

In our initial workshop Francene reminded us what it looks like to read the Bible with a missional viewpoint, intentionally noticing God's reconciling work in the world. During this plenary time, we want to look at practices, or holy habits, that align with this kind of reading of Scripture.

Missional communities are not just another seasonal program or momentary interest of your diocesan leadership. Rather, we are *convinced* that the emphasis on missional communities gets at the heart of what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus. **Christians are a sent people.** From our early beginnings in first century Palestine, the Church has gathered community made up of people of all kinds. The boundary crossing nature of the early church was one of its greatest strengths, and it was also strange to that day's culture. There were countless gods in the Roman world but few, if any, crossed cultural boundaries. You worshiped a particular god because you lived in a particular place, came from a particular people and lived in a specific context. It was perplexing to people in the first few centuries that Christians could believe that the God they experienced was indeed the Creator and Redeemer of all people.

Our emphasis on missional communities is an effort to return to the central habits that made us who we are as the Church. This is our DNA. Our baptismal promises call us towards a particular way of living. Not something we *say* we will do but something we actually do. Jesus told his disciples that all of what Scripture demands of us can be boiled down to two things: love God with every fiber of your being and love and care for your neighbor in the way you would care for yourself. This is not an easy task, in more than one way. Today, we are focused on the habit of sharing this love and entering into relationship with others. So how do we go about sharing this Good News?

If we are being honest, not many of us are gifted evangelists. Only a few more are the kind of extroverts already prepared to run out these doors and start making new friends. So, for the majority of us, how do we go about cultivating habits that will bring us closer to living into the missional identity that is at the core of our Christian life?

I'm going to frame this invitation using the term Holy Habits, or practices. In monastic communities, individuals subscribe to a Rule of Life, the purpose of which is to shape their communal life together through a commitment to habits. Practically, praying the hours, or sharing in the labor of gardening, ensures that things run smoothly within the monastery. However, there is another layer behind this Rule of Life. The church has learned from these monastic communities that spiritual transformation takes place when commitments are made to eat and pray together multiple times a day. Words and the habits seep into our bones, and then into our soul, and in such a way holy habits transform both people and communities.

I invite you into these practices with the hope that they become holy habits – a rhythm of life that will begin to transform our Diocese and the world in which we live. If we long to see our congregations thrive and the neighborhoods around them become more vibrant, we can be the catalyst. We need habits that change how we engage in the world.

The good thing about these Holy Habits is they cost little more than effort. Admittedly, the very real risk involved is that we must become vulnerable to enter into these new relationships. But it is a risk that ends with a positive return when we run a cost-benefit analysis. The worse scenario is that you try on a habit, it doesn't fit comfortably, and you move onto a different incarnation of that habit. Regardless, you will have learned something about yourself and your community in the process.

For a long time we have been coming to church, sitting in the same pew, repeating the same prayers. And next door, we have a neighbor who is isolated and alone and does not know there is a community that would welcome her with open arms. A neighborhood that has dramatically changed has lost sight of the God who longs for it to flourish. If our current practices were enough, so many of our communities would not be hungry for God's love and reconciliation.

Let me be really clear, we are asking you to reprioritize what happens in your congregations so that these Holy Habits might bring new life to your communities. This might look like putting to bed a Bible Study that has been struggling for years. It might look like letting go of the dream of a youth group in an aging congregation. It might look like consolidating to one service on Sunday mornings so your laity are not stretched too thin over two half empty services. You will have to evaluate and prioritize how to make space for these Holy Habits. We truly believe that these spiritual habits will change what we are able to do in our communities. So begin to think about the margins in your schedule. What are the things that no longer give life, that were good for a season but are done flourishing? How will you cultivate space to allow these habits to take root in the life of everyone in your congregation?

What I am sharing this morning I believe from my own experience, and I am drawing from Australian missiologist, Michael Frost's book *Surprise the World*.

The first habit I offer is simple: eating.

Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus dining with all sorts of people, often without a particular script or program. His conversations are as different as the individuals and context of each. Yet, over and over again, we see Jesus breaking bread. This becomes so central a practice that Jesus is accused of being a gluttonous drunk. Nonetheless, what is clear is that dining with others was a specific habit of Jesus'.

The early church imitated this practice. Throughout the book of Acts we read of communities of Jesus' followers eating together. It becomes such a common custom in the early church that the apostle Paul advises on boundaries for this practice. Yet, throughout human history sharing meals has brought people together across any number of divisions and differences.

I'm completely convinced in the advantages of sharing a meal. For years, my Wednesday morning routine involved taking up residence at Bouldin Creek Café with a good friend. This friend and I had traveled to Kenya together and done work for his non-profit that empowered impoverished communities to create holistic change. One morning he asked what I thought of expanding our circle and making it an intentionally spiritual gathering. I was intrigued. Over the course of the next four years, we each invited a rotating cast of individuals, some who stayed, others who only came a time or two. Some were nervous about joining us, others were ripe with questions.

Though he was a regular churchgoer himself, he insisted that we call it a “Spirit Gathering,” or really, anything but Bible Study, because of the cultural baggage associated with that term. We read theological books, studied scripture, prayed, drank lattes, and ate countless bagels together. With one regular, it was with us that he first shared he was getting a divorce. With another, we were the first whom he told he was gay, and you can imagine the courage that took. We shared the deep longings of our soul, and the pithy frustrations of a single day. It was there, at those sacred tables that we sought to meet one another wherever we were on our faith journey, as Jesus did.

It is worth remembering that eating with another, sharing our table, getting curious about the customs of another, is an intimate gesture. I was reminded of this recently when I attended a weekday Advent prayer service at a local parish. I knew there would be a simple meal afterward, but I hadn’t put much thought into what it might feel like to join a small group of strangers, all of whom knew one another, around a cozy table. The person I knew and I thought would be there wasn’t, so I completely and totally chickened out. I made a bee-line for the door as soon as the service was over and hoped no one saw me running to my car! It was too much for me engage that deeply that quickly. But it was a helpful reminder, because for so long, I’d been extending the invitation. I forgot what it might feel like to receive the invitation. This is deeply holy, relational work that takes time, thoughtfulness, and follow up.

I'd like to challenge each of you to commit to sharing a meal with three people a week who are not a part of your church. It can be a feast, or as simple as a cup of coffee. But regularly sit down for a meal with three different people.

“Then what!?”

Again, we find our example in Jesus. The Gospels are ripe with encounters of Jesus meeting people where they are. The rich young ruler, Nicodemus, Zaccheus, the woman at the well ... in each case Jesus' counsel is unique. He does not tell the rich young ruler to be born again as he does Nicodemus, but he does tell the young ruler to sell his possessions and follow Jesus. He does not offer Zaccheus living water but he does offer this to the woman at the well. Each encounter requires a distinctive response because Jesus listened to them as individuals. He paid attention. He heard their story and responded directly to their particular situation.

The danger of many modern evangelism projects is that they are by nature impersonal. While God's good news is universal, it's delivery must match the context. It requires that we listen to those around us long enough to discover and name where God has been at work.

The second habit I encourage you to adopt is easily paired with the first. Invite others to share a meal with you and **listen**. Listen to their story. Pay attention to what God is up to in their life. Lament the tragedies of the story with them and celebrate the successes. Be present and engaged. Consider the 70/30 principle: Do 70% of the listening and 30% of the talking.

More often than not, the temptation is to *say something* but the real gift in meeting people where they are is listening to them. A quick scroll through your Facebook feed confirms The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells' argument in his most recent book that the true crisis of the human condition is not mortality, but **isolation**. People long to be heard, we long to connect. However, it is worth remembering the wisdom of Dr. Brene Brown as we go about this work, "**You cannot hotwire connection.**" Meaningful connections are not quick, and cannot be forced. Intentionally sitting down to listen to three people a week is a huge gift to your community. The benefits of this spiritual habit are plentiful - you will learn things you did not know about your neighbors, you will learn things that will shape how you engage further with your community.

One word of caution: it is difficult, near impossible, to share good news you haven't first experienced yourself. If you invite people to share a meal, and listen deeply to their story, hoping to see where God may be at work in their life, it would be wise to reflect on where you have noticed God at work in your own. Whether in receiving bread and wine, in reconnecting with God through nature, or a loving friend, each of us can recall moments when our lives were touched by God's presence. Reflect on these things so that you might share these stories with others.

So far, we've talked about sharing:

- 1) A meal with three people a week
- 2) And, doing the majority of the listening....

The third habit draws again on Jesus' pattern in the Gospels.

There is a rhythm in the Gospels of Jesus being with the people and then retreating to spend time with God in prayer. Study of Scripture and prayer, as inward as they can be, are what ground us for the work we will do in our communities. C.S. Lewis said that prayer, "Doesn't change God—it changes me." We pray in order that God may change how we look at the world, so that we may see the world increasingly as God sees it. Scripture is the same.

Story captures the imagination. It is the primary means through which we find out more about who we truly are. It also helps us to imagine more freely who we could be. Stories help us to create meaning in our own life. Scripture includes the greatest stories ever told. Yet, for some reason we often treat it as though we have heard the story enough. Once you have heard the story of the betrayal and abandonment of Jesus, the default is to assume there is nothing left to be discovered. Yet, this overlooks the way in which *you* have been changed since the last time the story was brought to life. For this reason, I love the Ignatian discipline of imagining myself in the story. It calls for a physical awareness of the smells, the sounds, the sights, and the people that scripture describes. While the beginning, middle, and end of the story don't change, my own awareness of the story is enhanced. Perhaps I notice someone who is present whom I completely overlooked before. Perhaps the experience of betrayal in my own life has evolved, and the intensity of the loss of relationship Jesus experiences is made new to me. God's story is our story. We cannot lose the importance of locating ourselves within this grand narrative.

As Episcopalians, we believe in the power of reading scripture together, in community. One year for Lent, the Student Center took on a habit that captured this essence of entering the scriptural story. We read a book that explored every character in the Passion narrative – even those whose role was seemingly insignificant. In conjunction with this study and our working through the scriptural story together, we encouraged the students to use Twitter to voice the perspective of the various characters. As we made our way through the Passion, students regularly captured heartbreak, confusion, disorientation, and love in 140 characters. They shared an image of a time when they had experienced the same emotion they felt come alive in the Passion narrative. This sparked an online component to the conversation they started in person. This ancient, foundational story took on life in a new way. Scripture transformed our experience of Jesus' Passion that season.

Reading Scripture together is transformative. We trust that the Spirit uses it to shape us in conversation one with the other, and inform how we engage our community.

An invitation from me to each of you to take on three holy habits:

- 1) Share a meal with three people a week
- 2) Listen more than you speak
- 3) Read scripture and engage in prayer together

We are *convinced* that the emphasis on missional communities gets at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. We are a sent people. God does not just send the extroverts or gifted evangelists or biblical scholars. God send us. All of us. God is sending you and me.

You do not need great oratory skills or a knack for hospitality. Just a willingness to be vulnerable and maybe a little courage to try something new. If you take this on, you will be different. Your communities will be different. How we see the world will be changed. But above all else, how the world sees *us* will be changed.

I now have the privilege of introducing Pedro Lopez to you, who is the Vicar of San Pedro's in Pasadena. The way in which Pedro has engaged his congregation and greater community in holy habits is truly extraordinary. I have no doubt you will enjoy hearing from Pedro this morning!

Conversation Questions:

Where does community happen – where do people meet - outside of church in your context?

Who are the first three people you plan to invite to share a meal with you?