! Did God tell YOU all THAT?* She replied as I EXPECTED. She said: *Ellis, I will PRAY for you!* SO, do you know what I did? I did something that I learned a LONG time ago from one of my teachers and mentors, William Sloane Coffin. I said: *SO, you're going to add ME to your PRAYER list?* She said, *YES, I AM!* I said: *Then tell me something: HOW is your PRAYER list different from your HATE list?* Well, AS Bill Coffin always SAID it would, THAT shut her up, because she DIDN'T have an ANSWER for me! It ALWAYS works! And I NEVER heard from her again. No friends, OUR job is NOT to JUDGE people. That's GOD'S job! OUR job is simply to welcome ONE and ALL, as if EACH and every ONE were Jesus CHRIST Himself!

I ALSO like the EXCHANGE in our Scripture Lesson today. Jesus asks the 2 disciples of John: *What are you looking for?* It's a LEADING question, and they COUNTER with ANOTHER: *Rabbi, WHERE are you staying?* Now at FIRST: this seems like a STRANGE response. BUT biblical scholars TELL us that THAT question was NOT just an inquiry about His LODGING, but a BIGGER question, a SPIRITUAL question. They were saying: *Who ARE you? WHERE is the CENTER of your life? WHERE is "HOME" for you?* And I LOVE the response Jesus makes. He INVITES Andrew and his companion to *Come and see.* And they spend the DAY with Him. And then ANDREW brings along his brother, Simon, and the three of them stumble along to follow a PRESENCE they DON'T yet UNDERSTAND. BUT, note that SIMON comes to Jesus NOT out of any kind of conviction, or ANYTHING spiritual, but SIMPLY out of LOYALTY to his younger brother. And what THAT shows us is that the roads that LEAD to Christian FAITH are MANY and varied. You see: what's IMPORTANT is NOT how we COME to Christ, but HOW our journey of faith DEVELOPS, and WHERE it LEADS.

I once worked with a woman who BEGAN her journey of faith by joining our church CHOIR, simply because it provided her an opportunity to sing SOLOS. She had a very BEAUTIFUL voice, and she LOVED to sing to an audience. Well, in BETWEEN *performances*, as SHE called them, this woman would sit in the choir loft, which was right up in the FRONT of that church, and read NOVELS. Well, let me tell you: THAT drove SOME people in the church absolutely NUTS! But I KEPT saying to them: *It's OK! We're NOT all here for the RIGHT reasons, and ONE day, something that we SAY here MIGHT just take ROOT in this woman's LIFE!* And sure enough: over time, the words of the SOLOS and ANTHEMS that she was singing, such as, *I KNOW That My Redeemer Lives*, began to REACH this woman. Gradually, she began acquiring the vocabulary of FAITH, and pretty SOON, she had a personal RELATIONSHIP with Jesus Christ. And this newfound RELATIONSHIP actually crept into her singing, and she began to sing MORE beautifully than EVER before. And IN the process, SHE experienced what SIMON experiences in our Scripture Lesson when Jesus CHANGES his NAME to CEPHAS (or PETER, the Rock). HER name was ALSO changed: from *performer* to *Christian witness*. You see: THAT was her JOURNEY, and she had come a very LONG way! No friends, WE are NOT to judge anyone. OUR job is to TAKE people where they're AT and invite them to **COME and SEE** a BETTER way, to *come and see* CHRIST'S way.

You know: I think that EVERY church ought to PAINT over its door the words: **Come and see**. And then, EVERYONE who enters, for WHATEVER reason, OUGHT to receive a JOYFUL and extravagant WELCOME, along with a BACKPACK for the JOURNEY they're about to TAKE, because this IS a JOURNEY that we're on, NOT a DESTINATION. And CHRIST is at WORK in EACH and every ONE of our lives, JUST as He was at WORK in the lives of His FIRST disciples. Yes, the RISEN Christ is GUIDING our journey. SO, let's INVITE people to our church and WELCOME them extravagantly. Let's ask them to come and do what WE are doing, to **come and see**. And AS they do, their lives will be changed. Amen.