

MISSION BELLS: BLESS

SHERARD EDINGTON

Philippians 2:1-8

In seven weeks, I will start my sabbatical. A sabbatical is written into each pastor's contract and is to be taken every five to seven years. I have served this church for twelve years now and this will be my first sabbatical. It's long overdue.

To prepare for this sabbatical I convened a committee that has met several times to assign tasks that I normally handle. We have an outstanding pastor who will be serving in my absence—the Rev. Warner Durnell. I cannot think of anyone else that I would rather leave in charge than Warner. He's been a good friend for close to 30 years.

But in addition to simply covering the day-to-day tasks, I hope that you, as a congregation, will use this time while I am away to grow as a congregation. And to encourage you in this direction, I want to leave you with some homework—homework that will begin this week before I leave, homework that I hope you will continue in my absence. I want you to commit to five missional habits. I will explain what I mean in a moment.

Today, I am starting a new sermon series called *Mission BELLS*. This series follows a small book called *Surprise the World: Five Habits of Highly Missional People*. For the five weeks of Lent, we will look at five different missional habits that are listed in this book: bless, eat, listen, learn, and sent. If you need a mnemonic device, the first letter of each of these spells out the word BELLS—bless, eat, listen, learn, sent. The graphic that I created for this series includes a photo that I took of the beautiful bells in our church tower. These five habits offer a practical approach to being the hands, feet, and voice of Jesus Christ in the places where we live, work, and play.

So, your first question is this: “What is a missional habit?” The word missional is not one that we easily find in our Presbyterian lexicon. It is based on the Latin word *missio* which means “sent.” Missionaries are those who are sent. Today, mission has a range of meanings. But the root meaning would be “a strongly felt aim, ambition, or calling.” As a church, we ask, “What is our mission? What do we feel called to do?”

Jesus defines our mission when he tells the disciples, *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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.* That is the mission of all who choose to follow Jesus. That is our mission—make disciples, baptize, teach.

Missional living is a Christian practice to adopt the thinking, behaviors, and practices of a missionary in everyday life in order to engage others with the gospel message.

Mission can be broken into two categories: evangelism and service. Evangelism is the verbal proclamation of the gospel message along with the call for repentance and conversion. Service would be an intentional effort to meet the mental, physical, and emotional needs of a group of people. At FPC, I would dare to say that we are good at service but could use some work in the area of evangelism. Both are required to fulfill our calling to mission.

So, what does it mean to be “missional?” To be missional is to adopt the thinking, behavior, and practices of one who adheres to following the mission of Christ. In other words, to be a missionary. As Christians, we should engage in missional living every day.

In his book, *Surprise the World*, Michael Frost writes, “By missional, I mean all that we do and say that alerts others to the reign of God.” To be missional is to alert others to the reign of God by our words and actions.

So, how do we put missional into practice? We do so by developing habits. A habit is something that we do regularly. Habits are those things so ingrained in us that we do them almost without thinking. Habits form us into who we are and who we are becoming.

Aristotle wrote, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.”

A missional habit, therefore, would be something we do over and over that points us toward Christ and also points others toward Christ.

This is where the word evangelism comes in. When we think of evangelism we tend to think of bold proclaimers of the gospel, door to door campaigns, big named preachers like Billy Graham. And yes, that is evangelism, but that is not the only way.

And this is a point that Michael Frost makes in the first chapters of his book. Not everyone is called to be an evangelist. That may sound surprising given Jesus’ directive *to make disciples of all the world*. But the Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians that being an evangelist is a specific gift. It is a gift given to some (but not all) by the Holy Spirit.

Paul lists five possible gifts when he writes, *The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and [some] teachers*. The challenge for us is finding our particular gift. Our gift is a primary expression of our faith and leadership style. Not all are called to be an evangelist.

Hopefully, that is a word of comfort to some of you—you who have felt that you were not fulfilling your Christian duties because you don't have the gift of evangelism.

If all of us are called to share the gospel, but not all are called to evangelism, then what do the non-evangelists among us do? How do we fulfill our sacred calling? And this is where those missional habits come into play.

Our missional habits can become signposts that point the world towards God. Our missional habits should be making us stand out from the world around us. And the way that we can do this is through what Michael Frost calls “questionable living.” “Questionable living” is living in such a way that invites people around you to say, “Hey, why did you do that?” Questionable living sets us apart from the rest of the world. It makes us different.

Frost writes, “If our only habits as Christians are going to church and attending meetings, they're not going to connect us with unbelievers nor invite their curiosity about our faith.” Missional habits are not simply doing what we are expected to do; missional habits are doing the things that make the world sit up and ask why, why did you do that.

I'm going to talk more about questionable living in future weeks. But today, I want to talk about the missional habit of blessing. As I mentioned earlier, Frost offers five missional habits that Christians should engage in. The first is “bless.” And your challenge this week is to bless three people, at least one of whom is not a member of this church.

So, what does it mean to bless someone? For some of us, the term blessing means the cursing we give when someone has done us wrong. “That guy cut me off, so I blessed him out.” But that's not what we are talking about here.

Technically, a blessing involves the act of consecrating something or someone. Originally, it meant to mark with blood, as in a blood sprinkling on pagan alters. In Old English, its meaning shifted to “to make happy, prosperous, or fortunate.” Today, bless means “to invoke divine favor upon.”

In the covenant that God made with Abraham, God called Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) and said to him, *‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.* God made so that we, as human beings, have the capacity to be blessings.

And so, I am asking to be such a blessing. I am asking that perform three acts of blessing this week. One of those cannot be on a church member. You are going to have to engage in a small bit of evangelism. So, what are some ways that you can bless someone?

Michael Frost, in his book, offers three types of blessings: Words of Encouragement, Acts of Kindness, and Gifts.

The first, Words of Encouragement, is simply that—words that lift someone up. I love the quote by the great Mark Twain, who said, “I can live for two months on a good compliment.” Good words are like gas in our tank. They get us up and going each day.

How often do we offer words of encouragement to those around us? Is it often enough?

To convey a word of encouragement, you can write a note, send a card, an email, or a text. You can see someone in person or give them a call. It doesn’t have to be a huge act, but it does need to be genuine.

A second way to bless someone is with an act of kindness. We run into folk every day in many different situations. Be open to opportunities to act kindly and make someone else’s day a little better. I’m talking about more than holding a door open for someone; I’m talking about doing something that would make them sit up and ask, “why are they doing that.”

Just this week, I was the recipient of an act of kindness. It was Monday and I was driving home from a meeting in Nashville. It was dark and raining. About four miles from home, the lights on my dash started blinking telling me that a tire was losing air. I figured I could make it home and take care of it there. Nope. A mile and half from home, I was riding on the rim. I pulled over and started the process of changing to the spare. Did I mention it was dark and raining?

I was just getting started when a guy stopped and asked if I needed help. I told him thanks, but no. It was just a flat and I could handle it. He asked if I would like his 3-ton jack. He lived just up the street and could go get it. To this, I said, “absolutely.” Because that would be much easier than trying to lift the car with the little scissor jack that comes in the trunk of all our vehicles. He left and came right back with the big jack, and I was done in a few minutes. It was a very welcomed act of kindness and I felt blessed.

The third way to bless someone is with a gift. It can be big or small, planned or spontaneous. But, like the others, it needs to be sincere. Just spend your week on the lookout for someone to gift. Make them feel blessed.

I have a story to tell. Just a couple of days ago, quite unexpectedly, I got a card in the mail from a local charity informing me that a member of this church had made a contribution in my name. Honestly, this is a better gift than if that person had handed me cash. I was thrilled to receive that card and, yes, I felt blessed.

When we bless, we are putting others ahead of ourselves. We are sharing the gospel by demonstrating to others that God loves them. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians, *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.* To have the mind of Christ means to live the life of Christ, to develop the habits of living the gospel.

So, remember, whether your blessing comes in the form of a word of encouragement, an act of kindness, or a gift, these actions are to be habits that we practice, and by doing so alert others to the glory of God's reign.

Furthermore, we don't bless people as a form of manipulation. Your blessings must come with no strings attached. We are called to bless because God has called us to be a witness of his blessings.

So, go out this week and bless three (or more) people. As a way to support and encourage one another, I have created a space on the church website for you to record your missional habits. It's called the Missional Habit Journal. You can find it as part of the Pastors Blog. Go there and leave your story. If you got a response from your act of blessing, tell us about it. You can leave your name or just be anonymous. Tell us here in church or in Sunday school what you've done and how you blessed someone. Your stories are important as an encouragement to others. Your stories are acts of evangelism.

As people of faith, we are blessed to be a blessing. Let us make others feel blessed as well.

Amen.