

Title: BLESS – Be With People

Text: John 17:15-18; John 20:19-22 NRSV

Last week I offered the provocative idea that not every disciple is called to be an evangelist, but every disciple is called to pray to the Lord of the Harvest that evangelistic workers would be sent out among the hapless and the hopeless.

And while we may not all be given the gifts and calling associated with evangelism, we are all called to be ready – as Peter says in **1 Peter 3:15** - **“to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.”** But what form should this defense take? What if keeping in step with the Holy Spirit meant that we don’t have to be on the defensive all the time, but are instead able to move through the world as Jesus did – that is, with care, compassion and curiosity?

What if we aren’t called to have religious arguments or theological debates, but instead have *spiritual conversations*? That is what our little acronym B.L.E.S.S. is all about.

B **Be with people**
L **Learn their story**
E **Embody God’s Truth**
S **Share your story**
S **Share God’s story**

It’s about moving through the world as Jesus does – not just being *around* people but truly being among them. This is what Jesus always intended for us disciples.

This intention is part of Jesus’ priestly prayer before the crucifixion...

John 17:15-18

15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. 16 They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

And then it is repeated again when Jesus first appears to the disciples after the resurrection...

John 20:19-22

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

The mission of the church as an outflow of the mission of the Trinity: The Father sent the Son into the world, The Father and Son sent the Spirit into the world, the Son and the Spirit sent the church into the world.

We are sent into the world to truly BE with people. Are we called to be fully invested in the lives of our neighbors. We are called to not just work with our co-workers, but to care about them. Our lives in Christ are not about preserving our salvation until we die and go to heaven. We are called to be preservers of the earth. That is why Jesus called us salt and light!

Do you remember what Jeremiah had to say to Israel? They so wanted to believe their exile would be temporary, and that things would go back to the way they used to be. But Jeremiah said:

Jeremiah 29:4-7 NRSV

4 Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

That is what it means to be with people. That is the spirit of what Jesus prayed when he asked his Heavenly Father NOT to take us out of the world but to protect us as we go all-in and seek the blessing of the world “God so loved... that he gave his Son...”

Jeremiah’s “welfare of the city” applies to us, in all the spaces we inhabit. Spaces like:

Neighborhood

Workplace

Larger Family Network

People we Play With

Vendors – people with whom you do business

And the ones who are physically close to us are surely the best place to start when it comes to their welfare. In their book *The Art of Neighboring*, authors Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon note that in the US, only...

10% know 8 neighbor’s names

3% know more information – info that could only be gained by actually talking to them

1% know deeper information – info related to their real hopes and hurts

What is required to actually BE with people suddenly becomes obvious doesn’t it?

We are called to BE with people. Yet, more often than not, we avoid doing this. We surround ourselves with Christian friends. We invest ourselves in church activities. We gravitate toward

people who agree with us, who share our values. When I was a kid, my church emphasized the importance of being “in but not of” the world, which really meant only listening to Christian radio, going to Christian concerts, joining Christian clubs at school, and otherwise keeping quiet about faith unless being challenged to defend it. If you have been part of evangelical American church culture for the last half century, maybe you can relate to what I’m describing here. Some even went so far as to say that we had created Christian ghettos – enclaves of church going folks who dress alike, who speak Christian-ese, and who talk at length about *Christian* things but rarely about *spiritual* things.

Yes. I said it. I made a distinction between Christian conversations and spiritual conversations. Why would I do this? I am making this distinction because we may live in a culture in which the majority of people do not identify with a particular faith tradition but we ALSO live in a culture in which people often identify as “spiritual but not religious!” Just think of the popularity of programs like Oprah’s *Super Soul Sunday* as one example of how spirituality has gone mainstream.

In his book *The Reluctant Witness: Discovering the Delight of Spiritual Conversations*, Dan Everts draws heavily upon research from the Barna Group to come to a simple-yet-shocking conclusion:

People who are engaged spiritually will have spiritual conversations.
Most people in church are not spiritually engaged.
So a lot of people in church are not “eager sharers” at this point.

This is why – in my mind anyway – the time we spent reflecting on what it means to keep in step with the Spirit is so important. Unless we are spiritual engaged ourselves amongst ourselves as Christians, then it is not very likely that we will feel comfortable having spiritual conversations with our neighbors.

If we are open and willing to BE with people, I am convinced that we would have lots and lots of opportunities to have spiritual conversations!

We can take a small step to BE with our neighbors in an intentional way.

Our Call this week: Learn your neighbor’s stories!

1. Write down the names of the people living around you.
2. Write down information you know about these people which you could only know by talking with them
3. Write down something you would only know from a deeper conversation – what are their goals in life? What tragedies have they faced? What do they think about religion?

Close in prayer