

B L E S S

in living color



Begin with Prayer



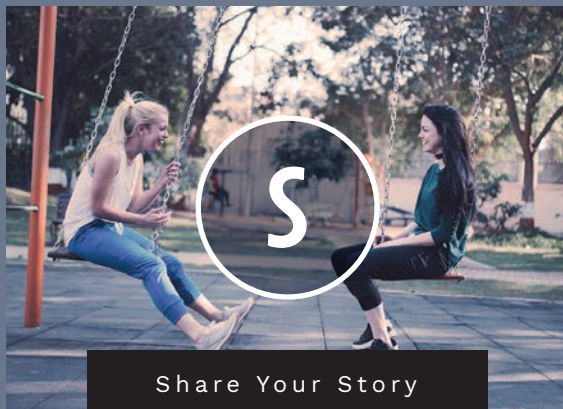
Listen with Care



Eat Together



Serve with Love



Share Your Story

Sermon Outlines



covchurch.org/bless

BLESSED

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BIG IDEA:

God calls us not only to bless but to bless in living color—**BEGINNING WITH PRAYER.**

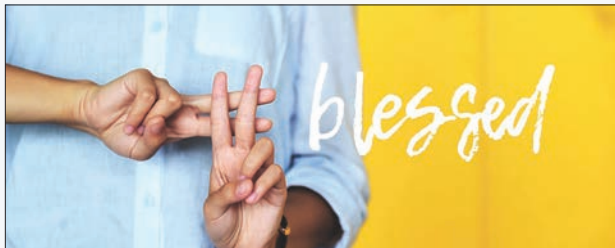
Genesis 12:1-5 (Abraham); **Acts 1:3-8** (Praying for Pentecost)

Opening & Connection

Perhaps you have heard that we have been “blessed to be a blessing.” It’s a popular phrase.

What is being blessed really all about? If you do a simple search on Twitter for #blessed, you’ll see a lot of interesting things.

Media Option: Do a search for #blessed on social media or Google images and display some examples like this:



Several years ago, the hashtag #blessed was trending. After awhile, many began to identify the trend as annoying and slightly ridiculous.

In one article titled “Why #Blessed Is the Most Annoying Hashtag on Instagram,” one author wrote, “#Blessed might as well read #bragging.” Celebrities were showcasing their luxurious lifestyles, but it wasn’t boasting—because they were #blessed!

But the Scriptures teach that rather than being self-centered, biblical blessing is both God-centered and others-centered.

- It is God-centered in that true blessing comes from God. To be blessed is to be the recipient of God’s divine and gracious favor.
- It is also others-centered in that God always blesses people so they can bless others.
- The foundational Scripture here is God’s blessing of Abraham in Genesis 12:2: *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.”*
- We are descendants of Abraham (Galatians 3:29), and we have been blessed to be a blessing.

Maybe you’re on the opposite end of the spectrum and don’t feel particularly #blessed right now.

- We will not always feel blessed, of course.
- Yet the fact is that we have been blessed beyond measure in Christ, through his death and resurrection.

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- “God has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3).
- Being blessed is a joy indeed—but not because of happy feelings or circumstances. Being blessed gives us the great joy of extending God’s blessing to the world—making more disciples among more populations in a more caring and just world. We have been blessed to be a blessing. As

we live this out together, we will reclaim the true meaning of being #blessed.

Story Options

- *Share about an occasion in which you experienced the joy of blessing someone else even when you weren’t feeling particularly #blessed yourself.*
- *Share a story from your own life about how you have blessed someone with the good news of Christ.*

POINT ONE: We Are Called to BLESS

Spider-Man’s Aunt May says, “With great power comes great responsibility.” (In the older movies his Uncle Ben said this.) The Bible’s version is a little different: With great blessing comes great responsibility. (Luke 12:48)

God wants us to enjoy our blessings, but God calls us to *be* a blessing. In the Evangelical Covenant Church, we do this through BLESS. At its heart, BLESS prompts us to bless the world for Christ in two simple ways.

- First, we pray by name for those we know who are not yet in a relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Second, we commit to taking concrete steps to bless them.

That’s it!

Sharing the good news of Jesus is not about making a sale; it’s about making an invitation. Sharing the gospel is ultimately about blessing the world.

What does that look like? BLESS is an acronym of five simple missional practices (review each letter of BLESS) that teach us what blessing looks like.

- **Media Option:** review each letter of BLESS using [BLESS slides](#).

- We **Begin with prayer**, acknowledging that we need God’s power to successfully extend God’s blessing. We will deeply bless others to the extent that we consciously depend on the Holy Spirit.
- We **Listen with care**. Sometimes we associate “evangelism” with talking *at* people rather than hearing *from* people. But God calls us to practice engaging authentically with others and to listen carefully to their stories. When we listen, people feel validated and loved—and they are also much more willing to listen to us.
- Next, the one which is perhaps the most fun: we **Eat together**. Think about this: many of Jesus’s most significant interactions with people involved some kind of food or drink. There is something about breaking bread together that creates meaningful and lasting connections.
- Once we understand people’s needs, we can **Serve with love**, imitating our Savior “who did not come to be served but to serve” (Matthew 20:28).
- And finally, we take the risk to **Share the story** of how Jesus is transforming our lives

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in living color

and the world, culminating in an invitation to join that story. By God's grace, as we bless others in these tangible ways, they too will receive the blessing of eternal life in Christ.

OK, we understand that we've been blessed to be a blessing. But let's take this one step further. When you think about people in your life whom you might be able to bless, how many of them look like you?

To bless our world in the way God envisioned, we must bless in living color.

- **Media Option:** Show the *BLESS in Living Color* trailer video. You may choose to introduce the 10-day *BLESS in Living Color* email devotional now, or revisit it again later in the sermon or the series. youtube.com/watch?v=nArPV2mQR44w



POINT TWO: In Living Color

What do we mean by blessing “in living color”?

- It means blessing across boundaries of difference, boundaries that often serve to divide us rather than bring us together.
- These boundaries can include ethnicity, class, gender, age, ability, and more. Much could be said about each of these, but today let's focus on what it looks like for you to bless the world across boundaries of ethnicity and race.

We don't bless in living color because we want to be politically correct or because it's trendy—we do so because the Bible teaches it! Let's take a closer look at Genesis 12.

- “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). This refers to all the diverse peoples on the earth.

We see a continuation of this commission to bless in the Great Commission of Jesus:

- “Therefore go 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 I have commanded you” (Matthew 18:19-20).
- The Greek word translated “nations” here is *ethne*. It's the root of our contemporary word “ethnicity.”
- The Great Commission is not just about making disciples of all “countries.” It's about making disciples of all ethnicities. The Great Commission is not just for global missionaries who are called to cross international boundaries. It's also a mandate for us all to cross ethnic and racial boundaries. It is a call to engage in multiethnic outreach wherever we are.

So we see that from the very beginning, we were meant not only to bless—but to bless in living color.

BLESSED

in living color

As we bless, let us especially consider how we can *bless in living color*. We can do this both individually and as a congregation.

There's still one more important thing we must do before we can bless in living color as Jesus taught us to do: We must begin with prayer.

Story Option: *Share about a time when you blessed someone else "in living color."*

POINT THREE: Begin with Prayer

Our second text takes us forward to the birth of the church in Acts, on the eve of Pentecost (Acts 1:3-8).

- In verse 4, Jesus literally tells the disciples to wait. "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised" (Acts 1:4).
- Only at this point can the rest of it come true: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Jesus tells his disciples, "Go into all the world." But he also tells them, "First wait for the power of the Holy Spirit." Why does he say this?

- Acts 1:8 is literally about crossing boundaries of difference (Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, etc.).
- We always need God's power to bless others, but this is especially true if we seek to bless in living color.

Sometimes the differences that divide us can seem overwhelming or impossible to bridge.

- In fact, studies have shown it's natural to associate with people who are like us. It's called [sorting](#), or a "tendency to seek out and associate with people who are similar to us in any number of ways—religiously, politically, economically and, yes, racially, too."

- There's nothing wrong with connecting with people who are just like us—in fact, it's natural. Yet God calls us to a supernatural mission!
- That's why we pray for the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ has broken down the dividing walls, and he has empowered us to do the same through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- One of the [six affirmations](#) of the Evangelical Covenant Church is "a conscious dependence on the Holy Spirit."

This is where prayer comes in—as we express our need to consciously depend on the Holy Spirit. The people prayed, and Pentecost happened. God filled them with the Holy Spirit and empowered them to bless in living color.

The rest of the book of Acts is the story of how God's people blessed in living color across all boundaries of difference [give examples].

- In fact, it's in the book of Acts at Antioch that the believers are first called Christians (Acts 11:26).
- This is significant because of what it represents: Antioch was where the church took on a solidly multiethnic appearance, a unity in diversity that surprised everyone!

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in living color

- Christians are called to unity, *and* we are called to diversity—unity in diversity. It’s the combination that makes our movement so special. The kingdom of God will stun the world now, just as it did before, to the extent that the church embodies God’s intention of unity in diversity.
- The Scriptures also say that disciples have been given the ministry of reconciliation: “All this is from God, who reconciled us

to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18).

- The book of Acts doesn’t really have an “ending,” because we are still living in the age of the empowering Holy Spirit who calls us to bless all the peoples of the world in living color. It’s an incredible adventure.

Story Option: *Share about a time when prayer empowered your own ministry of reconciliation.*

Conclusion

We are called not only to bless, but to bless in living color.

We serve a God who delights in bringing people together, building bridges where there are none, and making broken things whole.

- What’s more, building bridges across ethnic boundaries of difference is just the beginning. May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to the bridges he wants us to build wherever we find ourselves—in race, ethnicity, culture, ability, age, gender, class, and beyond.

Friends, this is not some kumbaya fantasy. With our own eyes, we will see history culminate in a colorful celebration beyond anything we have ever dreamed or imagined. Let us stay the course as we partner with Jesus to usher in the colorful kingdom of God.

Let us begin with prayer.

Media Option: *Display Hyatt Moore’s beautiful artwork, [Luke 14 Banquet](#).*

Reproduced by permission.



BLESS

in living color

CALL TO ACTION: BLESS Prayer Ceremony

Today, we also begin with prayer through a BLESS ceremony. And as we consider those we would like to pray for, let us make sure that they are not all just like us.

Invitation for Believers

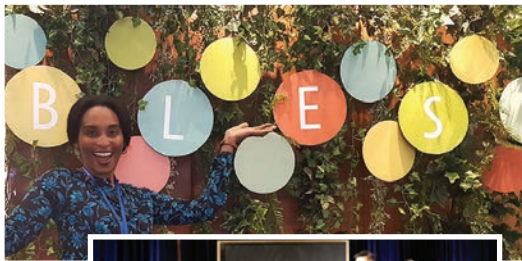
- Consider especially ethnic diversity. If you can't come up with a multiethnic list, pray that God would help you build one over time.
- Another option is to make sure your list is colorful in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, ability, age, class—even politics.

Invitation for Not-Yet Believers

- If you are not yet a believer, the invitation for you is to consider how you might bless those around you who are not like you in whatever way you feel most comfortable.

BLESS Ceremony

- Many churches have created beautiful BLESS displays.



CLOSING PRAYER

Benediction: Matthew 28:19-20 or Acts 1:8



BIG IDEA:

God calls us to bless in living color by **LISTENING WITH CARE** across boundaries of difference.

Genesis 12:1-5 (Abraham); **Acts 8:26-39** (Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch)

Opening & Connection

When was the last time someone truly listened to you? Think about it for a moment. Now tell the person next to you who that person was.

- *In smaller churches: Can a few people say the name out loud?*

Perhaps several people would name their spiritual director or counselor, someone who is a professional listener.

Unfortunately, in today's world, really great listeners stand out. Conversational narcissism is the norm. We're all guilty of this sometimes. What does conversational narcissism sound like?

Options:

- 1) *Ask two volunteers to act these conversations out live or via video.*
- 2) *Project these sample conversations on the screen (or make up your own).*

José: I'm feeling really starved.

Destiny: Oh, I just ate.

Do you see what Destiny did? In one sentence, she shifted the attention from José to herself. In *The Pursuit of Attention*, Charles Derber calls that a **shift-response**. We do it all the time, answering someone's statement with our own experience or opinion.

Here's another example:

José: My mom used to pack me quesadillas for lunch.

Destiny: My mom never made me a lunch I could stand to eat.

I hope we can recognize that this is not how we want to be treated. And it's not how we bless others. Instead, we want to be people who listen with care.

- *Alternatively, share a different opening that helps people to connect with the idea of listening with care.*

As a reminder, we're going through a series on what it means to BLESS our world in living color.

Let's review what BLESS stands for.

- **Media Option:** *review each letter of BLESS using [BLESS slides](#).*

But God doesn't call us to bless the world only by blessing people who are just like us. Listen to these words of pastor and spiritual director Helen Cepero from her book *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice*:

"If Jesus is to be followed and obeyed, this means blessing our friends and our family, the lost and the least, even our enemies, both near and far, ones whose names we know and those who are nameless individuals within a hated people group. To bless means to be a seeker after good and to restore to our spirits a sense of wonder, perhaps even awe."

Remember the words of the Lord to Abraham in Genesis 12? He says, "I will bless you. And all nations will be blessed through you." The word used here for "nations" can also be translated "ethnicities." We are blessed to be a blessing to all nations, to all ethnicities, to all peoples. God's dream is that we would not only bless people who are like us, but that we would also

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in living color

bles in living color, reaching out to those who are different from us—whether because of race, culture, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, or beyond. The first way we can do this, as we talked about last time, is to begin with prayer. The second way is by listening with care across all boundaries of difference.

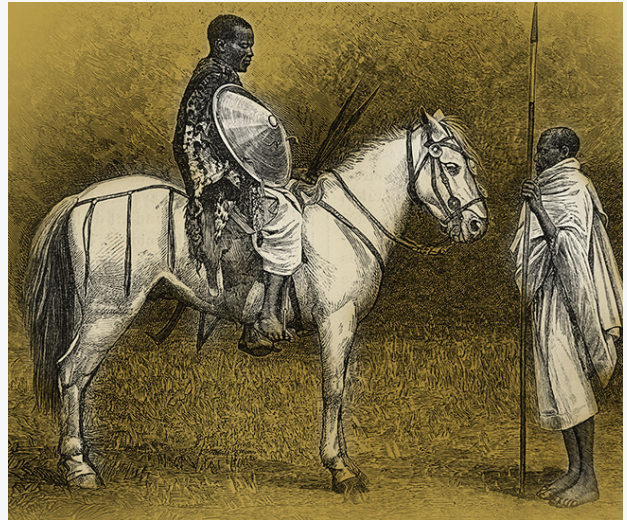
Today we are looking at a story in the book of Acts where the apostle Philip did just that. Let's read the passage together now.

- *Or have a congregant read before the sermon. As X read for us earlier in the service, today we are looking at...*

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 8:26-39

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.
In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."*



The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

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in living color

PRAYER

Let's pray together.

*Lord Jesus,
You were the descendant of
Tamar, a Canaanite
Rahab, an Amorite
Ruth, a Moabite.*

*You leaped over cultural barriers to bring living
water to*

*The Samaritan woman,
And you sent Philip to bless the Ethiopian
eunuch.*

*Help me to love my neighbors
Of every nation, tribe, and tongue.*

*Help me to see and hear and understand what it
means*

*To bless in living color
By listening with care.*

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit,
Amen.*

TRANSITION

Remember from our last sermon that we begin with prayer. Disciple-making is something we do in partnership with the Holy Spirit, who is already drawing people to God.

An angel of the Lord told Philip to go south to the desert road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza (vv. 26-27). Even though the command was an odd one, Philip's ears were open and attentive to God's call, and he was obedient to the voice of God. When he was there, he saw the chariot and heard the Spirit say, "Go to that chariot and stay near it" (v. 29). Again, he obeyed.

The Holy Spirit was already in conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Spirit called Philip to lead him to Jesus that day. As pastor and professor Darrell Johnson says, "The Holy Spirit is having a conversation with every person in this world. Evangelism is when we are invited into that conversation, either by the person or by the Holy Spirit." This invitation takes the pressure off us. We are joining God in God's work, not trying to convince someone by our own skill or persuasion.

POINT ONE: Listen

Philip ran over to the chariot. Did he jump in immediately with his own evangelistic agenda? No, he listened to what the Ethiopian eunuch was reading. He didn't interrupt him with a prepared speech. He listened and then responded, asking, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian, hungry for answers, invited Philip to come and sit with him.

Remember José and Destiny's conversation earlier? Twice, Destiny shifted the attention to herself. She had a **shift-response**. The opposite of that is a **support-response**.

A support-response encourages the speaker

to go deeper into what they are already talking about. This is exactly what Philip did. "Do you understand what you are reading?"

Here's how José and Destiny could have given support-responses.

José: I'm feeling really starved.

Destiny: When was the last time you ate?

José: My mom used to pack me quesadillas for lunch every day.

Destiny: Lucky you, that sounds yummy.

This week, when someone tells you something, I invite you to practice responding with support-

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in living color

responses. It's one way to listen with care.

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon no longer be listening to God either: he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too."

Like Philip, we can bless others by decentering ourselves, and listening more than we speak. Rather than waiting for the chance to jump into a conversation with our wisdom, let us bless others by elevating our conversation companion above ourselves and truly listening to what is going on in their hearts and minds. When we do this, people feel deeply loved.

- *Story Option: Share about a time when you (or someone else) demonstrated listening well, and what the impact was.*

POINT TWO: ...In Living Color...

When we say we want to listen in living color, what does that mean? It means resisting the temptation to be colorblind, and to notice who each person is as a unique being. What makes them the person they are? Noticing these things will help us to listen better and communicate in ways that will help them hear what we are saying.

Here are some questions to consider: What is their gender? What is their ethnic background? What is their nationality? What is their religious background? How old are they? How do they dress? What is their level of education? How wealthy are they? Do they have a disability? What are their hobbies? What is their family history? What is their vocation? What experiences have shaped them?

Presumably it was Philip who told Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, about his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Here are some details he observed or learned about the man. He was:

- Ethiopian, a black African, one of the first non-Jews to come to faith in Jesus. (What was known as Ethiopia then is now southern Egypt or northern Sudan.)

- Wealthy, high-ranking, in a chariot, with servants attending him.
- In charge of the treasury for the queen mother of Ethiopia (see Esau McCauley, *Reading While Black*, p. 108).
- Highly educated, reading the Hebrew Scriptures.
- A castrated man. It was common in the ancient Near East for men who had been castrated to serve in positions of state (see N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, p. 133).

That is a long list of differences! Nevertheless, Philip obeyed the Holy Spirit. He continued on his quest to bless by listening with care.



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POINT THREE: With Care

“So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’” (v. 30).

As it turns out, the eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53—a prophecy about Jesus as the suffering servant. This is what it says: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.”

Philip listens with care by beginning the conversation with a question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” And then he listens. The man responds: “How can I unless someone guides me?...Who is the prophet talking about?” We read that Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

In this story, we see a beautiful example of listening in living color, with care. Do you see what Philip does? He doesn’t start in with a prepared speech about Jesus. Rather, he starts with a question, he listens, and he meets the man’s need.

Jesus was known both for telling great stories and for asking great questions. The four Gospels record Jesus asking at least 330 questions in his conversations. As the Son of God, he did not ask



questions because he needed answers. He asked questions because he is love. Because he cared. Jesus majored on questions because questions have the power to build relationship.

When we ask thoughtful questions, we express humility, gentleness, and a willingness to grow. We demonstrate an understanding that story and context matter. We gain insight into the hopes, dreams, and wounds of others—as well as the ways Jesus longs to engage those needs. As we listen, we discover clues of where God is already at work, and we feel God’s nudge about how we can join him.

In this story, perhaps God was already at work in pointing the Ethiopian man specifically to Isaiah 53. Some scholars believe that he may have identified with this Scripture because he too had suffered as a servant. Perhaps he too needed to be silent about his suffering. Anglican pastor and theologian Esau McCauley points out in *Reading While Black*, “This eunuch as a ‘despised thing’ found hope in the shamed Messiah whose resurrection lifts those with imposed indignities to places of honor.” Good news indeed!

Philip listened to the Holy Spirit, and he listened to the man in the chariot; he then joined God in what God was already doing. He proclaimed the good news that Jesus died on the cross and was



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resurrected on the third day. He proclaimed that Jesus “took up our pain and bore our suffering... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds, we are healed.” He proclaimed that “we all, like sheep, have gone astray...and the Lord has laid on [Jesus] the iniquity of us all.” Isn’t that good news?! This is as true for each of us today as it was for the Ethiopian eunuch. No wonder he gave his life to Jesus and wanted to get baptized right away!

Had Philip studied Ethiopian culture before this encounter? Probably not. But he had the humble attitude of a cultural learner, and he observed well. Sometimes we may become fearful about the complexity of contextualization, so we hold back from conversations about Jesus with people of other cultures and backgrounds, for fear of getting things wrong.

But the call to go and make disciples of all peoples is for all of us, and Jesus promises that he will be with us through his Holy Spirit. Yes, we need to equip ourselves and grow in cultural agility, that is, to learn what our own cultural characteristics and preferences are, and to understand those of other people.

But starting where we are, we can all be like Philip, taking the humble posture of a cultural learner. We can always boldly follow the Spirit’s promptings and humbly step into situations where we are not yet experts, pointing people to Jesus. Remember, we are joining God in God’s mission.

Story Option: *Share about a time when you were (or someone else was) able to make someone feel blessed by your (or their) attention to another person’s unique cultural background.*

Conclusion

I love how this story of listening in living color ends—with baptism and joy!

Philip listened in living color, and the result was the miracle of new life in Christ.

Philip listened in living color, and the result was rejoicing! God wants each of us to experience this same joy.

The Spirit who spoke to Philip is the same Spirit who awakens us to the reality that making disciples means making every effort to reach every type of person—all ages, ethnicities, abilities, classes, cultures—every type of person at the farthest reaches and the furthest margins of the world.

Like Philip, with Jesus, let’s listen in living color with care.



Call to Action

Invitation for Not-Yet Believers

- Do you relate to the Ethiopian man in this passage in any way? Do you have questions about the Bible, Jesus, or the Christian faith? We are here for you, and we promise to listen with care. Share how people can engage their questions in your church community, and find someone who will listen to them with care.

Invitation for Believers

- Ask the Holy Spirit to open doors for conversations, especially with people who are very different from you, and have the courage to obey the voice of Jesus.
- Listen with care and point them to Jesus, the one who brings new life and who cares for them the most.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, our desire is to love you and love our neighbors. We want to bless others, to see the good that you see, to be a seeker after good, and to restore to our spirits a sense of wonder and awe toward the people in front of us. Empower us by your Holy Spirit to go and be a blessing, to listen in living color with care. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Benediction

As you go out today, may you receive the blessing of Jesus, who loves you and listens to you as God's beloved child. May the Holy Spirit empower you to be a blessing to those who are like you, and a blessing to those who are not like you, as you listen in living color.

Recommended Reading

Ajith Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary* (NIV, 1998), pp. 282-92.

N.T. Wright, *Acts Part I for Everyone, Acts 1-12*. (SPCK, 2008), pp. 130-36.



BIG IDEA:

God calls us to bless in living color by **EATING TOGETHER** across boundaries of difference.

Luke 19:1-10

Opening & Connection

Story Options

- Share about a memorable meal you have shared with others. Why was it memorable?
- Share a story from your own life about how you have bonded with someone over a meal.

Media Option: Search on Unsplash or Pixabay for images of the food you're describing.

We mark the important events of our lives by eating together.

Birthdays, weddings, funerals, family dinners, and time with friends.

- God has created us so that eating together is woven into who we are as relational beings.
- So when we want to share Jesus with another, what could be more natural than eating a meal together?
- Think about this: many of Jesus's most significant interactions with people involved some kind of food or drink. There is something about breaking bread together that creates meaningful and lasting connections.

As a reminder, we're going through a series on what it means to bless our world in living color. BLESS is an acronym for five simple missional practices that teach us what blessing looks like. Let's review what BLESS stands for.

Media Option: Review each letter of BLESS using [BLESS slides](#).

- We **begin with prayer**.
- We **listen with care**.
- Next, the one we're looking at today, which is perhaps the most fun: we **eat together**.
- In the coming weeks, we'll look at what it means to serve with love.
- And finally we share the story of how Jesus is transforming our lives and the world, culminating in an invitation to join that story.

As we have discussed in previous weeks, we not only want to bless others but we bless in living color across boundaries of difference. In this series we are primarily focusing on race and ethnicity, but ultimately our call is to bless across all boundaries of difference—including age, class, ability, language, education, gender, and more.

Our goal in blessing others is to join with the Holy Spirit in drawing people to Jesus. Today we're looking at a story in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus responds to the promptings of the Spirit and goes to eat with someone unexpected. Let's read the passage together now.

- *Or have a congregant read before the sermon. As Y read for us earlier in the service, today we are looking at...*

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SCRIPTURE READING: Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome

him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

PRAYER

Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus,

We so often get stuck in our own comfortable little tribes.

Help us to follow the movement of your Spirit, and to be open to spending time sharing a meal with people who are different from us.

Lead us to be a blessing to those whose hearts you have prepared.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.



POINT ONE:

Eat Together—With Anyone Seeking Jesus

The Holy Spirit is always at work, drawing people to Jesus across boundaries of difference. Do you remember how this was the case with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8?

The same thing was happening in the heart of Zacchaeus, who was a tax collector. Although Zacchaeus was Jewish like Jesus and the disciples, he was also radically different in some notable ways.

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in living color

- Everybody in town would have known Zacchaeus, and almost everybody in town would have disliked him. He was a chief tax collector. And tax collectors were viewed as traitors. They were the ones who were taking money from the local Israelites and giving it to the occupying Roman governors.
- He was very, very wealthy. It is almost redundant to say that a tax collector was wealthy, but Luke includes this detail to set up the magnitude of the transformation to come.
- He had multiple streams of income—from the Romans, from the tax collectors under him, and from whatever extras he squeezed out of people or skimmed off the top from Rome.
- He was probably the very last person you would expect to have earnest conversations with the Holy Spirit about the state of his soul.

Think about your community. What types of people would you least expect to seek Jesus?



Imagine this scene:

- A huge crowd has gathered to see Jesus, the exciting teacher who's just come to town.
- Then comes Zacchaeus, easily recognizable by his fancy clothes—but nobody makes room for him.
- Nevertheless, Zacchaeus really wants to see Jesus, so what does he do? He climbs a tree.

When was the last time you climbed a tree? Honestly, who does this? Grown men don't usually climb trees. Scholars tell us that it was undignified for a man to even run then. It's reasonable to assume that, by climbing a tree, Zacchaeus's "otherness" in this community was emphasized even more.

Nevertheless, when Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

Another translation says, "Hurry up and come down."

To be the guest of someone, to break bread with them, was central to life and social relationships in the ancient Near East. Eating with someone was a statement that you wanted to be associated with them, that your lives were woven together. The crowds knew this and they grew nervous. How could Jesus be so great if he was eating with this kind of riffraff?

Story Options

- *Share about an occasion in which you experienced someone unexpectedly revealing themselves as a seeker after Jesus.*
- *Share a story from your own life about a meal you shared with an unexpected seeker.*

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Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus saw Zacchaeus's heart. He knew that Zacchaeus was ready to repent and orient his life toward the Father.

What Jesus shows us is that if anyone is seeking after God, no matter who they are, we should go and eat with them. Isn't it strange that we are reluctant to share a meal with people who are not in our Christian circles? If they haven't experienced new life in Christ, why do we expect people to be godly?

We often think of hospitality as a tame and pleasant practice, but Christian hospitality has always had a subversive, countercultural dimension. (See Christine D. Pohl, *Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, p. 61.)

Let us be like Jesus, and look for signs of people being open and hungry to know more of God. Let us go and eat with people outside of our usual friendship circle, perhaps someone who follows a different religion, someone wealthy, or poor, someone with a different skin color, or even a tax collector.

POINT TWO: Eat Together—and Practice Hospitality

Throughout Christian history, the practice of hospitality has been a key spiritual discipline.

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus tells us that when we offer food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, when we welcome the stranger, we welcome Christ. This has been a crucial text in the history and practice of Christian hospitality.

Today we often view hospitality as a gift we only offer family and friends, almost akin to entertainment. But sharing meals across cultural barriers, and especially reaching out with Christ's love to people who are poor and the marginalized, has always been an essential part of Christian hospitality.

When we notice the how much of a role eating together plays throughout Scripture and the history of the church, its significance is amplified beyond merely the giving and receiving of food. A shared meal is the activity most closely tied to the reality of God's kingdom, just as it is the most basic expression of hospitality.

Eating together, ritualized in the Lord's Supper, continually reenacts the center of the gospel. As we remember the cost of our own welcome, Christ's broken body and shed blood, we also celebrate the reconciliation and relationship available to us because of his sacrifice and through his hospitality. (See Christine Pohl, *Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, p. 31.)

Hospitality is not the same as entertainment, and it does not require lavish guest rooms or elaborate meals. We can demonstrate Christ's welcome and hospitality through a simple meal and a bed.

Story Option: Share about a time when you experienced or were able to share Christ's love eating together over a simple meal.

Illustration Option: Share about Alpha, one of the most fruitful evangelism ministries of this generation—largely due to their emphasis on eating together.

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In Western culture, we honor our guests by inviting them into our home. In most Eastern cultures, having guests in one's home is an honor for the hosts.

Reverse hospitality is a concept that gives others the opportunity to show you hospitality in order to bring them honor. To engage the world as multiethnic evangelists in obedience to the Great Commission, we do well to understand and practice different expressions of hospitality, as we invite others to share our lives, and as we accept the hospitality of others.

Jesus was a host, feeding the five thousand, offering living water. And he received hospitality from others, inviting himself over to people's homes for meals.

When Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus's house, he honored Zacchaeus profoundly, saying, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today!" (Luke 19:5).



In this passage, Jesus is practicing reverse hospitality. He demonstrates honor, or a desire for a meaningful relationship.

To minister across ethnicity and culture, we embrace a posture of mutuality. We not only show hospitality; we also open ourselves up to receive hospitality. Both are expressions of honor and love, and we see Jesus model both.

POINT THREE: **Eat Together... In Living Color**

Reminder:

- Abraham: All nations, all peoples will be blessed through you (Genesis 12).
- "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28).

We get to join God in blessing across boundaries of difference—age, class, ability, race, ethnicity, and more. All of these differences have the potential to divide, to be "false barriers."

But they are not. We are the ones who create false barriers. We set up walls, establishing who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong. Who deserves something and who does not.

In the story of Zacchaeus, the crowd objected to Jesus going to eat with a sinner. "All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner'" (Luke 19:7).

It is true that Zacchaeus was a sinner. But what the crowd misses is that they are sinners too. They, too, are lost.

"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus broke down the dividing wall between different groups of people through the cross. He desires for all people to know God's love and experience eternal life through him.

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in living color



Who are the tax collectors in our society today? Who are the tax collectors in your own heart and life? Can you imagine eating with them? Jesus invites us to leap over the cultural barriers and sit down for a meal with people we might have reason to avoid—even to hate.

Story option: *Share a story about someone you know who went out of their way to eat with someone they did not get along with or who was from a completely different cultural group.*

When we eat with others, either inviting them in or practicing reverse hospitality, here are a few practical tips:

- **Be a learner.** We love people by being cultural learners and entering their world, learning what they eat and how. If possible, check with your host or a trusted friend from that culture in advance to learn practices in their culture (e.g., valuing punctuality or having a flexible sense of time, what to bring, always leaving a little on your plate, placing your napkin on your lap, sitting in a certain place, removing shoes, whether to bring alcohol, etc.).
- **Be willing to receive.** If you are invited to someone's home, make every effort to go. Their invitation honors you, and by accepting it, you honor them. When practicing reverse hospitality, accept items offered by your host with gratitude,

especially if they are offered for a second time—food, beverages, slippers, etc. (In some cultures, guests are expected to initially refuse offers of more food or drink, before accepting on the second or third offer. Ask a trusted friend from that culture if you are not sure.)

- **Offer to help.** Offer to help to serve or clean, but do express gratitude if your host insists on serving. Similarly, do not make assumptions about whether your guests will help serve or clean.

Remember: hospitality is about honor. Look for opportunities to honor friends by both giving and receiving hospitality from them.

Set your own way of eating and showing hospitality to the side. Don't assume your practice is "normal." Remember: different is not wrong. It's just different.

Story Option: *Use this or another example of experiencing cultural differences around eating together, as well as how these experiences forge relational connections.*

Covenant pastor Kat Hampson describes eating together with the two sides of her extended family. This has meant experiencing the difference between a formal/cold climate culture and an informal/hot climate cultures. (See *Foreign to Familiar*, by Sarah Lanier, for a description of



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the difference between hot and cold climate cultures.)

With her husband's British extended family, eating together means:

- Full place settings, seating arrangements, formal china, tablecloths, cloth napkins, and glassware
- Guests eat appetizers, drink an apéritif and chat in the sitting room while waiting for dinner to be served. The host or hostess invites guests into the dining room when the food is ready.
- Several distinct meal courses

- During the meal, guests talk to those seated around you. It is not polite to be loud.

For Kat, eating together with her own extended Filipino family means:

- Paper plates, plastic utensils, plastic cups
- Aunties all cooking together in the kitchen, uncles shooting the breeze with a beer, food served buffet style, eating wherever you find space.
- No "courses," but lots of food.
- Everyone talking (or singing karaoke) at loud volumes at all times.

Conclusion

What happened as a result of Jesus's decision to bless in living color?

- The result was salvation!
- Zacchaeus was grateful, astonished, and completely transformed.
- Jesus proclaimed, "Today salvation has come to this house!" (Luke 19:9). This was beautifully holistic salvation, including both personal and communal aspects.
 - On one hand, there was personal transformation. Zacchaeus repented and was utterly transformed by God's touch.
 - On the other hand, there was also community transformation. Zacchaeus demonstrated his repentance by generously returning what he had stolen in order to right his past wrongs in the community.
- Holistic salvation—this is the power of blessing in living color!

Final thoughts / summary

- Eating together is a wonderful way to bless in living color.
- We get to be Jesus's hands and feet as we listen to the Spirit and eat together with those who are seeking God.
- Let us recover the biblical and Christian tradition of hospitality, including to the poor and marginalized.
- Like Jesus, let us practice reverse hospitality, and allow others to be honored by receiving what is offered to us.
- Let's become cultural learners, and discover how to bless and love people well as we seek to eat together in living color.



Call to Action

Reflect and pray about your approach to hospitality. Do you see it as entertaining family and friends you are comfortable with? Where is God asking you to reframe your ideas? Continue to pray for the people on your BLESS list.

Invitation for Not-Yet Believers

- Eat a meal with someone who is different from you.
- Accept offers of hospitality from others.
- Be a cultural learner.
- Invite someone over for a meal to discuss what it means to follow Jesus.

Invitation for Believers

- All of the above
- Grow in listening to the Holy Spirit, noticing where God is at work among your friends, neighbors, and coworkers.
- Stretch your capacity for hospitality.
- Consider ways our church community could eat together in living color, such as Alpha, holiday meals, or beyond.

Benediction

As you go out today, may you receive the blessing of hospitality that Jesus offers, and in turn offer it to others. May your circles expand, so you can eat together in living color with friends, old and new, who are seeking after God.

Recommended Reading

Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*

Verlon Foster, *Dinner Church: Building Bridges by Breaking Bread*

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BIG IDEA:

God calls us not only to bless but to bless in living color by **SERVING WITH LOVE** across boundaries of difference.

John 13:1-17; Matthew 20:25-28

Opening & Connection

How much do you tip your server in a restaurant? 15%? 18% 22%? Do you evaluate how well they served you that day? Were they worth the extra tip?

On one level, we all like to be served—not just in restaurants, but also in stores, on customer service calls, on airplanes. Even in church, we want good customer service! In fact, the US is known around the world for demanding good customer service. We like to say, “The customer is always right.”

It may be time to ask ourselves how much of a consumer mindset we have adopted. Do I always expect to be served everywhere I go?

Today we will look to Jesus, the Prince of peace, the King of kings, for his example. Jesus the King shows us that the way up is down. We are blessed when we bless others in the name of Jesus, as we humble ourselves and serve with love.

- *Alternatively, share a different opening that helps people to connect with the idea of serving with love.*



As a reminder, we are going through a series on what it means to BLESS our world in living color. Let's review what BLESS stands for.

Media Option: Review each letter of BLESS using [BLESS slides](#).

- We **begin with prayer**.
- We **listen with care**.
- We **eat together**.
- Today we are focusing on **servicing with love**.
- And finally, we'll look at what it means to **share the story** of how Jesus is transforming our lives and the world.

As we have discussed in previous weeks, we want to not only bless others but to bless in living color, to bless across boundaries of difference. In this series, we are primarily focusing on race and ethnicity, but ultimately, our call is to bless across all boundaries of difference—including age, race, class, ability, language, education, gender, and more.

Our goal in blessing others is to join the Holy Spirit in drawing people to Jesus. Today we are looking at a story in the Gospel of John where Jesus demonstrates to his disciples what it means to bless others by serving in love. Let's read the passage together now.

- *Or ask a congregant to read before the sermon. As Z read for us earlier in the service, today we are looking at...*

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SCRIPTURE READING: John 13:1-17

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already decided that Judas son of Simon Iscariot would betray Jesus. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord,

not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had reclined again, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

PRAYER

Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus,

*As we consider what it means to bless others
by serving with love, in living color,
give us the mindset of Christ.*

*Who became a human,
And humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross
so that we could know eternal life.*

*Please give us this heart of service as we reflect
on your Word.*

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit, amen.*



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POINT ONE: We Are Called to Serve...



<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/brown-jesus-washing-peters-feet-n01394>

What Jesus is about to do is the act of supreme love. His actions were a symbol of what he was going to do at the cross. “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (v. 1, NIV).

One of the most extraordinary things about this passage is that Judas is still present in the group. If you knew someone was going to betray you, wouldn't you wait until they had left the room before committing a great act of love? Jesus doesn't just serve the ones who love him. He lovingly serves even the one who stabs him in the back.

Story Option: *Share about a time when you experienced someone serving another person, even when it was undeserved.*

What a contrast we observe between Jesus and Judas. We see the next contrast in the following verses. “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up

from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist” (vv. 3-4).

This doesn't make sense, does it? Jesus had all power. When most people have ultimate power, they wield it, exert it, dominate. They make other people serve them.

But Jesus's kingdom looks different from the kingdom of the world. It's upside down. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28, NIV).

In this scene, the disciples would probably have been reclining in a circle, leaning on their left elbows, their feet fanned out behind them. They wore sandals, and their feet would have been filthy from the heat and the first-century dirt roads—dirt that included waste from the animals that were a primary source of transportation.

Usually a servant would have done this lowliest of menial tasks. Imagine the shock on the disciples' faces when Jesus started washing their feet. Jesus has all power, yet he chooses to lovingly, humbly serve.

God's power is expressed through loving, humble, and joyful service. That's what it looks like. That's how God's kingdom works.

In verse 6, Jesus comes to Simon Peter. Peter's reaction probably reflected what others were thinking. “No...you shall never wash my feet” (v. 8). At first Peter doesn't get it, but then he understands what Jesus is asking. “Then, Lord,... not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!” (v. 9).

Jesus has already washed us in calling us to belong to him (John 15:3). What we need day by day is the regular washing of the parts of ourselves that get dusty and dirty.

Let Jesus wash your feet today and receive his cleansing in a fresh way.

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Option: Pause for a moment of prayer to allow Jesus to serve us. Consider inviting people to pray a breath prayer. As you breathe in, say, “I bring you my dusty self.” As you breathe out, say, “Thank you for making me clean.”

It’s amazing, isn’t it, when you see someone actually living like this? For example, the life of Mother Teresa of Calcutta was an example of what it means to serve across boundaries of difference with love.

In 1948, Mother Teresa responded to the call within the call to minister to the most disadvantaged people in Calcutta. One biographer describes the beginning of her ministry like this:

“On 21 December she...visited families, washed the sores of some children, cared for an old man lying sick on the road and nursed a woman dying of hunger and TB. She started each day in communion with Jesus in the Eucharist and then went out, rosary in her hand, to find and serve him in ‘the unwanted, the unloved, the uncared for.’”

Mother Teresa expressed the power of God in the ways she blessed others in living color, serving with love. What would that look like for us?

Story Option: Share about someone you know who serves with love. It may be a tireless volunteer in your church or someone in your local community.

“When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place” (v. 12). Jesus had their full attention. Then he says, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also should...” (v. 14). How does he complete that sentence? Does he tell them to wash his feet? No. He says, “You also should wash one another’s feet.”

Jesus is giving his followers an example or a pattern to copy. He was saying, “This is how I want you to live this life. Serve each other. This is how you’re to love me now.

- And this is how I want you to shout out to the world who I am and what I’ve done.
- Do you want to be blessed? Serve each other with love.”

POINT TWO: ...with Love

Serve **with love**. Isn’t it sad that our evangelical movement is generally not known for this sort of loving, humble, and joyful service?

Sometimes we love to display our righteous indignation at the moral depravity of the world, lording our righteousness over others around us. Or we marginalize groups of people and treat them as less-than, because they are not like us.

What if we changed that pattern? What if we made it so that when people who don’t yet know Jesus think about Christians, they think about their friend whose home and whose church are always a safe place where they can belong?

Do you remember last time, we talked about **reverse hospitality**? Sometimes we can bless others by receiving their hospitality as we eat together, and that concept applies to serving as well.

In John 4, Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. When he offers her living water, what does he say to her? He asks her for a drink. He dignifies her by allowing her to serve him.

Listen to this quote from the book *A Credible Witness*: “[Jesus’s] conversation with the Samaritan woman begins with Jesus’s accepting and acknowledging his real need for something

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that the woman has. He didn't make this up to start an evangelistic conversation with her... He was really thirsty, and he really needed a drink of water...**If we are going to regain our evangelistic credibility, we must recognize our need for people who are different from us and invite them into our lives.** We must be willing to say to them, I need you. Instead of just evangelizing from a place of power, we would begin by affirming that other people have something valuable to offer us" (p. 60, 72).

Love is patient, love is kind...**it is not self-seeking.** Serving with love is not showing off about how humble and servant-hearted we are, with photos on our websites of our congregants in matching T-shirts painting a building for poor brown people! When we serve with love, we do not make it about ourselves.

When we do service projects in the community or go on overseas short-term mission trips,

we need to take the time to build relationships first. We need to learn what assets already exist in that community—that may or may not be financial. We need to pray, to listen, to eat with people so that we can learn what kind of service really would be a received as a blessing. (Books such as *Toxic Charity*, *When Helping Hurts*, *Becoming Whole*, and *Walking with the Poor* offer helpful guidelines for this practice.)

Story Option

- Share a story about a well-intended service project that actually did not bless the community they were trying to serve.
- Or share an example of a healthy and collaborative service project that blessed a community.

Note: It is better to serve and learn as we go than to do nothing because we're afraid of doing the wrong this. Jesus will help us.

POINT THREE: ...In Living Color...

We are called to bless others by serving with love. And we want to do that in living color. What do we mean by blessing "in living color"?

- It means blessing across boundaries of difference, boundaries that often serve to divide us rather than bring us together.
- These boundaries can include ethnicity, class, gender, age, ability, and more. Much could be said about each of these, but today let's focus on what it looks like to bless the world across boundaries of ethnicity and race.

Building relationships with people of other cultures takes patience and time, but it's worth it. Here are a few examples of what this could look like.

First, let's **learn**. In order to serve people of another race or ethnicity with love, we need to have the courage to grow in our awareness of the many dimensions in which our society is still "racialized" or blighted by racial disparity. We now have abundant evidence of ongoing unequal race-based outcomes and experiences in wealth creation, employment, healthcare, criminal justice, and so much more. This evidence—this clear picture of our reality—is easily accessible to anyone who is willing to discover it.

It takes effort to grow in awareness, and it is usually uncomfortable to do so. But committing to learn is an important way we can serve. As we become increasingly aware of the status quo in our broken world, the Spirit will prompt us to serve by changing it.

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Second, let's **collaborate**. Pastor Troy Nichols leads a multiethnic congregation called Common Ground Covenant Church in Sacramento, California. They rent out their building to Lu Mien Covenant Church, who have a predominantly Lu Mien congregation. Here is his story of learning to cross boundaries of difference to serve the community together.

"Lu Mien Covenant started with a family garden that eventually grew to take up the entire back lot of the campus, but at some point the garden ceased to exist. When I came to the church, we received some grant money and earmarked it to start a garden to help provide additional healthy food to the community. We started the garden. Over the years it grew a little and some people would get involved, but the garden never flourished.

"Eventually, it occurred to me that I had never asked for Lu Mien Cov's permission, partnership, or thoughts on starting a garden. I approached them and surrendered the entire garden to them. The garden is now flourishing and provides a source of nourishment and a tangible witness to the community of Jesus's love. And Common Ground serves alongside them as needed."



Third, let's **explore**. Take the time to get out of your normal pattern of life and discover ethnic-minority stores and restaurants in your neighborhood that you have not visited yet. Serve them by giving them your business. Allow them to serve you. Discover new flavors. Tip them well! Make some new friends.

Story Option: *Share about a time when you blessed someone else or when someone else blessed you "in living color."*

Conclusion

"Now that you know these things, you will be blessed, if you do them" (John 13:17). The verse includes a condition. We're blessed, if we follow his example. It will transform us. And those around us will be blessed. We can testify to the truth of Paul's words when he quotes Jesus in Acts 20:35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Jesus calls us to bless others as we serve, in living color, with love. To serve as he has loved us. In John 14-16, directly following this passage, Jesus talks about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

He is not asking us to serve in our own strength but rather through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God, where are you calling me to relinquish power and humbly serve? We know you will enable and empower us to obey that call.

Consider sharing where the Lord is asking you to serve, in living color, with love.

Each of us is in our own season of life. Let us ask the Lord, what does this mean for me?

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Call to Action

Who is God calling you to serve in living color?

Invitation for Believers

- Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where the Lord is inviting you to serve with love. Take the time to build relationships and learn before you jump in.

Invitation for Not-Yet Believers

- If you are not yet a believer, receive the invitation to consider how you can bless others by serving with love across boundaries of difference.



Closing Prayer

Consider this poem by Teresa of Ávila, a Spanish Christ-follower who lived in the 16th century.

Christ Has No Body

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks
to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses
all the world.*

*Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

- **Media Option:** <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/christ-has-no-body>. Video version of the same prayer. Subscription required.
- Alternatively, close with your own prayer.

Benediction

As you go out today, may you receive the blessing of hospitality that Jesus offers, and in turn offer it to others. May your circles expand, so you can eat together in living color with friends, old and new, who are seeking after God.

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BIG IDEA:

God calls us to bless in living color by **SHARING THE STORY** of Jesus across across boundaries of difference.

Acts 17:16-34; Acts 1:8

Opening & Connection



Once upon a time, in a small village in Somalia, people raised lions as their guardians. One day a lion with red eyes was born named Bahdoon. Bahdoon was banished from the pride for his strange eyes, and he grew up alone, admiring the brave lions of his pride from afar. One day, the village was attacked by a dragon. Bahdoon watched his pride lose the battle, but he was afraid to join in. Finally, after multiple nights of the dragon's attacks, he could not stand to see the suffering anymore, so he joined the fight. Bahdoon was the only lion that could defeat the dragon, and once he did, his pride accepted him again, realizing they never should have treated him differently.

Story Options

- Choose instead, one of these children's stories from around the world.
- Alternatively, tell a story from your own cultural tradition.

"Once upon a time..." All over the world, we tell stories to our children, passing them down from generation to generation. The story of Bahdoon is told to help Somali children accept people for who they are, even if they are different in some way.

What is your favorite childhood story? Perhaps it is Cinderella, the story of a poor, neglected girl with a servant heart who is unexpectedly chosen to become a princess? Is it the story of Robin Hood and his merry men, who steal from the rich to give to the poor?

Of course, the greatest story of all, the true story and the one we all find ourselves in, is the story of God's salvation of the world through Jesus, the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.

This is the story we want to invite others into, and today we are talking about how we can bless others through sharing the story of Jesus with those around us.

- Alternatively, share a different opening that helps people to connect with the idea of sharing the story.

B L E S S

in living color

As a reminder, we are going through a series on what it means to BLESS our world in living color. Let's review what BLESS stands for.

Media Option: Review each letter of BLESS using [BLESS slides](#).

- We **begin with prayer**.
- We **listen with care**.
- We **eat together**.
- We **serve with love**.
- And finally, we'll be looking at what it means to **share the story** of how Jesus is transforming our lives and the world.

As we have discussed in previous weeks, we not only want to bless others but we bless in living color, to bless across boundaries of difference.

Our goal in blessing others is to join with the Holy Spirit in drawing people to Jesus. Today we are looking at a story in Acts where the apostle Paul tells the story of Jesus to a crowd of Greek philosophers. Let's read the passage together now.

- Or ask a congregant to read before the sermon. As Z read for us earlier in the service, today we are looking at...

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 17:16-34

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons and also in the marketplace[a] every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, "What does this pretentious babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them

an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God[c] and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said,

'For we, too, are his offspring.'

"Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent,

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because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed, but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.

PRAYER

Let’s pray together.

*Lord Jesus,
Thank you for the example of your servant Paul,
Who paid such careful attention to communicate
effectively with
The various groups of people he came in contact
with.
Help us learn what it means to bless in living
color by sharing your story.
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit, amen.*

TRANSITION

Remember from our previous sermons that our desire is to make disciples of Jesus through praying for people and through taking concrete steps to bless them.

Paul is an example of a master evangelist who has taken the posture of a cultural learner, so he could bless the most people possible with the gospel. He writes to the church in Corinth, “I have become all things to all people so that

by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:19-34).

Former Covenant church planting leader Dave Olson, says, “We may not all have the gift of an evangelist, but we all need to do the work of evangelism.”

Let us learn today how to do this effectively from the way Paul shared God’s story with the people of Athens.

POINT ONE: Share the Story

As we have seen, blessing others is a comprehensive mission that involves prayer, relational connection, and service. One final step is necessary to take to make our mission whole. When children move beyond gesturing and start to “use their words,” we recognize that as a sign of their growing maturity. **Likewise, a sign of our own maturity in Christ is using our words and blessing others by sharing his story.**

The apostle Paul was distressed to see that the city of Athens was full of idols. Although he hadn’t originally planned to be there, he couldn’t help but start to share the story of Jesus.

He begins in the synagogue. We know from other passages that when he is with Jews, he speaks Aramaic and appeals to the Jews based on the history of Israel and the prophetic texts that point to Jesus.

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Then he starts reasoning in the marketplace about the good news of Jesus and the resurrection with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. In the city of Socrates, Paul evangelized with the method of Socrates, with proclamation and also with discussion.

He causes enough of a stir that his hearers drag him to the Areopagus, the hill upon which sat the main administrative body and the chief court of Athens. There, he shares the story again.

How often do you share about Jesus with those who do not yet know the good news? If this is not something you often do, you can start by learning to articulate the hope we have. What is your story? How has Jesus changed your life? What is the hope you have?

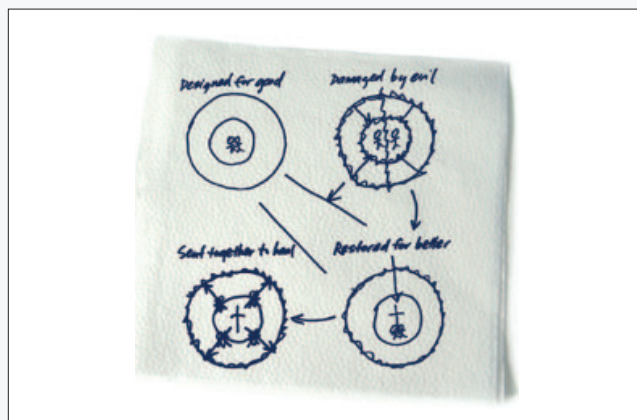
As we think about how to craft our story, it's important to note the holistic nature of the gospel. The early church prayed, they performed miracles, they ate, and they looked after the poor. It's essential that we proclaim God's kingdom in the power of the Spirit by welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, and seeking justice for all those who are oppressed [you may want to include specific examples from your community here, e.g., with those who are experiencing homelessness, or refugees].

Key global missional leaders have defined the holistic or integral nature of the mission of God this way:

"Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world, we betray the Word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the Word of God, we have nothing to bring to the world." —Lausanne Movement, Cape Town Commitment, 2011

Story Option

- Share about a time when you or someone else was able to share the love of Jesus in a holistic way.



In the late 20th century, it was very popular to share the gospel using diagrams and napkins. Although this practice is not as common now, one napkin diagram that is worth knowing about is called the “Big Story.” *Christianity Today* interviewed evangelist James Choung and asked him to summarize the “Big Story” his four-circles diagram is designed to tell:

“I call the diagram the [Big Story](#) because it sums up the plot points of the larger story in which we live and breathe. The most essential parts are the phrases: designed for good, damaged by evil, restored for better, and sent together to heal. They follow the biblical narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and mission.” —“[From Four Laws to Four Circles](#),” *Christianity Today*, interviewed by Andy Crouch, June 27, 2008

Media Option: Show one of the videos that demonstrates how to talk about the Big Story. <https://www.jameschoung.net/true-story-resources/> - This includes Big Story videos in various languages, including Spanish, Korean, and Swedish.

Maybe using a napkin just wouldn't work for you. For others, it may be right up your street. The main thing is discovering ways you can share the story of Jesus that feel authentic to you and to the person you are talking with.

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POINT TWO: ...In Living Color...

Throughout this series, we have talked about blessing “in living color.” What do we mean by that?

It means blessing across boundaries of difference, boundaries that often serve to divide us rather than bring us together.

In Acts 17:22, Paul starts to address the people in the meeting of the Areopagus. The way he shares the story is a masterclass in blessing “in living color”!

First, we see that although he was “greatly distressed” by the idol worship he saw, he addressed these idol-worshippers with respect and honor. He acknowledges their commitment to worship, without denigrating it.

Paul noticed the inscription “To an unknown God.” Paul spoke to them in language they understood and introduced them to the God of heaven and earth.

“Paul agreed with what he could agree in those faiths and used those elements as stepping-stones to presenting the gospel” (Ajith Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary*, 479).

“Though his substance was entirely biblical, [Paul] did not quote from the Scriptures as he did when he spoke to Jews and God-fearers. In fact, he quoted from the writings of their own philosophers (v. 28). We call such adapting contextualization” (Fernando, 480).

Paul preached to these Greek philosophers of the death and resurrection of Jesus in such a culturally effective way that Dionysius, a member of the leading council, became a follower of Jesus, as well as a woman named Damaris and a number of others.

If we want to reach those who are different from us, it will take time and energy to get proximate and enter their world, so that we can speak of Jesus in a way they will hear as good news. Are we ready to do that?

Some of us may be afraid that if we immerse ourselves in the ways of unbelievers, it will dilute our faith. But if we continue to soak in the Scriptures each day, we know that our contextualization will remain faithful to Jesus.

BREAKING EVERY BARRIER

Our call is to commit to an ongoing way of life that both centers our identity in Christ and intentionally reaches across diverse boundaries to build shalom (God’s very best) in God’s name. We serve a God who delights in bringing people together, building bridges where none exist, and making broken things whole.

Building bridges across ethnic boundaries of difference is just the beginning. May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to the bridges he wants us to build wherever we find ourselves—in race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, ability, age, gender, class, and beyond.

Friends, this not some fantasy. With our own eyes, we will see history culminate in a colorful celebration beyond anything we ever dreamed or imagined. As we stay the course in building bridges, we can partner with Jesus to usher in the kingdom of God and experience a foretaste of our destiny in Christ.

Story Option: Share about a time when you or someone you know blessed someone else by sharing in living color, making cultural shifts to communicate in a way that was contextualized.



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POINT THREE: ...In the Power of the Holy Spirit

As we commit to blessing others by sharing the story of Jesus, we can do so with the confidence that God is with us.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

As God sent Jesus, he now sends us to make disciples, not in our own power, but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus commissions his disciples to go and make disciples in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to ends of the earth. When you look at these names on a map, they appear like expanding concentric circles, rippling outward.

It’s like [your town/city], [your state], [your country], ends of the earth.

Where is God calling me to bless others by sharing the story of Jesus?

Today, 29% of the world’s population (2.1 billion people) have little or no access to the gospel. Two terms define this population: Unreached People Groups (UPGs)—less than 2% are evangelical Christians <https://joshuaproject.net/>; and Least Evangelized Peoples (LEPs)—with little or no gospel access per a multiple-factor list. <https://worldchristiandatabase.org/>

“The church’s mission goes on. The mission of God continues to the ends of the earth and to the end of the world. The day will come when the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ and God will dwell with his redeemed humanity in the new creation. Until that day, the church’s participation in God’s mission continues, in joyful urgency, and with fresh and exciting opportunities in every generation including our own.” — Lausanne Movement

Here in the US, the world has come to us.

Whether or not we are called to relocate for the sake of the gospel, we are called to be God’s witnesses, to bless others in living color by sharing the story of the good news of Jesus Christ with those around us, including those who are very different from us.

“And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). We have the confidence that the same Holy Spirit who empowered the disciples at Pentecost is present here today and will enable each of us to be an effective witness to Jesus’s saving love.

Story Option: Share about a time when you or someone you know was aware of a sense of leading and empowerment by the Holy Spirit as they shared the story of Jesus.



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Conclusion

We are called not only to bless, but to bless in living color.

We are called to share the story of Jesus with wisdom and cultural agility like the apostle Paul in Acts 17, contextualizing our message for our hearers.

We serve a God who delights in building bridges where there are none and making broken things whole.

We can be confident in the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.



Call to Action

Invitation for Believers

- Remember to pray for those whom you want to meet Christ.
- Write down your own story. How did you come to faith in Jesus?
- Ask the Holy Spirit for opportunities during your day to share the story of Jesus, including with those who are different from you.
- Commit to learning more about a culture different from your own.

Invitation for Not-Yet Believers

- If you are not yet a believer, the invitation for you is to reflect on your own journey of faith. How do you see yourself in relation to Jesus?
- Commit to learning more about a culture different from your own, to grow in your cultural agility.
- Consider how you might bless those around you who are not like you in whatever way you feel most comfortable.



Optional Response: *As appropriate in your context, ask congregants to discuss these questions with the person next to them, and then ask a couple of people to share.*

- *What has been your biggest takeaway from our sermon series, BLESS: In Living Color?*
- *How do you sense God may be calling you to incorporate this into your way of life?*



Closing Prayer

Lord, as you sent Abram to be a blessing to the nations, now you send us, in the name of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thank you that we can join in your mission, as Mission Friends, to bring all things in heaven and earth into unity under Christ, reconciling them through the blood of your cross.

May your kingdom come, may your will be done, on earth, as in heaven. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Benediction

As you go out today, may you know that you are blessed by God. And may the Holy Spirit empower you be a blessing to those around you by sharing, in living color, the story of Jesus's love for the whole world. Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

Recommended Reading

James Choung, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In*

Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: A Model for Effective Personal Relationships*

Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together*

Latasha Morrison, *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Ethnic Diversity*

Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World*