

Expand Your Mind: Bless Others

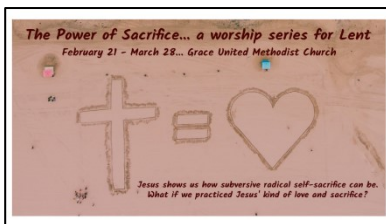
February 21, 2021

Mark 1: 9-15

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."



Welcome to Lent and the start of a new series. The worship series for the season of Lent is "The Power of Sacrifice". The main focus of the series will be on how

subversive and questionable Jesus' practice of radical self-sacrifice was in his day and can be in our day today. Continuing on in our book for Lent, Surprise the World, we will seek tangible ways to demonstrate sacrificial living in our day and age. Doing so, we will offer witness to the powerful and world-shaking ramifications that Jesus' sacrificial life had on his day. Through our own practices of sacrificial giving, we too can impact our world. As we begin this morning, let us pray...



Please turn with me to Mark 1 as we begin this morning. Beginning in verse nine, we see that Jesus came to John the Baptist and was baptized in the Jordan River. As Jesus is emerging from the water, John sees the heavens "*torn apart*" and he sees something that looks like a dove descending upon Jesus. The Holy Spirit alights on Jesus and a voice from heaven declares, "*You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased*". These words echo the words we heard last week as we looked at the passage where Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop.

After this affirmation, the same Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days where he is tempted by Satan. After resisting Satan's temptations, Jesus is attended to by the angels. Then in verse fourteen we read that John the Baptist is arrested and Jesus then travels to Galilee. There was a lot of tension in and around Jerusalem at this time, so Jesus begins his ministry to the north, in the more remote area known as Galilee. If all this feels fast and furious, it is. Mark's gospel tends to move quickly, offering broad, quick brush strokes most of the time. This happens and then that happens and then suddenly we are here, and this is happening. That is the nature of most of the book of Mark. And then we get to verse fifteen.

Verse fifteen focuses is on the cornerstone of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ: the gospel or the good news of Jesus Christ. In verse fifteen Jesus says, "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news*".



The good news or gospel that Jesus offers is really pretty simple, pretty straight forward. The gospel that Jesus preached centers on the idea that in and through him the kingdom of God is coming near and is being manifested in the world. To participate in that kingdom, we must repent and believe in that good news that the kingdom of God is near, that the kingdom is here. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom coming near, he is not usually referring to some future event when the clouds part and a new Jerusalem descends to the earth. Rather, Jesus is asking his disciples to imagine what the world might be like if God were on the throne instead of Caesar or some other earthly leader or, in last week's language, some other god or idol of this world. The invitation that Jesus offers to the disciples is to start making that vision a manifest reality in the world. The way that Jesus envisions this becoming a reality is first by his disciples repenting and believing and then by them going out and helping the kingdom of God draw near.

Let's unpack what the word "repent" means before we get too far ahead of ourselves. In the modern church, when we say "repent" in church we are talking about turning from our sins or moral failures and asking God to forgive us. But in Jesus' day, the word that has been translated as 'repent' was *metanoia*, which literally means "expanding your mind". At that time this expansion implied moving from a finite human perspective towards a broader, wider, divine perspective. At the heart of the gospel was a call to change the way one sees the world, to expand one's mind beyond the rigid boundaries and beliefs and practices of the day, to begin to see the world in a new

Repent – 'metanoia'

Repent – 'metanoia'
To expand your mind...

Repent – 'metanoia'
To expand your mind...
To move towards a broader,
wider, divine perspective

way. When Jesus clashed with the religious authorities it was often over how he read and interpreted and applied the Law.

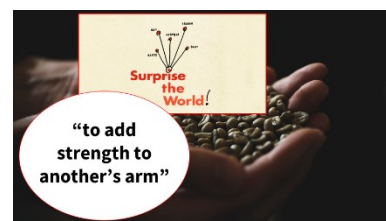
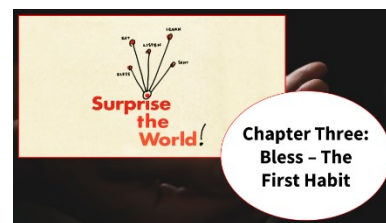
When Jesus would heal on the Sabbath, for example, he was breaking the Law as the religious leaders understood and lived it out. But when working from a broader, wider, more divine perspective, Jesus could not simply allow the suffering to continue. He was moved to heal that man or woman who had suffered long enough, regardless if it was the Sabbath or any other day.

Again, when Jesus says that the kingdom of God has drawn near, he means that it is now near. Jesus is inviting the disciples to live into the present reality of a kingdom here on earth, drawing it even nearer by the way that they lived. Jesus invited the disciples then and he invites the disciples now to recognize that there is a better, more righteous way to live and be in the world. The invitation was to begin to see the world through a different, wider lens. The invitation was to begin to believe in the possibility of a world that was more just, more generous, more loving. To respond to Jesus' invitation to be a part of the kingdom of God drawing near, we must first have a willingness to change our perspective, to see the things differently. To respond requires sacrifice. It requires humility. True repentance means humbling ourselves to embrace a posture of empathy, a posture of listening, a posture of exploration, a posture of understanding. True repentance requires a willingness to change the way we think, act, and live – to expand our minds.



The willingness to change our habits and therefore our values, to see the world from a new perspective, to live as one that brings the kingdom of heaven near, is at the heart of this book. Chapter Three in Surprise the World is entitled "Bless – The First Habit".

In the Christian world today, to bless means to confer happiness or prosperity on another. Blessing others usually lightens their load or alleviates their burdens or allows them to breathe more easily. In the book, Frost shares that the idea of blessing used to mean "to add strength to another's arm". This would be building another up, encouraging another. Blessings can be large or small, expensive or free, in person or remote. Author Michael Frost shares three ways to bless others. The three ways are to offer words of affirmation, to perform acts of kindness, and to give gifts. Let's unpack each of this just a little bit and then explore some practical ways that we as a church and as individuals could practice the habit of blessing others.



Words of affirmation are the simplest way to bless someone else. The words of affirmation or encouragement can come in a text, a phone call, a note or card, a Snapchat, an email, a knock on the door. It is simply letting someone else know that you noticed something worthwhile or kind or loving about them and then affirming that quality or action or characteristic. It is appreciating the goodness in others. Gary Chapman, author of The Five Love Languages writes this about words of affirmation: *"Encouragement requires empathy and seeing the world from another's perspective. We must first learn what is important to the other."*

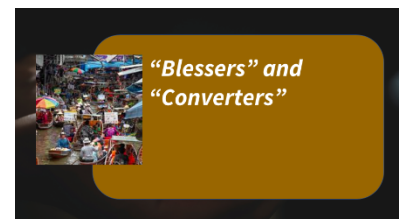
Only then can we give encouragement". To really offer words of affirmation that have meaning and value, we really do need to be willing to expand our mind and to understand and see things from another's perspective.

The second way to bless someone is to perform acts of kindness. This week an act of kindness could involve shovelling someone's driveway, babysitting someone's children so they can run an errand or two, bringing someone to their doctor's appointment, helping a neighbor with a project they are working on. These and many, many more actions add strength to another's arm or lighten another's burden. As Michael Frost points out in his book, these actions will exercise our souls and will also provide practical assistance to someone else. And as a potential side benefit, Frost suggests that acts of kindness can work to deepen our relationships and connections with our neighbors, friends, co-workers, classmates, and so on.

The third way that Frost suggests blessing others is by giving gifts. The recipient of a gift thrives on the love, thoughtfulness, and effort behind the gift. Gifts show others that they are known, cared for, loved. Now, we are not talking about birthday or anniversary or Christmas presents here. We are talking about random, 'just because' gifts. Some are obvious – food for a struggling single mother, furniture and clothes for someone who experienced a house fire, school supplies for a local school. Gifts come in all shapes and sizes. Some are free, some have a cost. One simple example would be the Valentine's cards that our youth made for local nursing home residents. All that was required was a little time and a little love.

Blessing others is something we are all capable of – from our Sunday school students to our youth to our young families to our middle-aged families to our retired couples and to our older singles. When we choose to be people who affirm, who perform acts of kindness, and who give gifts, we will be changed. As we practice and cultivate this habit of blessing others and as we share our experiences with one another, it will become contagious. As we practice and cultivate this habit of blessing others we will be propelled out into the community, bringing the kingdom of God near to those we bless. As I begin to draw near to a close, I want to share two illustrations about the power of blessing others. The first comes from the book Surprise the World.

In chapter three author Michael Frost shares a study that centers on missionaries sent to Thailand. The short-term missionaries were split into two teams – one team was the “blessers” and they were to simply bless those they met in whatever practical, real ways that they could. The other team was the “converters” and they were to try and evangelize the people they met – using tracts, handing out Bibles, preaching about Jesus. At the end of their time in Thailand, this is what the researchers discovered: the blessers had almost fifty times as many conversions as the converters did. When they lived highly questionable lives, bringing the kingdom of God near to those they ministered to, they drew others to Christ.





My second story comes from right here in Piedmont. As an illustration of how this idea of blessing others can suddenly become contagious and can draw others in, let me share what happened this past Monday. As many of you probably know, last Sunday after church we had our “Sweet Eats and Treats” auction. Speaking of such, thank you to the many people who were here cooking and baking on Saturday and thank you to the many people who were part of raising over \$3,600 for camp scholarships. Talk about blessing others. When we left the church on Sunday afternoon, we had a lot of sweets – the ones we had bought and the ones my folks had bought.

On the way home Kristin shared that she had an idea. My Mom and Dad only wanted a couple of the items they successfully bid on, so we had plenty. She wanted to take most of the sweets we had and to make plates to give out to the neighbors that live around the parsonage. Nice little thing to do, right? Well, that is not the story I want to share with you. One of the plates went to the home of one of our youth. About ten or fifteen minutes after dropping the plate of goodies off, Kristin got a message asking if it would be okay to bring the plate to their neighbors. They did not have any food in the house and this youth wanted to share what she had been blessed with by giving it away.

Moved by this youth’s compassion for her neighbor, Kristin and Sam, my son, put together some soup and pasta and whatnot and met the youth at their house. They walked over to the neighbor’s house and the youth brought the food in. Coming out she was visibly moved by what her act of kindness had meant to her neighbors.

Now, I have no idea where the ripple effects of this might end up going. Maybe this youth will forever see herself as one able to minister to others. Maybe this gift of food will lead to a relationship developing that goes beyond someone that just lives down the street from us. The blessing that was passed on blessed so many more people than just the giver and original receiver. That is the power of practicing and cultivating the habit of blessing others. It was really just a simple thing to do – both the giving and the passing on of the blessing. Hearing this simple story, what can you think of to do for a neighbor or co-worker or classmate that would add strength to another's arm, that would lighten their load, that would bring the kingdom of God near?

My friends, as we begin this Lenten journey together, there are two steps that are necessary. First, it is essential that we all begin with a posture of repentance – the sacrificial posture of understanding that our perspective, that our ability to love, that our ability to surprise the world is finite. God is so much bigger than our limited view. We must trust into the Lord our God. Second, we must be willing to step outside of our comfort zones. For most of us, I am not talking about taking a giant leap. I am asking you each to get to the edge of your comfort zone and then to just step across that line. Be a little bolder for your faith, go a little further in your love of neighbor. Expand your mind.

As we journey into Lent, may we journey together as a community of faith, seeking to bless others through our humble, sacrificial acts of service. As you live out this week, when you bless others through a word of affirmation or through an act of kindness or through a gift, I hope you will share those stories with your faith community as a means to inspire and move others to action.

Share them on our Facebook page, call the church and tell us about them if you don't have Facebook, email your stories to me. Please share your stories so we can all experience the kingdom of God drawing near in this time and place. God's peace and love to you as you seek to bless others this week. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you think about your faith journey, how has the gospel or the good news continued to change your life and your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Where is God calling you to bring the kingdom near? Pray for guidance or for direction to bless others this week.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 4: 12-17. What does this add to Mark's version?