

Invited to Remember

First Sunday in Advent

December 3, 2017

Amid all the difficult news this week, it was nice to hear a happy story. Prince Harry and Meghan Markle announced their engagement.

In an interview Monday night, they shared details of the proposal. They described a cozy night at their cottage. They were roasting chicken. It was an amazing surprise. He got on one knee. He gave her a ring. It was sweet and natural and romantic they said.

But, I have to say, not terribly original.

For help, Harry could have checked howheasked.com, a website with handy tips on how to plan the perfect proposal. You can use their proposal idea generator or take the proposal idea quiz. There's a whole page titled "Marriage proposal ideas that are actually unique." This, of course, begs the question - if you find an idea on a website is it actually unique? Despite the domain name there is also a how she asked section and resources for same sex couples. It's all there.

But while Prince Harry surely has the resources for an elaborate website worthy proposal, he chose the sweet and simple route. Meghan Markle said yes. They will marry in May at St. George's Chapel in Windsor.

The fun and joy of this news was a contrast to disturbing and widespread and continuing news about sexual harassment and abuse in media, in workplaces, in government, and more. These stories need to be told, but they are hard to hear. They are infuriating and painful for victims and those who love them. And they are dismaying for those who practice utmost respect for all people and are tired of the disrespect of others. In contrast to Prince Harry's happy invitation, these are stories of unwanted invitation at best, or assault at worst. No consent. No joy. Fear of retaliation if you speak out.

I decided several weeks ago that we would spend Advent season thinking about the theme of invitation for several reasons. The celebrations of this season present a natural opportunity to invite others. More important, many start the new year determined to take new steps in their lives. As one year ends and another begins we take stock. We become more open to God and more open to others. A friend who needs faith and hope and acceptance and community may be in the right place at this time of year to receive the invitation.

But before we talk about invitation, we have to consider why we don't invite. We won't hesitate to tell a friend about a great restaurant or book. But we do hesitate to tell a friend about a great

God, or a great community of faith, or a great change that has happened in our lives as a result. Why is this?

Two reasons come to mind.

One is that I think sometimes we've convinced ourselves sharing our faith is difficult. In our minds we've created a complicated, elaborate social or emotional process, like a howheasked.com proposal. Though we know a friend or neighbor needs the good news we have to share, though we know they'll likely receive it with good faith, we're anxious about sharing it. In reality, the Prince Harry approach works just fine. You know someone. You love them. You want what is best for them. No pressure. You just invite.

But sadly, another reason many don't share their faith, is the problem of religious harm and abuse. We've heard of times or experienced times when the Christian community shared the good news of God in abusive ways. Examples abound. It happened in the past with so-called Christian armies forcing whole cultures to be baptized or be killed. It happens in the present with emotionally manipulative altar calls, with churches that welcome you in and then shut you out, with scary movies or skits that frighten the heck out of children and then invite them to follow Jesus at the end. We don't want to be associated with that kind of invitation, so we keep the good news to ourselves.

Our gospel lesson today is one of many that has been twisted at times for frightening purposes. The coming of the Son of Man has often been preached as a scary thing, so you better get ready. It's like the veiled threat in the song we will hear way too often over the next few weeks – You better watch out, you better not pout, you better not cry. No wonder kids scream on Santa's lap.

I could be wrong, but I do not believe Mark or Jesus intended to scare anyone. The world was already scary enough. The gospel of Mark was written during a devastating time, either just before or just after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in year 70, depending on who you ask. Imagine for a minute how awful that was. Jerusalem was the holy city, the place where the people mentioned in Isaiah had returned after being exiled. Their main goal in returning from exile long ago had been to rebuild the temple and worship God freely in this place.

But they never quite regained their freedom after they returned. They lived under various oppressors for years and years. By year 66, Jewish armies rebelled against Rome, largely in protest against heavy taxation of the poor. By year 70, Rome defeated the Jewish armies, destroyed the Temple and much of Jerusalem, and shattered their hopes.

Isaiah also comes from a similar time of crisis. This part of Isaiah was written right after the people returned to Jerusalem centuries before Jesus. You'd think they would be happy, but life was harder than expected and the return was not going well. So they cried out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." In other words, come down and fix this, O God. You are the potter, we are the clay.

The people in Mark's time would have agreed with Isaiah.

I don't know about you, but I find myself feeling the same way at times. I'm scared to death of war with North Korea. I worry about the economy and the vast majority of people who are struggling. I'm concerned about the health of the planet. I'm troubled that we can't seem to work together to address critical issues. I want to pray with Isaiah, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down. Fix this."

In his moment of crisis, writing to followers of Jesus in the midst of war, Mark remembered what Jesus had said. You know that summer is near. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Keep awake. Jesus was not talking to those outside the faith to scare them into obedience. Jesus was calling the faithful to wait in hope and trust. God was already at work in the world, Jesus proclaimed, but the work grows slowly. It is like a fig tree. The tree does not blossom all at once, but as soon as the branch becomes tender and puts forth leaves you know summer will come. And servants in the household don't panic when the master is away on a trip. They keep working. No one knows the day or hour, but they trust he is about to return.

Jesus said the Son of Man, the one who would gather the elect into safety, was already near, at the gate, even in times of crisis. So stay awake. Sleep with one eye open if you have to. Stay awake to God's continued redemption of this world. God has not abandoned you, even though it feels like the world has been destroyed. Remember.

The church is a community that remembers. It is all too easy to forget and give in to despair. We come together to help each other remember. We remember God is near, working in the world and in our lives. We remember the scriptures, the witness of God's work in the past. We remember we are all God's children. We remember there is no one outside God's loving embrace. We remember and acknowledge the pain and injustice of the world so we can work with God to address it. We remember God is still working.

We need help remembering. And that is one of the blessed gifts of the sacraments. Every time we celebrate Eucharist, the break is broken, just like we are, just like the world is. But as we take that brokenness into ourselves we are put back together into Christ's body. We are re-membered into him— put back together and made whole.

When we share this gift with others we are inviting them to be re-membered, too.

I know you know someone who is losing hope. I know you know someone who has just about given up on God or on the church. I know you know someone who is longing for community. I know you know someone who is hurting and needs a healing place. That's the invitation we offer. It is good news for a world that needs it. So keep awake to opportunities to share this good news. Amen.

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