

May 5, 2024

Clip in to a Culture of Hospitality

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:1-5

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴Such confidence we have through Christ before God. ⁵Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

God bless the reading, the hearing, and the understanding of the scripture

Thanks be to God.

Message

I was talking to Kathy Jennings about creating a culture of hospitality as a method of fulfilling our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and she told me years back, before the pandemic, she was sitting in Chicago O'Hare Airport waiting for her connecting flight to Madison. She had picked up a pizza and was sitting down to eat it as a plane from New Orleans was unloading. A man who was coming off the plane noticed her pizza box and said, "You made a wise choice!"

Instinctively she opened the box, held it up, and told him to take a piece. He hesitated only a moment before he said, "I think I will!" It turns out he was in Chicago to speak at a conference on pizza. He told her that he was going to tell the conference attendees about the nice lady at the airport! After telling me about this, Kathy exclaimed, "I decided I'm going to change the world one slice of pizza at a time!"

That certainly is an example of how we can cultivate a culture of hospitality. Now I realize that not all of us are Kathy, however, I believe that God has implanted the Holy Spirit in each and every one of our hearts, giving us new power to live out Christ's love, in hospitable ways.

Today's reading is from a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church of Corinth. It is guesstimated that he wrote it five or six years after he planted the Christian community, making it around 55 or 56 AD. Paul had already written three letters, two of which are now lost. In 1 Corinthians he used strong language to teach and correct. Most of the church had responded in the right spirit. However, there were those who were denying Paul's authority, even questioning his motives. So, he began

this letter by reminding his readers of their relationship to him and how he had always been honest and straight forward with them.

That first verse that Luke read was a rhetorical question, “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like *some* people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?” This was likely a barb aimed at the false teachers who were trying to sway the people from trusting Paul. While others may need a letter of recommendation, Paul has a letter of recommendation in the form of the Corinthian church; a church he had invested more than a year and a half of his life to form. (Acts 18:11)

He encourages his readers, writing, “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” (2 Corinthians 3:3) Certainly these words served as a nod to the prophet Jeremiah who shared God’s new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah after the Babylonian exile. A covenant in which God said, “I will put my law within [the people], and I will write it on their hearts; And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:33)

Paul sees the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s words in the church of Corinth. He has confidence in them, not because they are all that, as he states, “we are not competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.” (vs 5) And because God has put God’s law within them, written on their hearts, they have become a recommendation letter on behalf of Christ.

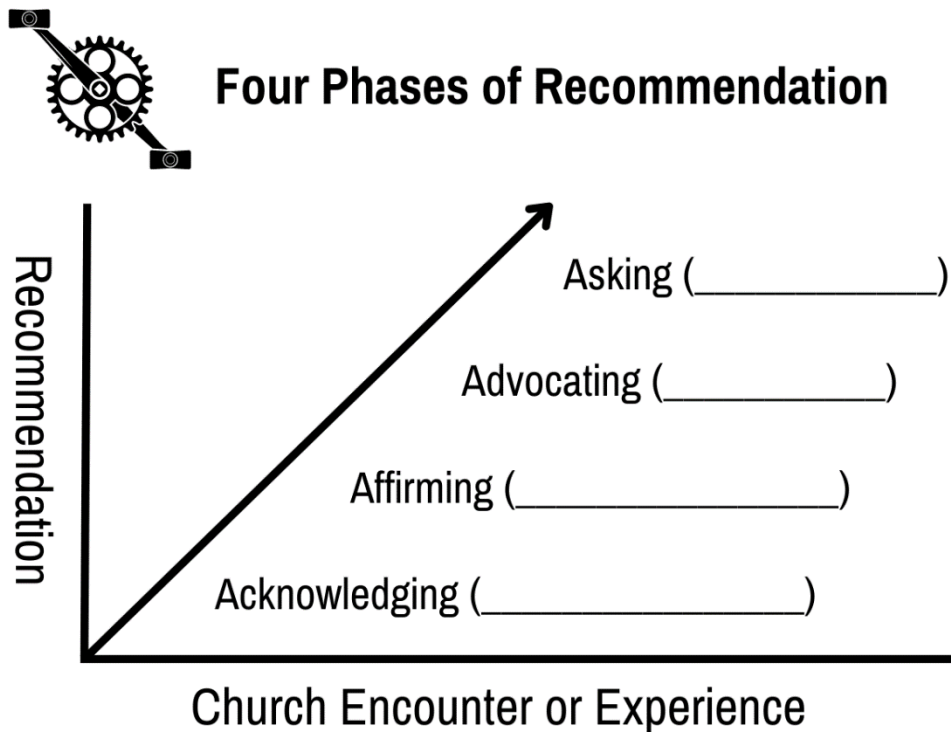
And now today, some 1,968 or 1,969 years later, *you* are the recommendation letter that can change the world. But you can’t stay sealed, you must let other people *read* you. And that can make one feel vulnerable, it can be scary, especially if we have not developed a habit of clipping in and welcoming people to read who we are in Christ.

So, a big part of being hospitable is just living that law that has been written on your heart, out loud. And you know that looks different on different people. For Kathy it means offering up a piece of pizza. For another it may mean being a listening ear and offering to keep them in your prayers. To another, it may be having fun participating in a trunk-or-treat event in the church parking lot this fall. There are all levels of hospitality that invite people to get acquainted with the living Christ, because the living Christ is in *you*. We help people get acquainted with the living Christ by recommending him.

Now before you get all wound up in what I just said, hear me out. By recommending people to Christ, I do not mean you are converting them. In fact, that is the job of the Spirit, not ours. This is a relief to many of us, because whenever I ask someone to invite somebody to a church function, to be a sponsor to a confirmation student, to be a bible study facilitator, not to mention asking someone to give their spiritual testimony, all kinds of fears come up. “What if they ask me a question I don’t

know the answer to? I don't know that much about the Bible; I didn't go to seminary?" I be like, are you kidding? I've gone through seminary, and I still don't know all the answers. And even though I don't know all the answers they still ordained me... go figure.

Recommending is not converting, it is living out your Christian self *authentically*, and there is no one right way to how that looks. In Jim Ozier's book, *Clip In: Risking Hospitality in Your Church*, he offers four phases of recommendation related to connecting new people to the church. (see graphic below)



He calls it the four phases of recommendation, I call it the quadruple A's of hospitality: Acknowledging, Affirming, Advocating and Asking. Let's unpack what each of these forms of recommendation mean.

Acknowledging that is mentioning: this is the entry phase of recommendation which requires little effort and includes behavioral examples. One way you can do it right now, whether you are here in the room today, or participating from your home another is to check in on Facebook during worship service. If you haven't already, go ahead and like Reedsburg United Methodist Church on Facebook.

Verbally mention the church's name in conversation outside the church, for example, you might say something like, "I'm so excited that Reedsburg United Methodist Church is planning a trunk-or-treat event this fall." Or you could reference an attribute of the church, for example, "Reedsburg United Methodist Church is doing

a special canned good drive this summer to support the local Food Pantry. If you'd like to contribute, let me know and I will stop by to pick them up."

The second level of recommendation is Affirming which is witnessing: affirming is characterized by more a strategic, specific focus. Behavioral examples include: checking in on Facebook with a comment such as, "Enjoying great music at Reedsburg UMC this morning!" Purposefully being more pointed in a conversation or in a Twitter feed: "Loved going to Reedsburg United Methodist Church last week; The message really spoke to me!" Allow a 15 second video of your personal story of the church's impact and your life to be shared on screens during morning worship, if you need help with this please let me know. Witnessing isn't about making a person drink the Kool-Aid, it's about communicating the impact Christ's community has on you.

The next phase of recommending is advocating which is Jim Osier's word for promoting: This is when you start clipping in to a more intentional and proactive form of recommendation, putting your own judgment and reputations on the line. Forwarding to folks on your contact list a creative, compelling electronic flyer promoting an upcoming sermon series; with the forward you include a personal comment such as "Hey, check out this sermon series-'Growing into Abundance.' I know this church has really helped me develop a growth mindset that has helped me overcome fears that have prohibited me from being all I can be." Or be self-revelatory in talking to someone who may be going through a hard time, "I went to the Soup for the Soul Reedsburg United Methodist Church, and it really helped me when I felt like the world was crumbling around me, perhaps it can help you." Share how the church has impacted you, "I used to see church as just something to check off my to do list for the week, but I'm seeing the difference it makes in my life, and it is equipping me to make a difference in the world.

The fourth phase is Asking, that is inviting: Again you can use social media to invite, posting a picture of the church building or better yet, a picture of the people. Include the location and worship times or information on some special event, "Going on a field trip for the Artists Way this Wednesday, to visit Jan Pearson's art studio. Want to join me?" Or you could speak directly to someone you know well, saying, "We love our church! Why don't you come join us? We'd love to pick you up and we could go have lunch afterward." Or to someone you know but don't have that kind a relationship, you might say, "I know you have a heart for the hungry, Reedsburg UMC will be packing Meal bags for the Midwest Mission that will feed the hungry. The goal is to pack 2,000 bags, which will feed a meal to 12,000 people. How about it? Can you join us next Saturday?"

Invitation used to be the only level of recommendation we used, but it is not as effective as it once was. We live in a world of identity fraud, multilevel schemes and conspiracy theories, making many wary of the motives surrounding all invitations,

including church. All these forms of recommendation gain more traction than our traditional invitation. And the truth is we recommend, all the time.

What do you do when you go to a great movie? You tell your friends. You know Howard and I went to the movie *Ordinary Angels*, starring Hillary Swank. It was an incredible story, and it was based on a true event. That alone would be a recommendation, but if I wanted to clip in to the next level of hospitality, introducing you to the Christ in me, I might add something like, “The story was amazing, you could see how God worked through people you might not think could make a difference. Especially Sharon Stevens, who was played by Hillary Swank. She was a struggling beautician, addicted to alcohol and on what some might call a “fluke” I call a God-incidence, injected herself into the lives of a family who recently lost a mother, and whose youngest daughter was struggling to stay alive. You’ve got to see it!”

If we go to a nice restaurant and enjoy the food, the service, the atmosphere, what do we do? We recommend it. But sometimes we recommend something without realizing we are recommending it. I mean look at Kathy Jennings, eating pizza at the O’Hara airport. Just by virtue of the pizza box she was eating from is a form of recommendation. I mean the gentleman getting off the plane recognized it, leading him to comment on it. That level of recommendation was quiet, but you know what? I know Kathy, when she counter engaged with him, she was offering him more than pizza, she was offering him Christ. And whether he knew it or not, for him to share his experience of Kathy with others is a further sharing of Christ. She was being the letter written by Christ to the gentleman in that airport, where she offered radical hospitality.

Jesus wants us to practice a radical kind of hospitality. A hospitality that is not simply an occasional act or interaction, but a way of living and connecting with those whom we encounter every day and in everyday situations. A culture of radical hospitality encompasses family, friends, coworkers but also complete strangers. It encompasses people we meet in person and those whom we don’t even know, but whom we can care for in other ways such as in prayer and through missions and humanitarian acts of kindness. We just need to clip in to the community around us.

Let us pray

- I will ponder/memorize/meditate on, 2 Corinthians 3:2 You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone.
- I will practice the _____ phase of recommendation, so I can clip in, becoming a producer rather than a consumer.
- I will recommend RUMC to someone. Worship services are:
 - ____ Live 9:00am at 833 3rd Street, Reedsburg
 - ____ YouTube Sunday afternoon
 - ____ Reedsburg TV Station 11.1 Tuesday at 3:00
- I will read/meditate on John 10:7-18 in preparation for next Sunday’s worship.

- I will continue to support RUMC through my prayers, presence, gifts, services, and witness.
- I will attend the next sermon series Growing Into Abundance.
- I will pray the breakthrough prayer at 8:33 am & 8:33 pm:
 - All loving God it is by your grace we thrive.
 - Continue guiding us in using your Spirit
 - to boldly move us in fulfilling your purposes.
 - We name it! We claim it, in Jesus' name. Amen