

MISSION BELLS: 2. EAT

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Matthew 9:9-13

Today is our second week in this Lenten series on the five habits of highly missional people. Through this series, we are sojourning together into the practical application of living as disciples of Christ in the places where we work, live, and play.

Each week in Lent, we are looking at different parts of the acronym BELLS. BELLS stands for Bless, Eat, Listen, Learn, and Sent. This BELLS method is proposed in a book *Surprise the World* by Michael Frost.

Each week, I'm giving you homework. Last Sunday, I asked that you Bless three people. I talked to several of you already and have heard the stories of your Blessings.

This week, we are going to talk about the second letter in BELLS: Eating. And your assignment will be to eat with three people.

When I was in college and seminary, my favorite part of each school day was the dining hall. Not for the food, of course, but for the fellowship. There were some students who would be waiting at the doors when the dining hall opened. They would grab their food and wolf it down, and head back to study. One of them was probably the valedictorian.

I, on the other hand, always chose to arrive about halfway through the mealtime. I would get my tray and find a table to sit. And I would talk to whoever was at the table. When I was done eating, I would get a cup of coffee and keep talking. As the room cleared out, I would call friends over and continue the conversation. We would be the last to leave.

Now that I look back, I might have been valedictorian if I had spent more time at the library and less time in the dining hall. But I wouldn't trade those conversations for anything in the world.

Eating is not just about filling our bellies with food, it is about fellowship and community and hospitality. For us as Christians, it is about Christ. And I'll get to that in a moment.

So, before I dive into this week's missional habit of eating, I want to talk again about what a missional habit is. Habits are those practices that are engrained in us, that define us. Missional means that we are alerting others to the reign of God in this world. Missional habits are the things that we do that point us to Christ. Our

missional habits also point others to Christ through us. Missional habits are signposts to God.

Now, I could offer you statistics about how much meat or ice cream or coffee the average American consumes in a year. I'm not, but it's a lot.

We eat a lot because we eat a lot: 3 meals a day, 21 meals a week, 90 meals a month, 1095 meals a year. How is eating a missional habit?

Well, eating is a universal habit. We eat to live, and we eat for the joy that it brings us. And Jesus was no exception. So much of his ministry took place at tables. Jesus says so himself when he tells his disciples, *the Son of Man has come eating and drinking* (Luke 7:34). His enemies held this against him and accused him of being a *glutton and a drunkard*. But he wasn't. They also accused him of associating with tax-collectors and sinners, which he did. For Jesus, meals were a ministry because in them he recognized an opportunity to connect with people. Beyond just eating to live, there is a power in the practice of eating together.

We can see this power in three ways: hospitality, belonging, and holy practice.

First of all, hospitality. A table is a place for hospitality. Hospitality is the practice of welcome. It is welcoming someone into your home or place of business, to your church, to your club, even into your family. And true hospitality comes with no strings attached. There is no *quid pro quo*.

As we bless and eat, we come bearing the gospel of Christ. But we don't make our fellowship or our blessing contingent upon the other person's conversion. We are not selling Jesus as a product. We are to live like Jesus. We are to act like Jesus, and we are to treat people like Jesus because that is what he called us to do. Our missional meal should be a place of hospitality where all are welcomed just as Jesus welcomed.

Secondly, the table is a place of belonging. We are all looking for a place to belong. We all want to know that we fit in somewhere. We don't want to feel alone. The table is the place where we can show others that they can belong, that they can be safe.

Jesus willingly ate with people from all walks of life. He dined with the Jewish elite, the Pharisees, the much-despised tax collectors, the marginalized, and the sinners. There were no requirements to be able to eat with Jesus. There were no bouncers at the door judging who was desirable and who wasn't. For Jesus, a meal was an opportunity to share a loaf of bread.

In our reading today from the gospel of Matthew, did you hear the Pharisees complaining to Jesus' disciples asking, *Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?* When Jesus hears this, he tells them, *Those who are well have no need*

of a physician, but the sick do. In other words, he is telling the Pharisees that they don't need him because they are righteous. (But they aren't; they just see themselves that way.) He goes on to say, *For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.* Since the Pharisees are righteous, they shouldn't be concerned. Jesus is here for the sinners. Even the sinners have a place at Christ's table.

We see this most vividly in the words of Psalm 23 where the psalmist writes: *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.* If the Pharisees would just open their eyes, they would see that they belonged at the table as much as any sinner.

Missional meals should be a place of belonging, not exclusion, a place of safety and acceptance. How will you make your table a place where others feel they belong?

Our reading for today begins with Jesus calling a disciple. Jesus is walking along when he encounters a man named Matthew *sitting at the tax booth.* Tax collectors weren't the most highly regarded people in society. They were Jews who were viewed as working for the Romans. They were also known to be notoriously corrupt. But Jesus says, *Follow me,* and Matthew complies. There may have been more interaction than this. Jesus may have spoken to Matthew at length. But it doesn't matter, because in the end Matthew became a Christ-follower.

And immediately, they are at dinner in a house—possibly Matthew's house—and the room is filled with other tax-collectors. These are Matthew's colleagues. Did Matthew say to them, "I have found the one who transforms lives. Come and meet him." And they come and they dine together sitting at table with Jesus.

And the Pharisees witness this and they don't get it, and they ask why Jesus associates with these obviously unrighteous people. *Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?*

What is going on at this table? It is the power of transformation. Matthew has called his friends and told them, "Come eat with me at the table of this man who showed me that life could be different."

The table can be a place of hospitality. And because it can be a place where people belong, then it becomes a place of transformation and change. The table is powerful.

Finally, the meal is a place of holy practice. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was in the habit of taking ordinary things and making them holy and sacred. At the table, he takes the wine and the bread and tells his disciples that when they eat of this and drink of this, that they are commemorating his life.

And what is interesting is that the bread and wine are bookends for the meal. The bread is broken before the meal; the wine is poured after. The meal itself was the very center of communion. There is power in the meal. When we eat missionally, the meal becomes sacred.

So, my question for you is this: What does it mean to eat questionably? Last week, we talked about Questionable Living. Questionable Living is living in such a way that your actions compel others take notice and ask, “Why did you do that?” But Questionable Living should also point them to the answer—Jesus Christ. Questionable Living is both the question and the answer. Why did you do that? Oh, I see, because of Christ. Questionable Eating is exactly the same. Who do we eat with? How do we treat them? Where do we eat? This can be Questionable Eating.

Your homework for this week, along with blessing three people...yes, you heard me right, we are developing Missional Habits and this week we will continue blessing...this week your homework is to eat with three people, at least one of whom is not a part of FPC. You can do this however you wish. You can eat with three people at one meal, or spread it out. It can be a full meal, a sandwich, or a cup of coffee. But the point is to meet at the table and engage. Talk to them, listen to them. Make the moment about them, not you.

The point is that you're intentionally engaging someone with a meal or coffee or doughnuts or whatever, and you're exhibiting hospitality. You're showing belonging. This is a holy moment.

(And here's a pro-tip for those of you who may feel overwhelmed; you can easily combine a meal and a blessing.)

Your homework for this week is to ask yourself the question: “What is it going to take for me to eat questionably?”