

John 8:12 10/6/13 (Red Letters #4) “**Letters of Invitation**”

Have you ever received an invitation that included an R.S.V.P.?

Slide: RSVP pic

Sometimes they come in nice flowery looking forms like the picture, and you’re getting invited to something like a wedding or a graduation or a baby shower, right? Just out of curiosity, does anybody know where we get the RSVP letters or what they mean?... This one comes to us from the French phrase:

Slide: "répondez, s'il vous plaît"

Which means...?

Slide: “Reply, if you please.”

And that’s kind of the way folks today take those invitations, right? “If they please” they’ll reply and if they don’t, they won’t. So I thought about that this week as I was developing this message on the **Red Letters**. Are those the kind of letters we’re talking about this morning? And is that the way Jesus extends His invitations to us? He just sort of drops a note and waits around? Well, actually I suppose in one respect it is. Certainly His **Red Letters** have been here (the Bible) for almost 2,000 years. They wait for whoever will pick up the book, open it and read. But you don’t have to. He certainly will not force His **Red Letters** on you. But once they’re out there... Once they’ve been spoken in your presence, once you’ve read them and taken them into your mind, it’s a whole different story, isn’t it? There’s nothing casual about the invitations of Jesus at that point.

We actually have talked about some of these **Red Letters** recently during the Fan or Follower series. Kyle Idleman wrote about them as a DTR moment, remember? Like when you’re dating and it comes time to have a talk that “defines the relationship.” (DTR)

Slide: Facebook relationship status

“Just where are we going in this relationship?” And of course, if either side pushes that talk too soon, it can get very uncomfortable, can’t it? So surely Jesus isn’t going to push us into an awkward moment – is He?...

Folks, what we’re going to find is that this is just another one of the thousand ways that the real Jesus is much **BIGGER** than the picture we have created of Him in our minds. I don’t know if you remember the story of this particular deteriorating fresco on the wall of a Roman Catholic church in Spain.

Slide: Ecce Homo pic

Last summer an elderly woman apparently took it upon herself to restore this work, called “Ecce Homo”, or “Behold the man.” (...The phrase Pilate declared as he presented the beaten and humiliated Jesus to the crowd.) She says she had the permission of the priest. He says she didn’t. At any rate this was the result of her efforts.

Slide: Behold the monkey pic

People have begun to call it “Behold the Monkey.” I don’t think there’s anyone here who doesn’t shudder a little bit at this horrible distortion of the image of Jesus. We recognize that it’s not even close. It’s a travesty. It should never have happened.

But folks, I submit to you that this same type of distortion of Jesus is happening in the minds of people every single day, outside the church AND inside the church. The lines of who Jesus really is, are being blurred by our culture, by the media, by YouTube and so on. It happens in every one of the categories of Red Letters that we’ll be looking at in this series. For instance,

when it comes to “**Letters of Invitation**” by Jesus, I’m pretty sure that the blurred image we have of Him of a Jesus who sort of sends out polite letters of invitation, slips in a little RSVP card and patiently waits for those cards to start pouring in. And folks, that is just not an accurate picture of the invitation you have received from Jesus and of the invitation you are receiving from Him today. Instead, almost the first words out of Jesus’ mouth in His encounter with all kinds of different people, were “follow me.”

Slide: “Come, **follow me**,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”” (Matthew 4:19 NIV)

*“But Jesus told him, ‘**Follow me**, and let the dead bury their own dead.’” (Matthew 8:22 NIV)

*“As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “**Follow me**,” he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him.” (Matthew 9:9 NIV)

*“The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “**Follow me**.”” (John 1:43 NIV)

*“Jesus looked at him and loved him. “**One thing you lack,**” he said. “**Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**””

(Mark 10:21 NIV)

And then we have this theme verse that we used throughout the “Are You a Fan or a Follower” series:

Slide: “Then he said to them all: “**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.**”” (Luke 9:23 NIV)

Folks, any way you look at that verse, that is NOT just a polite invitation – to which you can reply “if you please.” or not reply “if you please.” It is direct, it is demanding, and it is defining your relationship in no uncertain terms. The fact is that Jesus doesn’t mind making you uncomfortable. He absolutely does want to have the DTR talk with you right away. Jesus is inviting you right now, to follow Him. And to follow Him into what? According to this verse: “Denying yourself.” Folks, that invitation is absolutely foreign to the language of this world. The world says “serve yourself, save yourself and stuff yourself.” Jesus is inviting you into a life where you take incredible joy in serving Him and other people.

Now the text I chose out of the many invitations of Jesus is an invitation to live in the light. He said:

Slide: “**I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.**” (John 8:12 NIV)

Folks, this is kind of embarrassing, but I have to admit that occasionally, when I’ve had a long day piled on top of a long day, on top of some bad night’s sleep, there are times when I find myself in the middle of the night in our dark hallway. I have no idea where I am, no idea of how I got there, and no idea of where I’m going. Am I the only one who has had this happen? Sleepwalking, I guess you can call it. I don’t wander all over the house, just my hallway. I have maybe a vague idea that I’d like to go to the bathroom – if I knew where that was. So I just start trying doors – which doesn’t make you any friends with the rest of the family. It is folks, to say the least, a very uncomfortable experience, to be literally and figuratively “in the dark”. And all it would take, is one light to make all the difference in my dark world at that moment (It looks like I’m going to have to figure out some kind of nightlight).

Well folks, there are people all around you...that’s their experience with life itself. They have no idea how they got here, no idea what they’re supposed to be doing, and no idea where

they're going. And Jesus understands their problem and does not want them to **ever** be in that place.

By the way if we are honest, each of us will have to admit that there's darkness – not just around us, but in us as well. It may not be the kind of darkness that makes the headlines, but it's there. Those things in your life that you are ashamed of, that would make you cringe if the rest of us knew about it, the things that you've done or failed to do that make you fall short of the glory of God. Folks, God knows all of it and loves you nonetheless. But we've got to be real with Him. The Bible says in 1 John,

Slide: "5 God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth." (1 John 1:5–6 NIV)

The point is, you can't just answer the invitations of Jesus a little bit. You can't just repent a little bit, or just for certain things you've done, but still try to keep some aspect of your life away from God. There's nothing you can hide from God, you gotta let it all hang out. And as hard as that is, that's what disciples do when you realize that Jesus hung out on the cross to forgive you and cleanse you and give you a new start. When that message really hits home it's literally like that candle in the dark. It's hope in the midst of your hopelessness. And Jesus' simple message is "stay with me and you'll never be in darkness again."

So Jesus is the Light of the world and He invites you into His light, but He also invites you to be the light of the world. Remember these **Red Letters**?

Slide: 14 "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house." (Matthew 5:14–15 NIV)

And I've been privileged to see it so many times. You might be the lone candle in someone's dark life. A prayer, a kind word, a testimony to the light of Jesus in your life might make all the difference – maybe not to millions, but to one lost soul. When you shine the light of Jesus to another person and God uses you to open their eyes and change the path of their eternal destiny – to take them off the road to hell and put them on road to heaven, there is nothing greater on this earth than that. And God wants that for you and for this church.

Today we celebrate an organization within our church that is shining in that way and that exists to do just that, the LWML. That stands for Lutheran Women's Missionary League. They don't have a catchy name, but they do a powerful work. For instance, it never ceases to amaze me how much those quarters and dimes taken out of our pants in the laundry can accomplish when they get dropped in the mite box. They provide funds for ministries all over the world. At last count since its founding, the LWML has gathered and given to world-wide mission efforts more than \$85,000,000 with those mighty mites. That's not to mention the thousands of regional and local projects they have supported as well. They provide a whole catalog full of helps for our faith life, our prayer life, our family life, our daily life, and then some. Their **Red Letter** theme this year is the message of Jesus "You are my witnesses"

And I wish I had more time to connect that theme with the **Red Letters** of Invitation for instance, that Jesus gave to Peter when He first called him into ministry – and again when He reinstated Him for ministry. The invitation of Jesus in both cases is to try one more time – after we have given up... after the results can only be produced by God. And then He invites us to trust Him. He invites us to a higher calling, to be fishers of men.

Of course, in the second reading, after the resurrection of Jesus, he invites Peter to the highest calling of all, to follow Him into death and then eternal life. And for Peter, that wasn't going to be a peaceful end. Jesus said to him:

Slide: “18 I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “**Follow me!**”” (John 21:18–19 NIV)

Folks, probably most of you don't realize this, but Christianity is being threatened with extinction throughout the Middle East. In that attack on the mall in Nairobi, Kenya last month that left more than 70 dead, the terrorist group let the Muslims go free and they killed and tortured the Christians in ways I can't even repeat here. And that kind of thing is happening in almost every country in the Middle East. Churches are burning and Christians are being martyred simply for daring to answer the invitation of Jesus. Where they can, Christians are fleeing those countries by the hundreds of thousands.

And I don't know what the answer is, but I know it isn't silence, like we are receiving from the media. And I know it isn't apathy from us, who have perhaps not been invited to suffer for Christ - yet, but we have been invited to be His witnesses. To testify to the truth about Him, hear and throughout the world. It's true that there is great darkness around us and throughout the world. And that darkness – emanating from Satan himself, is trying to extinguish the light.

Slide: light in the dark pic

Please remember that it can't. Remember that Jesus Christ conquered the darkness. The Angels opened up His tomb and let the light shine in on His victory over Satan and death itself. And He is alive and He is the light of the world that no darkness can overcome. Plug into that light. Take it in and let it heal the darkness in your life, Answer the invitation of Jesus. Follow Him. Be His witnesses. And let your light shine for Jesus' sake. Amen.