

CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE Part 2 Preached at Eastview Baptist Church 28/8/16

What if your church could lead people to Christ at a cost of \$3.25 per person? That was the subject line of an email I received recently. Clicking on the link brought me to the website of an organisation using the internet to find non-believers, around the world, and tell them about Jesus. A Christian marketing consultant has partnered with an evangelistic group in a ministry aimed at harnessing the latest marketing technologies: Google AdWords, Search Engine Optimization, market research, Social Media, and autoresponders. And they reckon the return on investment is \$3.25 per new Christian. They claim that over ONE MILLION people have committed their lives to following Christ as a result of the website. And they offered me the chance to join the LIMITED NUMBER of people selected to go to Chicago to learn more for just 100 USD.

I don't know about you but I feel deeply suspicious about this kind of sales pitch. I'm sure they are genuine in their desire to help people use the internet to explore questions and issues of faith. But I'm also convinced that the best theological conversations are done in person, with someone who listens respectfully and responds non-judgmentally. I won't be heading off to Chicago next month - but I do want to be more intentional about living a "questionable" life.

A "questionable" life. That's the phrase we introduced as we've been exploring making real connections with people in our circle of influence. Not questionable in the sense of something dodgy, but in lives that provide questions in the minds of others. We've looked at Paul and Silas in Athens and Philippi and at how they made the most of every opportunity to connect with people from all sorts of backgrounds. The notion of "making the most of opportunities" comes from Col 4: 2 - 6, which was our Scripture last week. READ. This week we going to cover similar ground using Romans 12: 9 – 18. READ

We noted last week that while gifted evangelists like Peter and Paul were called to proclaim the gospel and defend its integrity in a cultural milieu of emperor worship and polytheism, ordinary believers in their thousands were infiltrating society with questionable lives and gracious answers. Their lifestyles and values were intriguing and attractive. They devoted themselves to acts of kindness – caring for the sick, feeding the poor, adopting unwanted babies, loving their enemies and blessing their persecutors. Amidst the brutality of Roman rule, they were curiously different. Tertullian reported in the third century that Romans would exclaim, "See how they love one another!" By the time of C4 Emperor Julian, the believers' influence was so surprising that he feared they might take over the empire. Concerned about the Christians' acts of hospitality and philanthropy winning over his subjects, he launched an offensive to get his officials and priests to "out-love" the Christians with food programmes for the poor and hostels for travellers. But Julian's social program utterly failed; he couldn't motivate his pagan priests or Roman officials to care for the poor. He failed to realise that the Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit of love and motivated by God's grace in Christ.

Our challenge is to find what questionable lives look like in the 21st century, what kind of living demonstrates kingdom values, what kind of intriguing lifestyle will evoke questions to which we can respond with gracious answers. Those of us who are not called to be gifted evangelists still need to foster habits that draw us out of the church into the lives of our neighbours. Missional lifestyles that invite questions, that lead to sharing – perhaps about spiritual things, perhaps just about what really matters to us – which is actually deeply spiritual too. Inviting people to church and church events won't necessarily evoke conversations around those profound questions – concerns about the meaning of life, what we tell our children about death, how we cope with a serious illness or whether our first loyalty is to our career or to our family. If our only Spiritual Habits revolve around doing stuff with other Christians, we are not going get many chances to connect with folk in our community who might be quietly curious about faith. We need habits that will unite us together as believers while also propelling us into

lives of others, practices that don't deplete our energy and burden us with more and more Christian duties, but that re-energise us, and connect us more deeply to Jesus.

This is the little book I introduced last week, and am referring to again today - its available through bookstores or Amazon Kindle - Michael Frost's "*Surprise the World*" (2016). Michael Frost - an Australian theologian and lecturer - is part of an international movement of Jesus-followers who recognise that our culture has radically changed. That if we are to participate in God's vision and mission for our community, we must find more ways to live questionable lives that can take cynical postmodern pilgrims by surprise. So let's revisit the 5 Habits I gave a sneak peek at last week.

The first surprising habit is to bless others.

Michael Frost defines blessing people as "anything that relieves their burden in life. Anything that helps them breathe more easily. Anything that lifts their spirit or alleviates their distress. It can be a small thing or large." To help us think about ways to do this he suggests three of the love languages. Words of affirmation - send someone a note, an email, a text. Give them some encouragement. You know I used to lead High School peer support camps where everyone - staff and students - wrote words of affirmation for each other on paper butterflies, and I still have mine!

How about serving? Last Sunday we looked at Paul's kindness to the Philippian Jailer, which encourages us too to put love into action; our kindness might be cutting someone's lawn, babysitting an exhausted couple's kids, bringing next door's wheelie bin down the drive, helping a colleague shift house.

A third way might be gifts - not birthday or Christmas presents, but spontaneous gift-giving. A work colleague used to buy those tiny flower arrangements you can get up in the village, and occasionally leave one on my desk - just because. Quality time, words, actions, gifts - make them a habit, to build a culture of blessing.

I showed you Frost's list last week -

BLESS: I will bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

EAT: I will eat with three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.

LISTEN I will spend at least one period of the week listening for the Spirit's voice.

LEARN: I will spend at least one period of the week learning Christ.

SENT: I will journal throughout the week about all the ways I alerted others to the reign of God.

He suggests three 'blessings' - and I like the idea of trying to include one who is not a member of our church. But let me say too that putting numbers on it can be daunting. Yes, what gets measured gets done, but not all of us have time or resources to commit to that three times a week goal. Some of you have your hands full with young children and family responsibilities; why not see yourself as missionary to them, sent to bless them in life-changing ways? So let's not burden ourselves with legalistic numbers - the new covenant is about grace not law. *Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.* (Matthew 11) But can we make a decision to bless others more than we do now? If you want a specific goal, know you are free to work it out for yourself, just like you are free about the amount you donate to the church every week. So we can take the times and numbers out. This habit of blessing is about developing a pattern of generosity

The next habit is one you'll like - it is to Eat.

Again Michael Frost's book puts some numbers on it, but those specifics are for you to work out. The goal is to be intentional about eating with people in our faith community, and

with people who are not. Eating together is important for building a relationship in most cultures, and hospitality is a deeply-ingrained Biblical value. Jesus' last meal with friends became the core sacrament of our faith, the Lord's Supper and eating together has been a key practice for Christian worship and fellowship. Most of us already eat 21 meals a week; can we bring another person to our table for one of those? The meal could be a nice dinner at home, but it could also be breakfast out or just a coffee and muffin. A Probus lunch group or an church pancake breakfast. Sitting across a table gives the opportunity for relaxed conversation and who knows where it might go? A recent book about Missional Hospitality says "If every Christian household regularly invited a stranger or a poor person into their home for a meal once a week, we would literally change the world." (from Discover your Mission Now on Google books). Not change the world by force like a jihad, but the transformation of grace, like Paul's "seasoning with salt" in Colossians 4.

The third habit is to Listen

Spending time every week listening for the Spirit's voice. We can't navigate our way through life, intentionally eating with and blessing others, and participating in God's mission, without relying on the Spirit's voice to guide us. There are myriad ways to do this - the ancient practice of examen is one way - but this book just suggests a designated time, in a quiet space, with no distractions. Start by simply enjoying God's presence; some find a worship track helps, others may use mindfulness training to focus awareness. As you listen to the Spirit, he may do his work of conviction - not just wrong words and deeds but of things you could have said or done and didn't. But more likely he will affirm and encourage you, like my coach at the Gym, who understands my limitations and gently pushes and stretches me rather than bullying. *"Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."* (Matthew 11) He might bring to your attention the name or face of a person you could bless or eat with or bring to mind something you would never have thought of, humanly speaking. I think I've told you before about a prayer time when God challenged me to start regular financial support of a youth worker with whom I was very angry; every month for two years, I obediently wrote that cheque and the bitterness dissipated. But there's no way I would have come up with that idea on my own. By spending time in prayerful listening we sense Christ's presence and love, and receive new strength, insight and encouragement.

The fourth habit is to Learn

by spending time each week learning Christ. We've all heard the phrase "What would Jesus do?" from the nineties, and some may have read the C19 novel *In His Steps* where a whole congregation decided to live by that maxim. The point of the exercise is that a lot of the time we don't pay much attention to what Jesus did when he was on earth. Even the Alpha course which I love and support, spends little time on Jesus' earthly life. But if we're being sent into the world to live questionable lives, to arouse curiosity, to answer people's enquiries about the hope we have within, we need more than ever to understand what Jesus would do or say in any circumstance. And we can't do that without ongoing study of the biographies of Jesus written by those who knew Him best – the gospel writers. If we want to learn Jesus, and follow Him more closely, we need to spend time learning his way, reading and rereading Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I know many of us have done that before, but this time it would be with the focus of becoming Christ-like ourselves – generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, authentic followers of Jesus. Soaking mind and heart in the stories of Jesus. Our next teaching series is going to help with that, because we are going to look at building our confidence in the gospel, that it is really good news for all people. A new habit of learning Christ might mean reading an entire gospel in one sitting, or divided into sections; you can read a gospel a month at the rate of a chapter a day. Our Youth Pastor has been using the audio bible as he drives back and forth from home and I'm sure he'll be able to recommend a good app. Of course there are books written about Jesus – I particularly like John Ortberg's *Who is this Man?* – and there are

miniseries to download. Find a way to reconnect with the life and ministry of Jesus in the actual words of Scripture. Let's decide to spend time learning Christ, marinating our lives in the story of Jesus.

The last habit is Sent

and what means that is to begin identifying ourselves as missionaries, as sent ones. One of my favourite Bible verses is John 20: 21 "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." The other is John 10: 10 about abundant life and that's what others will see in us - evidence of God and his love for all people. John 20 says the mission of Christ did not stop when he returned to the Father; He sent the Spirit to fill us and connect us and equip us to carry on his work. That's what it means to be the body of Christ. This habit encourages our awareness of that missionary task by getting us to journal – to reflect in writing – about ways we have been or could be alerting others to the reign of God in and around us. Again everyone does this differently. You could make daily journal entries or just look back once a week to write about ways you've participated in God's presence and purpose. Neuroscience shows that the very act of writing taps into something powerful; we learned this in 2014 when some of us wrote for "six minutes a day" during Holy Week. The practice was based on the research of James Pennebaker who found students who wrote about something deep and important for a set number of minutes each day wound up physically and mentally healthier than a control group who wrote about the weather.

As I said last week, each of these habits is designed to release a certain value. When we bless others we express God's kingdom value of generosity. When we eat with others we are practicing hospitality. When we listen for God's Spirit we are practicing being spirit-led. When we set aside time to learn Christ we become more Christ-like and when we journal and reflect on the ways in which we are alerting others to God's kingdom we are acting as those who are sent. The acronym together spells BELLS. A bell alone sounds nice, but as we commit together to make the most of every opportunity and shape a new rhythm we create the sweet sound of questionable lives. Remember the prayer of invitation we prayed together last week?

*God, where will your Spirit lead today?
Help me be fully awake and ready to respond.
Equip me with the generous and hospitable spirit of Jesus as you shape my life in grace.
Grant me courage to risk something new
and so become a blessing
of your love and peace.
Amen.*

Missional Habits unite us together as believers while also propelling us into lives of others. And as The Emperor Julian saw, they often have the effect of surprising our community. But making the most of every opportunity may come in ways that surprise us too. (*tell personal story of being used by God unexpectedly*) Dom Helder Camara was a Brazilian priest known as "bishop to the poor" whose life epitomised the habits we have spoken of today. He listened courageously to where God was leading. He was ready to bless others. He longed to be filled to overflowing with the generous and hospitable life of Jesus, And as he waited for the Spirit to lead he wrote this: "Accept the surprises that upset your plans, shatter your dreams, give a completely different turn to your day and who knows? – to your life. Leave the Father free himself to weave the pattern of your days."

Prayer: May God meet us in surprising ways this week, and may we in turn surprise others with his grace.

Vivian F Coleman www.godshapedlife.com