



A 4-week devotional companion

to the *Share* sermon series

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Introduction

I am finding more and more everyday that Christians fear the “e-word.” You know the e-word: Evangelism.

Too often when we think of evangelism, we concur up images of standing on the street corners handing out tracts, street preaching, or aggressively converting people to our way of being Christian. Personal space and experiences are not typically respected. Unfortunately, these kinds of things do not always represent the saving love of Jesus Christ.

Yet, at the same time our churches have been in a state of decline since the mid-1990’s. We look out at empty pews and wonder, “How will we fill these pews?” We know we should invite people to church. We know we should be engaging our community. We know we should be doing more. But how?

Before we start with how, let’s think about why.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is our why. This is why we do church and share our faith with others: to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are an abundant people. We are abundant in gifts such as money, talent, and time. But we are also abundant in the life-changing love and grace offered to us by Christ. Why would we keep this to ourselves?

Share is designed to help us explore and discover why and how we share Jesus with others. My hope is that you will find some of the how’s to be much simpler than what the “e-word” concurs up.

This devotional is designed to be a companion to a four-week *Share* sermon series. Each week has three components. First, there is the Share of the Week challenge. This is the invitation to share your faith in simple, concrete ways during the week. Suggestions are offered, but you are not limited to them.

This is followed by five devotional readings, with questions to ponder. The final component is a reflection page. This is where you can record or journal how you shared your faith and what those experiences were like for you.

The hope and prayer of *Share* is that each person will grow in their confidence to share Jesus with others, that we may form new spiritual habits as missional people. In doing so, we grow as disciples of Jesus Christ, as we make disciples of Jesus Christ.

And perhaps the world will be transformed.

But first

As we begin this four week journey, think of five people that you would like to see participate in worship. List them in the spaces provided.

During the next four weeks, pray for these five people daily. At the end of *Share* you will be asked to prayerfully consider inviting one or all of these five people to worship.

And while you are praying, remember to pray for your church.



The Share Sermon Series

Week 1: Share Food. Scriptures: Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

Week 2: Share Good News. Scriptures: Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15

Week 3: Share Mercy. Scriptures: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

Week 4: Share You. Scriptures: Romans 12:1-8; John 16:13-20

Audio files of the sermons will be available online at www.monumentalumc.org

Week 1: Share Food

Growing up in a small, rural, United Methodist Church, it was not uncommon for someone to bring to church the abundance of a current harvest. Tomatoes, cucumbers, and corn were passed around among church members just as the offering plates moved up and down the aisles.

The abundance of the harvest was shared.

The early church was no different. They shared from their abundance with one another. Food has always been a significant part of the Christian faith. When we share food with one another something powerful and deeply spiritual happens.

Maybe this is why Jesus came “eating and drinking” (Luke 7:34).



This Week’s Share:

This week share three meals with someone. At least one should be a church member, and at least one should be a non-church member. Of the twenty-one meals you eat a week, when could you invite someone to your table for some conversation?

Here are some suggestions:

- Meet someone for coffee and donuts one morning.
- Share a lunch break meal with a coworker.
- Invite someone to lunch after church.
- Come to Wednesday Night Dinner and share a meal with a guest.
- Invite three people over for dinner one night.
- Partner with another couple and invite two more couples for a dinner party.

Keep in mind that there is no agenda. Just gather together at a table and talk.

Week 1; Day 1: Interrupted

“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.”
(Matthew 14:13-14, NRSV)

One of my fondest memories of my grandparents’ home was all the times I would drop by unannounced. Despite the unnoticed arrival, the interruption was never seen as such. No matter what they were doing, we would always end up sitting around the kitchen table together.

Even into young adulthood, I would still drop by unannounced, and there was still room at the table. It would not be uncommon for other family members to unexpectedly drop by as well. As more gathered around the table, conversation flowed freely, along with the coffee and tea.

Unlike the disciples who wanted to send the interrupting crowd away, my grandparents welcomed us in, fed us, and engaged us in conversation. I am confident that the same hospitality shown to family would be shown to others. When you came to my grandparents’ home, you were greeted with compassion, not as a nuisance.

I imagine that you have days, like I do, where your plans get ruined. You get an unexpected interruption that throws you off a little bit. Someone approaches you at the store or a coffee shop and begins sharing much more than you expected. The person sitting next to you on the airplane senses that you are a safe person, and opens up to you about a life struggle.

These interruptions could easily be deemed nuisances. But, what if we viewed the sudden interruption as an opportunity?

Jesus planned out his day, only to get interrupted not by one or two people, but by a crowd. While the disciples advocated for the people to be sent away, Jesus welcomed them and fed them. He did not greet them as if they were nuisances. Instead, he looked upon them with compassion and engaged them.

What opportunities to share with others await you through interruptions this week?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, when we get interrupted this week, help us to see it as an opportunity to listen with compassion as we share your love. Amen.

Week 1; Day 2: The Sacrament of the Potluck

“And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.” (Matthew 14:20, NRSV)

It was not too long ago when I was looking through some old pictures of my grandmother’s. There were quite a few taken at church. They had set up wooden sawhorses and placed sheets of wood across them to make tables. Church members were gathered around with their plates and cups, eating and enjoying each other’s company.

The church dinners have come a long way since then. One thing remains, as a community of faith, the church still gathers around the table to share in the abundance of life. Potlucks and church dinners have been such a cornerstone for many faith communities, it could be considered a sacrament.

The image of Jesus feeding the five thousand brings to mind the many potlucks I have experienced in the church. One of the things you will likely hear at a church potluck is, “Well, we have enough after all.”

There are always a few planners who look out over the table of food that has been brought to share, and worry that it will not be enough to feed all the people. Yet, there is always enough food. The other thing you will likely hear at a church potluck is, “It’s like the loaves and the fishes.”

The miracle is not that Jesus fed the large crowd out of nothing. The miracle is that the sharing of the bread and fish was able to feed so many. This miracle story is one of the only stories found in all four of the gospels, which highlights how important this moment is.

Jesus used what the people had brought to share with everyone. And it was enough. And all ate and were filled.

Potlucks remind us that though it may seem small, in the hands of Jesus, it is great. The same can be said with our gestures of sharing food with others. Whether it be fresh vegetables from our garden or a sit down meal at our house, when we invite Jesus to be a part of that which we share, it will be great.

Do not be discouraged by what you perceive to be too little to give. In the hands of Christ, little is much.

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, little is much in your hands. May what little we offer this week be much. Amen.

Week 1; Day 3: Unexpected Grace

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.” (Isaiah 55:1-2, NIV)

Food is essential to the nourishment of our bodies. This is why we talk about needing to be fed spiritually.

One of the things that is often overlooked is how much it costs to eat healthy. In areas known as “food deserts,” places where there are no grocery stores or farmer’s markets, there is certain to be a McDonald’s or Hardee’s. In places where food is needed, it is usually found cheap and unhealthy.

In the meantime, others run the risk of living beyond abundance. Instead of sharing resources, they take more than their share. Instead of giving, they waste. Instead of being faithful stewards, they are greedy and unjust.

When Jesus fed the crowd with the loaves and the fishes, it was unexpected. We do not know who was in the crowd that day. But I imagine it was a mix of people, all ages, various religious thoughts, and different ethnic backgrounds. Jesus shared the abundance with all.

Isaiah 55 urges us to share food with others, especially those who are not like us. As followers of Christ, we are called to extend the table to the stranger. To the single mother of three. To the elderly man living on welfare. To the grandmother raising her grandchildren while living in a shelter. The same grace that is extended to us, we are to extend to others.

Who can come to the table? All those who are hungry and thirsty. And when we share grace with the “other,” we ourselves may experience unexpected grace.

Who in your community could you share food with?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, may we see others as you see them. May we share from our abundance with those in need. Amen.

Week 1; Day 4: The Wedding Feast

“Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’”
(Matthew 22:8-9, NRSV)

Sarah Cummins had spent over \$30,000 on her perfect day before the Indiana woman canceled the wedding. Faced with the reality of a reception contract that could not be canceled, Cummins made the decision to invite the homeless to the wedding feast.

She and her family contacted local homeless shelters, which bused in over 150 people to the reception. The homeless enjoyed bourbon-glazed meatballs, goat cheese and roasted garlic bruschetta, chicken breast with artichokes and Chardonnay cream. And of course, wedding cake.¹

Cummins’ canceled wedding reception resembles the image of Jesus’ parable of the wedding banquet. What was intended to be an exclusive party became a feast for all. The feast is a metaphor for God’s grace. We come to the table, feasting on God’s grace. This grace, freely given, is intended for all.

Can you imagine the conversations that were held at Cummins’ wedding tables? I imagine that the grief and sorrow present was replaced with joy and cheer. Cummins’ ex-fiancé told a local newspaper that this inclusion of the homeless was a “beautiful thing.”

A beautiful thing, indeed. Author Michael Frost writes, “The table ought to be the primary symbol of the Christian gathering. It represents hospitality, inclusivity, generosity, and grace.”²

Whenever we gather for communion in the United Methodist Church, we hear the familiar words of invitation: “Christ invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.”

This invitation extended to us by Christ is just as Frost describes. As followers of Christ, we are called to do the same. We are called to extend the invitation to the table to all. God’s grace is freely given to all. Let us not hoard it up for ourselves; let us share God’s grace. And may we share it joyfully.

How can your invitation to share a meal this week also share hospitality, inclusivity, generosity, and grace? During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, you call us all to your table, and we are thankful for such a wide table. May we strive each day to do the same. Amen.

¹ <http://wtkr.com/2017/07/14/indiana-woman-cancels-30000-wedding-invites-homeless-to-reception/>

² Frost, Michael. *Surprise the World: The Five Habits of Highly Missional People*. NavPress, 2016

Week 1; Day 5: Give It Away

“Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.” (Matthew 14:19, NRSV)

It is interesting that Jesus blesses and breaks the bread, but does not give it away himself. Instead, he gives the food to his disciples, and instructs them to give it away.

Jesus asks the same of us. We have been given the huge task of communicating Jesus to others. But Jesus does not demand that we all become academic theologians or world-class preachers. After all, little is much in the hands of Christ.

It is also interesting that prior to Jesus blessing and breaking, Jesus asked the disciples to feed the crowd. But they respond, “We have nothing **but** five loaves and two fish” (Matthew 14:17, emphasis added).

The “but” in their response comes from a place of fear. Fear prevents the disciples from seeing what Jesus sees. While they only see five loaves and two fish that in no way could feed a huge crowd, Jesus sees the main course.

Little is much in the hands of Christ.

Fear does the same to us. It prevents us from seeing that what we already have is much in the hands of Christ. Fear prevents us from taking that risking step to try something new. It prevents us from asking that person that we need to forgive to lunch. Fear prevents us from seeing the needs of those around us, and how we can care for them.

Fear is the great paralyzer of faith.

The opposite of fear is hope. Hope is our oxygen, giving us air to live. Every aspect of life, from planting seeds to raising children, is built on hope. Without hope, life can become chaotic and meaningless.

When we say “We have nothing **but**” we are clinging to fear, not hope.

Whether as individuals or as a congregation, hope empowers us to see as Christ sees. Hope reminds us that little is much in the hands of Christ. Hope empowers us to be faithful and give the abundance away.

How is fear holding you back?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, you called us to be people of faith. Yet, too often, we are people of fear. Forgive us and grant us courage to live in hope. Amen.



How Did It Go?

Use the guiding questions below to reflect on this first week of sharing.

Who did you share a meal with this week?

What was the experience like for you of intentionally sharing a meal with someone else?

What's your "aha" or take away moments from this experience?

Week Two: Share Good News

The Letter to the Romans is perhaps Paul's most theological of letters. In Romans 10:5-15 he argues that the law is made known to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our salvation comes through Jesus, not the law, he argues.

This is the good news.

Paul is clear when he adds that if one has not heard the good news, one cannot be saved, and that is not their fault. In order to believe, they first must hear. And that is where you and I come in.

We do not have to go to seminary or compete Disciple Bible Study in order to share good news. One of the primary ways in which people come to Jesus Christ is through other people. People just like you and me. Friends and family. Neighbors and co-workers.

An essential piece of sharing good news is building relationships with others, just as Jesus did.



This Week's Share:

This week share good news by being intentional in building or nurturing relationships by sharing your presence in the community.

Here are some suggestions:

- As you walk through your neighborhood, acknowledge or speak to your neighbors.
- Spend more time in your front yard to see your neighbors.
- Spend time in a local coffee shop.
- Provide transportation to and from the doctor for someone who cannot.
- Provide meals for a family dealing with a hospitalization, recovery, or loss.
- Visit with a Wednesday Night Dinner guest.
- Challenge yourself to go beyond "small talk" and go deeper in conversation.

Remember, relationships matter.

Week 2; Day 1: On Our Own

“Immediately he [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.” (Matthew 14:22, NRSV)

The first time we left our daughter longer than a couple of days I kept a straight face, but deep inside, I was a wreck. Megan and I went on a trip to Mexico, and our daughter stayed the week with my mom. And even though I knew she would be safe, cared for, and loved, I was still a wreck. “Will she be okay without us for this long?”

I can hear what you’re thinking, “Just wait until she goes to college.”

I’m not sure I can handle that.

In the scene from Matthew 14, Jesus sends his disciples on without him. As the story continues, a storm arises on the Sea of Galilee, and the disciples are unsure if they will make it to the other side. Of course, this is what would happen as soon as Jesus sends them off on their own. He sends them out of the metaphorical nest.

The story provides a glimpse into what it would look like for the disciples to be on their own. While the disciples were on the boat being battered by water and wind, Jesus was by himself praying. It is not until morning that Jesus sets out to meet the disciples.

Jesus is not the anxious parent sending his child to grandma’s house for the week. Jesus is confident in his disciples. They can handle this. They will be okay on their own.

Sometimes when we think about sharing the good news with others, we feel as if we are being sent out on our own. We have that anxious feeling of uncertainty about whether or not we can really do this. Can we tell others about Jesus? What if they ask a hard question?

This may easily cause us not to share good news with others. But, Jesus is confident in us, his disciples.

In what ways are you anxious about sharing your faith with others?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, though we do not always acknowledge it in ourselves, you are confident in us as your disciples. Calm our storms of anxiety so that we may share our faith with confidence. Amen.

Week 2; Day 2: Strangers and Friends

“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.” (Luke 19:5-6, NRSV)

Do you remember learning the Zacchaeus song in church as a child? “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.”

Just as Zacchaeus was short in stature, he was short in character. As a tax collector, he not only took money from his fellow Jews to give to the Romans, but he cheated them as well. He marked up their taxes so he could take some for himself. The fact that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector only added to the disdain for a corrupt man.

As such, Zacchaeus was not a very popular figure in town. This is why it was surprising when Jesus stopped to speak to Zacchaeus AND invited himself to Zacchaeus’ home.

We read the story so quickly, we miss an important word in the passage. In verse 5, Jesus uses the word “**stay**” when he talks about his visit to Zacchaeus’ house. The changes that occurred in Zacchaeus did not happen during an hour-long lunch. It took a little longer than that. Jesus had come to stay for awhile.

Jesus starts not with a fiery sermon or the steps to salvation, he starts by sharing a meal and a conversation. Jesus first engages Zacchaeus and gets to know the “wee little man” for himself, not what other people think of him.

Zacchaeus was no longer a stranger or “that tax collector guy.” He was now a friend. And through the relationship that was built, he came to know Jesus personally.

Who do you know who is considered an “other”? How could you begin forming a relationship with that person?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

May we bear witness to the love of God in this world, so that those to whom love is a stranger will find in us generous friends. Amen.³

³ *United Methodist Book of Worship*, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992

Week 2; Day 3: Philip and Nathanael

“The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me.’ . . . Philip found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.’” (John 1:43, 45, NRSV)

When Megan and I first moved to Portsmouth, we faced the challenge that so many people face when they move to a new area. Where do we take the car for repairs? What doctor should we use for our child? What restaurants should we avoid? We asked around and people were happy to share their recommendations for auto shops, doctors, and restaurants.

We do that well, don't we? When you find the right mechanic, you tell others about it. When you find the right doctor for your child, you tell others about it. When you read a great book, see a great movie or television show, you tell others about it.

But what about church? Do you tell others about the great church you've found?

In our day and time, we are too often a little skittish about talking church or inviting others to church. We do not want to risk offending someone or making them uncomfortable. We say things like, “I'd like for you to join me at worship sometime.” And leave it at that.

The verses for today remind us that people come to know Jesus because of friends. Philip is called by Jesus to follow him. Then he goes and finds his friend Nathanael, who in verse 46 questions if anything good can come from Nazareth. Nathanael joins Philip in his journey. Why? Because Nathanael trusts his friend.

People still come to know Jesus because of friends.

Who are the people in your life? Who are your close friends? Who are your co-workers? Who are your neighbors? Who are the people you engage in conversation on a regular basis?

You already have a presence in their lives. It may be a small presence, but remember, little is much in the hands of Christ.

Who has been Philip to you? Who is your Nathanael?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, thank you for the friends in our lives who have invited us into this journey called faith. May we do the same for others. Amen.

Week 2; Day 4: The Turquoise Table

“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Romans 10:14, NRSV)

How well do you know your neighbors? Can you name the people who live near you? How much do you know about their lives?

Kristin Schell realized that she did not know her neighbors as well as she should. Facing this dilemma of wanting to know and love her neighbors, Kristin put a turquoise picnic table under a tree in her front yard.

She went out everyday to sit at her turquoise picnic table, at first taking her laptop or a book with her to give her something to do in case no one talked to her. She would see neighbors walking dogs and moms with their kids on bikes.

Eventually, people started stopping and having conversations with Kristin. Relationships started to form and neighbors have become friends. Because these relationships have developed, these neighbors are caring for one another in ways they never did before.⁴

Kristin used the turquoise table to create a space for neighbors to meet each other. Over time, they began to have meaningful conversations, and then began to share God’s love with one another. It is an example of what a life of hospitality looks like.

Sharing good news with our neighbors can be this simple.

The main way that God reaches people is through people like you and me. This is what Paul is speaking to in Romans 10. Those who have not heard cannot believe. How will they hear if we do not share?

Kristin’s turquoise table is a place where others are accepted and cared for. I recently heard the phrase, “Care than Share,” when thinking about effective evangelism. When we develop relationships with those outside our inner circle, and show that we love and care for them, we are sharing good news.

What would your turquoise table be?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, help us to find our turquoise table, a way for us to engage our neighbors and share your amazing grace and love. Amen.

⁴ I was introduced to Kristin’s story in *Connect!: Creating a Culture of Relationships that Matter*, Phil Maynard, 2016. Learn more at <http://www.kristinschell.com>

Week 2; Day 5: Be Prepared

“Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15b, NRSV)

One summer while in youth ministry, I had two different students have someone close to them pass away. For one student it was his grandfather, whom he was very close to who died right before the youth group went on a mission trip. The other student lost her father unexpectedly during the same mission trip.

I was a college student. I had only been doing this youth ministry thing for a few years. I had not yet been to seminary, or read any theological works around death and dying.

What I did have was my own experience of my father dying. Along with the assurance and hope of the resurrection. From this place of experience I was able to be presence with these two high school students during their grief.

The writer of 1 Peter wants his readers to be prepared for the moments when they will be asked to testify to the hope in their lives. The early Christians’ lives, post-Christ, were so different from their neighbors, that it raised a lot of questions. Mostly because in times of crisis, the early Christians still had hope.

I think it is important to notice what the writer is not saying. He is not saying that we need to give a convincing argument about why what we believe is right and what others believe is wrong. He is not saying that we should debate over doctrine, nor is he saying that we should leave argumentative comments on Facebook.

What the writer is saying is that we should be prepared to share why we have hope in Christ. The writer does not want his readers to miss an opportunity to share the hope they have in Jesus Christ.

As the pastor and teacher Dr. Warren Wiersbe says, “The purpose is not to win an argument but to win lost souls to Christ.”⁵

After all, the most effective sharing is of our own personal experiences of Christ.

In what ways can your own experiences communicate hope in Christ?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, prepare our hearts to share the hope we have in you with those around us. May we not be ashamed or fearful to share good news. Amen.

⁵ Wiersbe, Warren, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: The Complete New Testament in One Volume*, David C. Cook, 2007



How Did It Go?

Use the guiding questions below to reflect on this second week of sharing.

Who did you share good news with by intentionally building or nurturing relationships?

What was the experience like for you of intentionally building or nurturing relationships?

What's your "aha" or take away moments from this experience?

Week 3: Share Mercy

John Wesley encouraged the early Methodists to be engaged in what he called works of mercy. This included things like visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, and caring for those who were in need. Coupled with what Wesley referred to as works of piety (worship, communion, Bible study, etc.) the Christian had a balanced faith-filled life. Our works of piety fuels our works of mercy, while works of mercy inform our works of piety.

I know someone who would always say, “I believe in putting my prayers on feet.” What this person meant by that was she not only prayed about something, she looked for ways to do something about that which she prayed. This is the balance in our spiritual lives that I think Wesley taught. When we engage in works of mercy, we are sharing our faith by putting our worship into action.



This Week's Share:

This week share an act of mercy with at least three people, one church member, one non-church member, and the third of your choice.

Sharing mercy could include:

- Random acts of kindness.
- Acts of grace.
- Advocacy.
- Forgiving someone.
- Participate in a ministry with the poor.
- Volunteer with a local non-profit for a few hours.
- Contact a local nursing home about visiting residents who do not receive a lot of visitors.
- Consider ways you can get involved in a social justice issue that is important to you.

Week 3; Day 1: Blessed are the Merciful

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.” (Matthew 5:7, The Message)

My grandparents have always been formative to my faith. They would take in sick friends, family, or church members to take care of them as they get well. Meals would be prepared and made before being taken to someone who just got home from the hospital. They would regularly visit neighbors who were homebound. And it was no surprise to anyone when they invited someone who was not able to be with their family at Christmas to our family Christmas breakfast. And the list could easily go on.

They have always been full of care for others.

I like how The Message equates mercy with one who is being “care-full.” Mercy is more than just a feeling or a sentiment. It is a practice. It is a way of life. It is something that we do. It is an expression of the grace we have so freely received from Christ.

We live in a time when people are more concerned about themselves, and less concerned about others. One of the keys to sharing our faith with others is compassion. The word means “to suffer with” or to “carry one another’s burdens.” When we have compassion for someone, we do more than just have sympathy. We care for them.

Christ embodied this way of life. When you read any of the four Gospels, you will see how Christ took the cross willingly because he was so “care-full” for all of humanity. Because Christ has given so freely, so we too can give.

Who in your life has set an example of what it means to be full of care for others? How can you be “care-full” this week and share mercy?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, thank you for your example of what it means to be full of care for others. Guide our feet this week as we reach out to others in a care-full way. Amen.

Week 3; Day 2: Blessed are the Peacemakers

“You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.” (Matthew 5:9, The Message)

Have you ever gotten new eyeglasses or contacts? In those moments when I have a new prescription and put on the new frames, I am surprised at how well I can see! (And how poor my vision was.) It was only when I put the new glasses on that I realized how cloudy my vision had gotten.

The Greek word used for peacemakers means something like “doers of peace.” Peace, this spirit of not competing or fighting with one another, whether that be among nations, among siblings, or among church members, is something we “do” rather than “possess.”

But, cloudy vision prevents us from being peacemakers. We must learn to look at others and situations through the eyes of God. This way we can come face-to-face with the lack of peace around us, instead of evading it. When our vision is clear, we can deal with the lack of peace faithfully.

This is the lesson Bruce in the comedy *Bruce Almighty (2003)* learns. In order to make peace with his girlfriend Grace, he has to learn to look at her through the eyes of God. In Jewish tradition, the rabbis believed that the highest duty for the human to achieve is right relationships with each other.

Martin Luther King, Jr. longed for a day when children of all colors would join hands. For King it was a day when we look at each other through the eyes of God and see each other as members of the same family. King longed for the day when Americans would be in right relationship with one another.

To be a peacemaker is a call to action to share mercy with one another. To share mercy is to do the hard work of reconciling to be in right relationship with one another. The blessing, after all, is on the *peacemakers*, not the *peacelovers*.

In what ways is your vision cloudy? Who do you need to become in right relationship with?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, give us a forgiving heart so that we may be in right relationship with others. Empower us to not only be lovers of peace, but makers of peace in our church, in our community, and in our world. Amen.

Week 3; Day 3: Mercy Breeds Mercy

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (Isaiah 11:6, NRSV)

Most of us can remember where we were when we heard about the terrorist attacks on 9/11. I was walking across campus at Randolph-Macon College. I had an early class that morning and was walking towards the library when I overheard groups of students talking about airplanes crashing into buildings. I by-passed the library and went to my car, turned on the radio and listened with a heavy heart to the news reports of airplanes flying into the World Trade Center building. How could such a thing happen? How could there be so much hate in the world that hundreds of people would die?

There is a whole generation who were in elementary or preschool (if they were born) when 9/11 happened. The only world they know is this post-9/11 world. A world where war is common. A world where politics are more important than people, no matter what side of the aisle you are on. A world where bullying, school shootings, and hateful speech are the norm.

In her book *God’s Gift of Love*, Donna Schaper writes, “From a world without love and without hope, nothing is possible, expect a repeat of the same injuries.”⁶ Injustice breeds injustice. Violence breeds violence. At some point the cycle of hate must stop. But how?

Nelson Mandela is an example of someone who ended the cycle of hate. After being a, at times violent, leader against his government, and being imprisoned, something happened. He was transformed. When he emerged from his jail cell, he was a different man. A man filled with peace. He led his people to unity and to reconciliation.

Mandela made a difference in many ways, across many countries. And we can argue that some of the changes were big and some of the changes were small. But they were changes. And the transformation started within himself. He found peace in himself before he was able to lead others to find peace.

Change towards peace does not always have to be by the pound. Change towards peace can be by the ounce. Ounce by ounce through prayer and contemplation, worship and Bible study, scheduled acts of mercy and random acts of kindness, we change ourselves, and transform the world.

Because love breeds love. Hope breeds hope. Justice breeds justice. Mercy breeds mercy.

What transformation needs to happen within yourself? During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, may we be bearers of love, justice, and mercy. Amen.

⁶ Schaper, Donna, *God’s Gift of Love: An Advent Study Based on the Revised Common Lectionary*, Abingdon Press, 2013.

Week 3; Day 4: “I’m Sorry. How Can I Help?”

“Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.” (Psalm 25:6, NRSV)

A favorite at our house is Daniel Tiger. He is the main character in his own animated television show on PBS, *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood*. The characters and principles of this show are based on Fred Roger’s *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*. Each episode has a song that is catchy and easy to pick up that connects to the theme or lesson of that episode.

In one of the episodes, Daniel has to learn about saying he is sorry. A typical lesson in a children’s television show or book. The song goes like this, “Saying I’m sorry is the first step, then, how can I help?”

Saying “I’m sorry” is one thing, but if we do not change our behavior, what difference have we really made? As people of faith, we are called to repent (say “I’m sorry”) for the things we have done. Or, at times, the things we have not done.

When we come before the throne of grace and seek God’s mercy on us, we should also ask, “Lord, how can I help?” As Rev. Lyndsie Blakely frames it:

How can I help reconcile my relationship with God? How can I reconcile my relationship with my neighbor? How can I respond with acts of justice, compassion and love to those in my home, community and world that I have hurt or ignored?⁷

What difference would it make in our relationships with God, family and friends, and our community if we went the extra step and asked, “How can I help?” To share mercy is to do something with the grace we have been offered.

Who in your life do you need to say, “I’m sorry?” How can you help that person?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, forgive us for all the times we are unforgiving. May we forgive as you have forgiven. May we share mercy with those with who we have wronged. Amen.

⁷ See Rev. Blakely’s guest post at <http://jasoncstanley.com/guest-post-im-sorry-how-can-i-help/>. Rev. Blakely blogs at <http://adventures-of-baby-blakely.blogspot.com>

Week 3; Day 5: Rise Above

“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” (James 1:19-20, NRSV)

In an early episode of the medical drama *Grey’s Anatomy*, Dr. Miranda Bailey, the African-American chief of surgery, is faced with a challenging case. Not because the surgical needs of the patient are a medical mystery. But because the patient is a Neo-Nazi, and does not want any African-American person touching him.

TV medical dramas being what they are, the patient’s condition becomes so dire, that Dr. Bailey is the only surgeon who can do the most good. She easily could employ the same anger the patient showed her. Instead, realizes that if she responds out of anger, she will be no better than her patient. Dr. Bailey tells the medical staff, “We will rise above.”

Rise above.

Sometimes showing mercy to others means we have to set aside the anger we have, rise above the situation, and be Christ-like. Anger can be like an over-boiling teakettle. You have no idea when it’s going to run over or who it is going to burn.

The holiness code in Leviticus 19 begs us to not hold a grudge, to not seek vengeance, instead, love our neighbors. When Jesus was being persecuted by the Romans and nailed to the cross, instead of rising up against the Romans in an aggressive display, Jesus uttered these words: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

When Jesus concludes the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), he asked the lawyer which of these men showed love for his neighbor. The lawyer answered, “The one who showed mercy.” Jesus responds, “Go and do likewise.”

Go and love your neighbor. Go and share mercy.

Go, and as James says, “be slow to anger and quick to listen.”

Go and rise above.

What situation in your life requires you to set aside anger and share mercy?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, help us to be slow to anger and quick to listen. May we rise above the anger that resides in our hearts and share mercy, even to those who anger us. Amen.



How Did It Go?

Use the guiding questions below to reflect on this third week of sharing.

Who did you share mercy with this week?

What was the experience of sharing mercy like for you?

What's your "aha" or take away moments from this experience?

Week Four: Share You

It has been said already, but it is worth repeating. The most effective way people come to know Jesus is through other people. People just like you and me.

It may seem too simple. But the reality is there is no quick fix to the decline in the Church. There is no program that will change things.

People change things.

People just like you and me. And we have been called through our baptism to share our faith with others. To do so is to share ourselves. Paul refers to it as being “living sacrifices.”



This Week's Share:

This week share you with people inside and outside the church. This can simply be your presence in an engaging manner. Or it can be sharing a gift you have with others.

Here are some suggestions:

- Introduce yourself to someone you see regularly, such as a waiter, a coffee shop worker, the attendant at the gas station, or a homeless person.
- List three gifts you have. Then, list at least two ways you can use that gift in ministry (inside or outside the church).
- Come to Wednesday Night Dinner and spend time with a guest, perhaps a guest who had a meal with during Week 1.
- Prayerfully consider what committee or ministry team your gifts may be a good fit.

Week 4; Day 1: Give the World a Smile

*“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”
(Philippians 2:3-4, NRSV)*

In the summer of 2012 I commuted from our home in Lynchburg, Virginia to the University of Virginia Hospital where I was in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program. It was one of the last steps toward ordination for me. I would travel up and down Route 29 between Lynchburg and Charlottesville, five days a week.

Most evenings on the drive back to Lynchburg, somewhere just after entering Nelson County, there would be a man standing in the median of the road. The first time I saw him standing there, I thought unkind thoughts, wondering why on earth someone would be standing in a spot like that on such a busy highway.

About four weeks into my daily commute, I realized there was more going on here. This man, whose name I never learned, would stand there and when a car would pass, both northbound and southbound, he would face that car, smile really big, and wave with great joy.

I have no idea why he did it, or if he still does. But for at least a month and a half, he was there, every evening, in the same spot, waving and giving the world that was passing him by a smile. And what a difference it made.

I wrote about this experience on my blog, and a reader named Gigi left a comment:

I met this gentleman at UVA Medical Center approximately 10 years ago and recognized him immediately from my many trips between Charlottesville and North Carolina through the years. I jumped at the opportunity to introduce myself and let him know how much his [gesture] of goodwill touched me. He proceeded to share his story, one that I never anticipated. I will not go into details as it is his story to share, but if you ever have the opportunity to sit a spell and listen your life will never be the same.

I never got to meet this man. But what a difference he has made. He gave of himself in a no-budget kind of way. Something so simple, yet so powerful.

What simple way can you make a difference in someone’s life this week?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, may we not forget this week how powerful a smile and a wave can be. Give us the courage to engage those around us in such a way that it makes a difference. Amen.

Week 4; Day 2: Use Words, If You Have To

*“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”
(Romans 12:1, NRSV)*

There is a well-known quote, attributed to St. Francis of Assisi that says, “Preach the Gospel always, and use words if you have to.” I think this speaks well to the idea that we can share good news, share the gospel, by simply sharing ourselves.

It reminds me of the saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” (I cannot tell you how many times I heard that from my parents as a child.) The basic idea is that we communicate a whole lot more by our behavior than we do with our words. If we consider that the most effective way that people come to know Jesus is through other people, then maybe we should pay a bit more attention to our actions.

Paul is calling the church to be fully committed to God, not just with our words. Sacrifices in the Hebrew tradition were dead. But now, the sacrifices we are to make are to be living. By doing so, *all* that we do is worship and sacrificial living.

When we share a meal with the hungry, when we clothe those with so little, when we pray with those who are unable to find the words, when we share a kind word with a stranger, we are sharing a reflection of our faith.

Yet, there is nothing as damaging as Christians whose words do not match their deeds. For years, one of the reasons young people have cited their lack of interest in the church is the lack of authenticity. This leads to an image of Christians as being judgmental and hypocritical.

By sharing ourselves in authentic ways, we paint a different picture of Christians than the stereotype.

In what ways do you preach the gospel without using words?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

*Guide our feet, Lord, so that our words reflect our actions and our actions reflect our words.
Amen.*

Week 4; Day 3: Part of the Team

“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us; prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.” (Romans 12:6-8, NRSV)

In the 2017 film *The Lego Batman Movie*, Batman is a narcissistic, grumpy, billionaire who will not acknowledge his own loneliness. Lego Batman puts up a good front that, as he says, “I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone.”

The extent of Batman’s loneliness is captured in a scene where Batman heats up dinner left by Alfred in a microwave and then watches *Jerry Maguire*. Later, as he walks through his mansion, he stops and looks at the family pictures, and utters to his parents, “I think you would have been proud.” For a moment, we see a quiet, gentle side of the crime fighter. It reveals just how lonely and vulnerable he is, and that all in his world is not alright. Hiding behind the mask, as so many of us can relate to, is fear.

One *is* the loneliest number. Batman has convinced himself that this is the best way. With the combination of adopting Dick Grayson/Robin (“I want to be adopted so I don’t have to be alone”) and working alongside Barbara Gordon/Batgirl, Batman begins to come to terms with his reality. Barbara Gordon/Batgirl tells him, “You can’t be a hero if you’re only thinking about yourself.”

The actions of Batgirl, Robin, Alfred, and his classic villains show Batman that coming together can be more powerful than going alone. This is a lesson that Paul repeats many times in his letters to the early church. The Body of Christ should be the ultimate superhero team. We all bring many gifts to the table. When we use these gifts together, in harmony, we show others the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

We do not have to do it alone.

In what ways can you share your gifts with the Body of Christ?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, thank you for the Body of Christ, so that we do not have to share good news on our own. Teach us to lean on our brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.

Week 4; Day 4: Tony

“Don’t think you have to put on a fund-raising campaign before you start. You don’t need a lot of equipment. You are the equipment, and all you need to keep that going is three meals a day. Travel light.” (Matthew 10:9-10, The Message)

I had taken my youth group to a local mission setting that served a meal to the homeless and working poor once a week. It was our group’s turn to prepare and serve a meal. We always encouraged the students when the line died down, that they were welcome to fix a plate, sit with those they had just served, and engage them in conversation.

Sarah was a Caucasian high school student who made her mission to talk to as many different people as she could. At one point I looked over the sea of round tables with 80 or so people around them, and saw Sarah sitting next to a guy known as Tony.

Tony was a tall, broad shouldered African American man. When he talked, he was soft spoken. He would typically come in and sit by himself, wait patiently for the blessing to be offered, and the food to be served. He would almost always get a second helping, and if there was any left over, get a plate to go. It was likely that this was one of the only meals Tony would get that week.

So, I was surprised when I looked over and saw Sarah sitting and talking with Tony. Perhaps more surprised to see Tony talking back to her.

I was less surprised by the enthusiasm Sarah had as she shared with me her conversation with Tony. About the number of jobs he works to pay rent, leaving little left over for food.

Lovett Weems has said, “We have to earn the right to be heard.”⁸ What an insightful statement. Sarah earned the right to hear Tony’s story. I believe that one of the ways in which Sarah “earned the right to be heard” was that she was authentic. The Sarah that Tony met was the real Sarah. And in her authenticity, she accepted Tony as a child of God, just as he was.

I have no idea if Sarah shared how she came to faith or why she believes in God with Tony that night. What I do know is that Sarah shared Sarah that evening. And in doing so, she shared the accepting, grace-filled, love of Jesus Christ with Tony.

Can you identify someone this week who could be your “Tony”?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, give us the wisdom and the grace to see others as you see, as your children. Amen.

⁸ Quoted in Maynard, Phil, *Connect!: Creating a Culture of Relationships that Matter*, 2016

Week 4; Day 5: When Did We See You?

“Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’” (Matthew 25:44, NRSV)

Writer and poet Robert Benson recalls in his book, *Punching Holes in the Dark*, a time while on a spiritual retreat. At the end of the week of learning from and practicing spiritual disciplines with their spiritual director, Father Ed, the group went out for a nice dinner in Orlando. Father Ed drove.

After an hour of wandering through Orlando, Father Ed parks the car in the parking lot of a nursing home. Unsure what was going on, the group followed Father Ed into the nursing home. Then, slightly confused, the group continued to follow Father Ed down the halls and into rooms.

Father Ed engaged each stranger in each room as if they were lifelong friends. He talked with them about their illnesses as well as their hopes. And then he prayed with them.

Back in the car, Father Ed finally spoke in the silence, saying, “If you are going to spend an hour with Jesus in contemplation and prayer and silence and consolation, then you must spend an hour with Jesus who lives in the poor and the sick and the lost and the hungry. Otherwise, you have not really met Him at all.”⁹

Benson writes that the group settled on chili dogs instead of the nice, expensive meal. And that the silence continued for quite awhile.

“When did we see you?” the disciples asked.

It would seem that those we least expect to see Jesus in, is exactly where we should be looking. And as Father Ed teaches us, it takes sacrificing some our time to engage with and pray with the sick or the lonely. For when we see, really, truly see the sick, the homeless, the single mother, or the mentally ill, we see Jesus.

Where did you see Jesus this week?

During your prayer time, remember to pray for the five people you listed on page 2.

Lord, open our eyes to see that you are among us, you are in the unexpected people we meet. Lord, empower us through your Holy Spirit to see, serve, and love those who are different from us. Amen.

⁹ Benson, Robert, *Punching Holes in the Dark: Living in the Light of the World*, Abingdon Press, 2016



How Did It Go?

Use the guiding questions below to reflect on this fourth week of sharing.

In what ways did you share you inside and outside the church this week?

What was the experience like for you to intentionally share yourself with others?

What's your "aha" or take away moments from this experience?



Tips for Inviting People to Church¹⁰:

1. Make it personal (phone to phone, face to face, or Facebook to Facebook)
2. Make it specific (“I want to invite you to come on September 10 at 11:00 am for worship and lunch afterward.”)
3. Make it relational (“I want to invite you to come with me to worship on September 10. Would you like for me to pick you up?”)

It is best to use these tips with someone with whom you have an existing relationship with, such as one of the five people you listed on page 2.



Additional Reading:

Frost, Michael. Surprise the World! The Five Habits of Highly Missional People, NavPress, 2016.

Maynard, Phil. Connect! Creating a Culture of Relationships that Matter, 2016.

¹⁰ Adapted from Phil Maynard’s *Connect!: Creating a Culture of Relationships That Matter*, 2016