

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH**  
**Sunday Worship, April 21, 2024**  
**Rev. Irene Willis Hassan**  
**Sermon: The Courageous Invitation**  
**Scriptures: Acts 4:13-22 & John 1:39a**

13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. 14 When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. 15 So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. 16 They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. 17 But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." 18 So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; 20 for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." 21 After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. 22 For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

**John 1:39a**

He said to them, "Come and see."

**Sermon: The Courageous Invitation**

I understand you all had a very peaceful and spiritually nourishing time together with Pastor Dale. I am eternally grateful to Pastor Dale not only for the two weeks he spent here with you so I could go take photos of kangaroos, but for everything he's done since 1976 to love and build discipleship in this community.

I'm glad you've had time to celebrate together and grow in encouragement during this Easter season. And now we're going to fast forward a bit to Halloween and discuss a topic that to some may feel very spooky: and that topic is "inviting people to church."

Maybe that comes naturally to some of you, but to others it may provoke anxiety. You may wonder: what if my friends and family reject my offer? What if I offend someone by the suggestion, and then they don't want to be friends with me anymore? What if they *do* show up and end up not liking it? What if they *do* show up and Jesus ends up changing their name to something weird like Bartholomew? (Like really, isn't Nathaniel a more sensible name, Jesus?)

Inviting your friends and family to church can be a very scary thing indeed for all the reasons stated above and more. Yet, statistically, personal invitation is the most predictable route for church growth. If you want to grow this church, you will have to invite people. The Gospel grew because the disciples went out to the edges of the Mediterranean World in the Book of Acts, fearlessly proclaiming the Word at risk of death and imprisonment, and invited others to join them in this risky business. Personal invitation is how the church was born, and it's how the church continues to grow.

You may read the stories of the heroic Apostles and think you don't have the right words to preach the Gospel like they did. You may think: I'm just an engineer or an accountant; we leave the fancy invitation words up to Pastor because she studied this stuff.

However, the Book of Acts states clearly that "these were uneducated and ordinary men" performing these miracles and proclaiming the Gospel. So, sorry folks, not being seminary trained or ordained is not an excuse to let the preacher do all the inviting, according to the documentation of the early church's spread.

At this point you may be thinking, "Ok, Pastor Irene – I understand the Book of Acts is all invitational, and you don't have to be a pastor to invite people to church ... so am I supposed to just suffer through the scariness of the invitation?"

The answer is: no. You should be inviting people, but it doesn't need to be scary, and it doesn't need to involve suffering, rejection, or alienation. You actually have all the tools for invitation already, whether you know it or not. Let me explain.

At the Plaza Bible Study on Thursday mornings, we just finished going through the Book of Acts. During the study, I asked the kupuna in the room several times throughout the weeks where they had proclaimed the Gospel in their lives and invited others to Christ. Often, I got embarrassed shrugs and an explanation that church was easy when they were young – in the 40s and 50s, it was very normal to belong to a church and it wasn't such a stretch of the imagination to invite others to join you. The risk of rejection, embarrassment, and failure of the invitation was much lower in their day, so they didn't resonate with Peter and Paul being thrown in jail at every turn for extending invitations to join the Jesus movement.

During that 6 week study with folks ranging from 85-100 years old, it sometimes felt silly asking them the places where they're actively spreading the gospel and proclaiming the Good News at risk of death or imprisonment. They would cast me dubious looks that said, "Um Pastor, I'm obviously too old for all of that now."

But you see, I purposely picked Acts for our first study because I wanted the kupuna who helped found our church see the places where they brought the gospel that continues to live in this congregation today. At the end of the study, I explained to them that the church is still alive *because of them*.

I don't mean that we continue on here as a duty of pity for them. It would be nonsense to say we are putting all this work into our church because we feel bad that our elders built this church and its not living up to the standard they imagined 70 years later. No, the reason we continue forward is much deeper than simply a duty of pity. We could say we're obviously here to glorify God, which of course is a fabulous answer – but really there's a lot of places you could do that now, in many churches in our very own city of Kailua. So why this church? Why do we specifically show up to this one?

We're here, continuing forward despite the massive decline of Christianity in the Western world, because we admire the courage that it took for the charter members and their friends to build this church 70 years ago. We're here because they dreamed something big and made it happen. The folks at the Plaza Bible Study and their friends did something huge and courageous. They put all their resources, money, time, and faith into building this church and spreading the Gospel in Kailua when Kailua was still a fledgling city nestled obscurely on the other side of the Pali. They built relationships and extended radical invitations to the suffering and brokenhearted Japanese immigrants living in obscurity from their homeland in a political climate that was downright hostile to Japanese folks in 1950's Hawaii. They shrug at me and say "it was easy, everyone was religious back then" but when I hold a mirror up to what they've done, we see a reflection of the original Apostles boldly going into new, dangerous places and spreading the Gospel at risk of death or imprisonment. This courage that our charter members displayed is the true reason why we specifically continue attending *this* church. It's not a duty of pity, it's an inspiration of courage.

Now, what does being inspired by our elders' courage have anything to do with the very real spookiness of inviting our friends and family to the church as it is here and now? At the Plaza Bible Study, I used the Book of Acts to hold a mirror up to the courageous-ness of our kupuna so many years ago. Today, I'm holding the Book of Acts up as a mirror to you in the courageousness you're embarking on now to spread the Gospel. Like our charter members, you are putting everything you have into helping this church survive after a difficult season. Like them, you're putting all your resources, your energy, and your faith into this church right now as we prepare for an intensive summer of outreach ministry. You're coming in after hours to wire security systems, clean windows, take inventory, attend meetings, laugh, explore, and be alive in this church, even when

you're tired and overworked in other aspects of your life. This church today is demonstrating that same inspirational courage that you admire in our charter members, right here and right now.

Just like you are inspired by the courage of the charter members in decades past, your kids, your friends, and others coming to visit the church will be inspired by the courage that you are enacting now. When you extend the invitation to join us, you can do so fearlessly, because you're not just inviting others into maintaining a thing that predates you – you're building a new thing and it will be a visible beacon of courage to those you love.

Your courage in continuing forward and trying new, bold things will inspire others to say yes to the invitation to join us. Your faithfulness shines through in the work you're putting into this church. The invitation you send to your loved ones will be "look at this cool new thing I'm doing," which anyone who loves you would clearly want to celebrate something you're passionate about and putting active labor into creating.

Go forward knowing that your courage will be inspiring to others, especially those who know and love you most. Know this is true because you feel the same inspiration about the kupuna that preceded you. With this in mind, the invitation won't be scary, I promise – and I'll be backing you the whole way. And even more than me, Jesus will be backing you too. Have faith, go forward and spread the Good News that Christ is alive and well here: Come and see.

Amen.