

What Matters Most: Eat Together

February 28, 2021

Mark 8: 31-38

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Matthew 9: 10-13

¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."



As we begin to explore our second habit this week, the practice of eating together, we begin with our passage from Mark 8. Here we find some of the hardest, most difficult words that Jesus ever preached. As some may have found this past week, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus is not always easy. The willingness to step into humble, sacrificial service is not always easy to master. As we begin this morning, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Our passage from Mark 8 begins with Jesus detailing the last days of his life on earth. Jesus shares, *"quite openly"*, that he will suffer and be rejected, that he will be killed at the hands of the elders, priests, and scribes. But all will not be lost. He will rise from the grave after three days. Jesus is speaking of the week just before and running into Easter. We will walk through this week in greater detail at the end of March and into April.

Peter, ever the one to act or speak his mind, pulls Jesus aside and he begins to rebuke the teacher. In Matthew's gospel we learn that Peter tells Jesus, *"God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you!"* Here Peter is failing to see or understand the broader, wider, more divine perspective. Instead of expanding his mind, Peter is limiting his thinking, only considering his human desire to keep Jesus with him. In verse 33 Jesus plainly tells Peter that *"you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things"*. In response to Peter's lack of understanding, Jesus gathers his disciples and the crowd and offers a teaching. In this teaching, Jesus tells his followers what it will cost them to follow him.

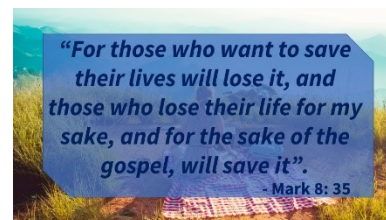
According to the one whom all disciples follow, there are two primary requirements. In verse 34 Jesus says, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"*. Here we see that the first requirement is to deny ourselves. Here Jesus is speaking of placing ourselves, our desires, even our needs behind others and their needs and desires. Denying ourselves also involves the choices and decisions we make. Some of our actions and decisions affect others and we should certainly think of these consequences and ramifications first and foremost. Other actions or decisions are more personal in nature. Although they do not affect others, some of these are not good for our souls or bodies or emotions. Even though these things may make us feel good for the moment, for example, they are things we should deny ourselves because in the long run they are not good for us.



The second requirement is to *"take up your cross and follow me"*. For many of the disciples, there would be a literal reality to this. All but one of the original disciples would be martyred, killed for their faith in Jesus. Perhaps for some of us, finding three opportunities to bless others this past week may have felt like taking up our cross. Or maybe for some God did provide us opportunities to bless others but actually stepping outside of our comfort zone to help draw the kingdom of God near felt like taking up our cross. When we think of taking up our cross, we usually equate that with doing something hard for our faith, of bearing a burden for Jesus. In the other gospels, this idea is in terms of *"come and die"* to self for the sake of Jesus and for the sake of others.

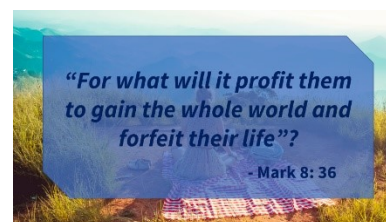
In verse 35 Jesus reiterates this idea with these words:

"For those who want to save their lives will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it". Here Jesus is clearly defining



the cost of discipleship or of following him. Jesus calls all disciples to lose our self-centeredness for the sake of manifesting the kingdom of God here on earth – for the sake of drawing the kingdom near, to use last week’s language. This call to make the world a better place, a more generous place, a kinder place, a more loving and forgiving place is in some ways a more difficult call than the call to martyrdom. It is one thing, certainly a very hard thing, to die for one’s faith in Jesus Christ. It is another to live a life in which we continually die to our self-interest, to our pride, to our ego, to our anger, to our jealousies all for the good or betterment of our families, neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and even for our enemies.

Jesus hits the struggle right on the head when he asks, *"For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life"?* Indeed, for those who gain the whole world – fame, fortune,



status, power, possessions – what do they truly gain? The pursuit of earthly gain and human recognition is ultimately futile. It never brings real joy or peace or contentment. We are always left longing for more when we pursue the things of this world. As we heard last week, true joy and meaning and purpose in this life comes when we follow Jesus and seek to bring the kingdom of God near. Jesus’ big message in this passage from Mark 8 is that by giving up our attachments to material gain and by turning from self towards others, we actually will find true life – a life filled with meaning and purpose and joy.

If you found ways to bless others this past week, whether through words of affirmation or through acts of kindness or through giving gifts, then you experienced joy and meaning and purpose in your life. If you were here last Sunday or if you tuned in last Sunday, you heard how the plate of cookies became contagious. The story continued this week. After church one who was here found Kristin and asked about bringing some food to that home that was without food. This Wednesday that family received another gift of food. God can and will work in amazing ways if we just let the Holy Spirit lead and guide us.

Last week I spoke of several postures – of empathy, of understanding, of listening, of repentance – that we must assume if we are going to be followers who bring the kingdom of God near. Jesus is calling all followers to give up the selfish pursuits and to begin serving others sacrificially. Instead of giving up this or that for Lent, we are being challenged to turn our attention away from ourselves and to then turn it towards those in need all around us. Jesus tells us today why this is the way of the disciple. Jesus tells us in verse 35 that we will *"save our life"* and enjoy a truly abundant life here and now if we make the pursuit of denying self and taking up our cross one of our daily habits, part of our regular rhythms in life.

Turning to Matthew 9, we see all of this lived out by Jesus, including the willingness to pay the cost. This is certainly part of why Jesus came to earth. To set the stage for our next scripture today, please take a minute to consider how you would fill in this blank:

"Jesus, the Son of Man, came to _____".

What comes to mind for you?



In general author and pastor Michael Frost has found that people will answer this question three ways. Jesus came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. And, Jesus came to eat and drink. This third one is how the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes would answer this question. As an example of this, let's look at the interchange that occurs in Matthew 9.



Join me, starting in verse ten. To give you some context, Jesus has just called Matthew to follow him.

Matthew, also known as Levi, was a tax collector. Tax collectors were among the most hated, despised people in Israel. They collected taxes for the Romans, and they were known for padding their own pocketbooks in the process. Just as Andrew and Peter, James and John, had left their fishing boats to follow Jesus, Matthew leaves his tax collector's booth then and there and joins Jesus. In the earthly sense, Matthew was leaving behind great wealth to follow Jesus.

As the passage begins, Jesus finds himself at Matthew's house for dinner. We quickly see that Matthew still has many of his old connections. In verse ten we read that many "*tax collectors and sinners*" joined Matthew and Jesus for dinner. The Pharisees ask Jesus' disciples, "WHY?" Why would Jesus eat with such people? Why would Jesus eat with tax collectors and other known sinners? Why would he make himself unclean for their sake? In their closed, strict, limited understanding of the scriptures, this made no sense. Much like Peter in our opening passage, the Pharisees were seeing things from a human perspective.

Jesus responds by saying, *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick"*. What a

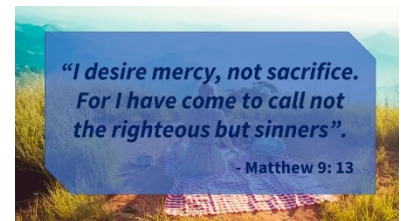
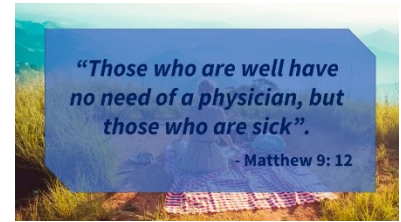
simple truth this is. Those sitting in church or a small group or in a Sunday school class usually do not need

saved. Sometimes they do, but not in general. Jesus did not come to the healthy and spiritually mature folks of his day. He came to the broken and the lost and the hurting, to the searching and the wayward. Not content to let the conversation end with this truth, Jesus goes on, giving homework to the

Pharisees. In verse thirteen he says, *"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners"*. The

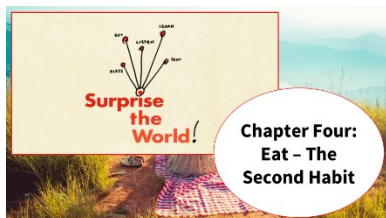
Pharisees were experts at offering the sacrifices in the

temple, at going through the motions of being religious. But they struggled to offer mercy and grace and blessing to folks like the tax collectors, like the prostitutes, like the Gentiles and all the other sinners. Is this something that Jesus would say to Grace UMC? Would Jesus look at us here on a Sunday morning and ask where the hurting, broken, and lost are?



The reality is that we all know people who would fit one of these descriptions: hurting, broken, lost. Last week the challenge was to engage three people as we blessed them in some way. Part of the challenge was to bless at least one person who is not from our church. Hopefully the Holy Spirit led you to someone who needed the kingdom of God to draw near. Although the act of blessing another was to "add strength to their arm" or to alleviate a burden or to lighten their load, the real purpose is to begin to develop a relationship.

Entering into a real relationship with others will eventually lead to a gospel conversation. Really, that is the overarching idea of living out our faith, of living a questionable life – the privilege of one day sharing why you are who you are. It is an opportunity to tell others – the hurting, broken, and lost – about Jesus and about what faith means to you.

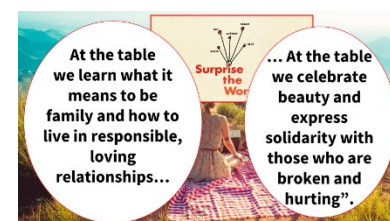
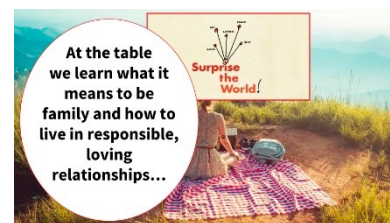


Chapter Four in Surprise the World is entitled, “Eat – The Second Habit”. On page 47, Frost writes, *“The table is the great equalizer... there we discover the inherent*

humanity of all people”. This is why the “love feast” or community meal that usually happened on Sunday evenings in the early church was so beloved. At the common table it did not matter if one was rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, slave or free – at the table all had a place, all shared in the food together. This is the idea that Jesus began and that Paul extended surrounding the communion table. Christ died for all. Jesus continues to invite all to the table of grace. All are welcome to come to the table of grace, to repent, to find forgiveness and mercy, to be made new again, to be welcomed back into right relationship with God. Practiced together, it is the examination of self that occurs before approaching the communion table that broke down the walls and barriers that would normally separate people out in the real world. Remembering the sacrifice of Christ would counter the impulse to exclude the poor and the outsider from the common table. There, the early Christians would learn the value and worth inherent in all of humanity.

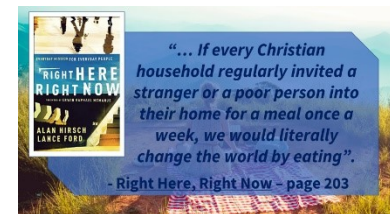
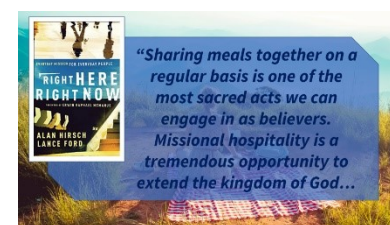
I invite you to think about your experiences around the table. As I think about my childhood and about raising my children, as I remember meals with friends

and with our church family, the words that Frost shares about the table resonate with me. On pages 46 and 47 Frost writes, *"At the table we learn what it means to be family and how to live in responsible, loving relationships... At the table we celebrate beauty and express solidarity with those who are broken and hurting"*. When we invite someone to have coffee with us and to share in conversation, when we welcome someone into our home for a meal, when we prepare and bring a meal to the family down the street, when we stealthily drop off a couple of bags of groceries to that single mom's place – we are practicing what it means to be the family of God, what it means to live in responsible, loving relationships, what it means to express solidarity with the broken and hurting and with the world, with our friends and neighbors.



Jesus came to serve and give his life as a ransom for many, to seek and save the lost, and to eat and be in fellowship with others. In their book Right Here, Right

Now authors Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford share these words: *"Sharing meals together on a regular basis is one of the most sacred acts we can engage in as believers. Missional hospitality is a tremendous opportunity to extend the kingdom of God... 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 by eating"*.



While we live in a different world than when this book was written – in a world greatly impacted and affected by COVID – the truth of this quote still remains. Sharing a meal can be a sacred act. Making a meal for a neighbor or sharing a cup of coffee with a friend or bringing someone groceries to a family in need are also sacred acts. While practicing this habit will make a positive difference in another's life, we too will be changed. This habit of eating together, in whatever form that safely takes, will develop the value of hospitality in each of us.

The added challenge this week is to find three people, at least one not from the church, to eat or share the blessing of food with this week. Keep up the habit of blessing others with words or acts or gifts. Share your stories of living out these habits as a way to encourage others in the church to practice these new habits. As a reminder, in verse thirteen of Matthew 9 Jesus said, *"I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners"*. In ministering to and in caring for those in need, Jesus lived out a radical, subversive love. It most often began with Jesus meeting a physical or relational need and then moved on to addressing that person's spiritual need. At the table we join Jesus in meeting physical needs and relational needs. As with all of these habits, the goal is to develop a relationship that one day allows us to have a gospel conversation with that person.

As we seek to live out our faith this week, helping to draw the kingdom of God near, may we allow the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us to those who are lost, to those who need to experience the love and saving power of Jesus Christ. Through the gift of eating together may we surprise the world. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider the challenge to “eat” with somebody, who comes to mind? In what safe yet personal way can you share the table with others this week?
- 2) *Pray*. When did the Holy Spirit prompt you to bless another last week? How did you respond? Pray for a pleasing response as you live out your faith.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 9: 14-17. How can you “pour new wine into new wineskins” this week as you minister to the needs of the world?

Example: Phone call from Ron Kortemeyer this week. He called just to express his thanks for worship and for the love of Christ evident in our church. Ron and Jo tune in each week and this morning I would like to invite you to turn to the camera and to say hello to Ron and Jo... Ron shared with me the idea of “good and great”...