

Open Door Policy

By Santiago Lange

An owner of a small, crossroads store was once appointed the local postmaster in a small town. But six months after his appointment, not one piece of mail had left the town. When the puzzled postal officials investigated the situation, the local postmaster explained, “Well, it’s simple; the bag ain’t full yet.”



Once there was a church board that decided it wanted its congregation to grow numerically. An evangelism committee was chosen. The first thing the committee did was read every book and article they could find on church growth. The second was to ask persons in the congregation what they thought of when they heard the word “evangelism.” They discovered that many people were unsure of what exactly evangelism is. Some had negative images, thinking evangelism is people in the street shouting “repent, repent, repent” or handing tracts out to strangers. It was something other churches did but not THEIR church.

The evangelism committee was both surprised and challenged by the results of their informal survey. The committee understood evangelism as something Jesus commanded of all believers. They focused on Jesus’ teaching: **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19)** Believing that the church should be always reaching out to others, they devised a plan to attract new people to their church.

Full of enthusiasm, they shared their plans with the congregation only to get a mixed reaction. Many of the members were like the postmaster who wouldn’t deliver the mail until the bag was full. “Before we go after new members, we should try to win back members already on our lists,” some said. “I like the church the way it is now,” said others. Someone summed it up best: “Who wants strangers in our church? We should just stick to our own.”

Changing the scene... Jesus is enjoying a meal with some tax collectors and some other people we might call “unchurched.” The disciple Matthew had been a tax collector before following Jesus. Maybe these were his friends. Jesus enjoyed being with people, even people on the fringes of society. Some Pharisees were close by. They saw Jesus eating with these people they considered sinners. The Pharisees were uncomfortable, for they were keepers of the Jewish tradition. They believed avoiding sinners and other outcasts of society was the only way to live a truly holy life. The Pharisees could not understand why Jesus ate with such people. They thought Jesus had a lot learn about their traditions.

Jesus heard the “grumbling” and complaining of the Pharisees. In response He told a parable about a shepherd who had one hundred sheep. At the end of a long day the shepherd was counting his sheep when he discovered that one was missing. He had a dilemma. Would any

shepherd leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to search for one that was missing? Common sense would probably lead us to protect the ninety-nine that were accounted for. Maybe that's why Paul talked of the "foolishness of God." This shepherd left ninety-nine sheep and went searching for one that had gone astray. When the shepherd found the one lost sheep, "he called together his friends and neighbors saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'"

Jesus was portraying God in a different light than the Pharisees were accustomed to seeing Him. This went against everything the Pharisees believed. According to William Barclay, the strict Jews did not say, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents," but instead, "There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God." No wonder they were uncomfortable seeing Jesus eat with such people.

By eating with people that others turned their backs on, Jesus demonstrated how much God loves all people and how gladly, joyfully, He welcomes back "lost" children. There are some who have strayed away but who might some day be ready to come back. When they return we are to welcome them with open arms and rejoice with them.

Far too many times all the energy and focus has been on the members inside the church. We have neglected those outside the fold. The Parable of the Lost Sheep reminds us of our mission to reach out to welcome sinners into the life of the congregation. That's the kind of church Jesus means for us to be, a church where there is a joyous commotion every time someone who has been outside the church's fellowship makes his or her way home to the Father's house. □