

Surprise The World

Week 6 ~ Chapter 7: Sent

As Christians, individually and collectively (i.e. the Church), our primary task is to alert people to the reign of God through Jesus Christ. There is no one right way to do that, and it certainly varies from place to place, time to time, culture to culture, person to person (all of which takes sensitivity and discernment). But what is inescapable is that we have been tasked with this responsibility.

And yet, it is easy to go about our days not being mindful of this task, distracted by many things, or prioritizing other things above it. But part of Loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength is alerting people to God's reign.

This week's practice/exercise, which will hopefully become a habit, is to journal. Now you might be wondering: How does journaling alert people to the reign of God? Well, it doesn't. But by journaling, we become more mindful, more aware of this task, this responsibility...and really, this honor and privilege. The habit of journaling is the trigger, the reminder, that we are Sent people.

Frost anticipates the question his readers would likely have, "*If our lives are meant to alert people to God's reign, what exactly are we pointing them toward?*" Or, what are our words and actions, our very being, meant to draw attention to, and how?

As we know, God's Kingdom is here, now. It is open, available, accessible to us now. So what evidence can we provide for this truth/fact? Or, how can our lives, individually and collectively, provide evidence of this reality? Frost offers a sample (not an exhaustive) list of key areas in which Christ's reign and rule can be seen: Reconciliation, Justice, Beauty, Wholeness. Please allow me to riff on these for a bit...

When we talk about Reconciliation, what we're really talking about is how relationships within God's Kingdom are conducted. Left to our own devices, humans (individually and collectively) tend to divide, tend to silo ourselves based on our likenesses, tend to function with an "us vs. them" mentality. But this is not how things are within the Kingdom of God. In God's Kingdom—actually, what makes God's Kingdom God's Kingdom—is that everything/everyone is united around Christ. All lines of demarcation become meaningless and irrelevant. This is why Paul says, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:28, emphasis added) Likewise, in Colossians 3:11 Paul says, "*Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*" (emphasis added)

Another way of saying this is that when people see relationships within the Church and how we interact with one another and the wider world, they should see a glimpse of the Kingdom. Forgiveness, patience, bearing with one another in love, longsuffering...these should be evident in relationships between Christians. The peace, joy, and love amongst the Christian community should not only surprise the world but also draw them in.

When I reflect on Justice my mind goes to the work of our CUMC Missions team and our Community Transformation Team, both of which are working to reflect the justice of God's Kingdom in the world around us. For us at CUMC that looks like an increased focus on, and involvement with, Hunger, Housing, Health, and Hospitality as we partner with organizations doing good work in these areas. Part of our financial collection as a congregation goes to the work of justice.

As more details unfold for 2025, one way you can be more involved in justice, beyond contributing financially, is to look into ways to volunteer with the organizations we're partnering with. Personally, I would encourage y'all to consider how to engage as a Table Group...though engaging personally/individually is good too.

There is a sermon/message that I listen to a couple times a year. It's called "Beauty Will Save the World" by Brain Zahnd. If you have the time and interest, here's a link to the message...
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPzPFzjMS6I&t=13s>

Speaking of Beauty, what captures your attention? What sight or sound or experience takes your breath away? Where and how do you experience wonder? The ability to experience and value beauty and wonder is part of what makes us human. As we consider the beauty of nature and the created world, it is important to remember that God did not have to make it so beautiful. God could have been very utilitarian about it. But God is the very epitome and personification of beauty...so, of course, any way God expresses Himself, such as through creation, will be beautiful.

And part of what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God means that not only can we appreciate and experience beauty, but we can create it and share it as well. This is what Frost is getting at in this chapter. Beauty is an expression of God's reign. When people are touched by beauty, we can gently inform them that they are experiencing something of God.

When I think of Wholeness my mind goes to health beyond just physically. I certainly appreciate Frost's encouragement to pray for supernatural healing (physically)...we should absolutely do that. I've found that most people appreciate being prayed for even if they don't consider themselves "religious"...particularly if they're in a time of need. But I think it's also important to think beyond physical healing, health, and wholeness. While some people, sadly, are in need of physical healing, most are not. Everyone, however, is in need of integration. We live in a world that will disintegrate us and fragment us if we let it. Just look at how compartmentalized many people's lives are. They've got their family, their job, their friends/social lives, their various activities and associations. Oftentimes there's nothing that ties them all together. In fact, it's easy to be different people in different contexts...which is not healthy, nor a path to integrity.

Remember that illustration I like to use comparing our faith to an app vs. an operating system? If we function like our faith (or our life in God's Kingdom) is an app, that will tend to lead to disintegration and fragmentation. But God's Kingdom is the ultimate reality, so it must function as the operating system, thus integrating and holding everything together. People need to see

Christians whose faith is not simply a part of their life, but IS THEIR LIFE. Such an integrated life bears witness to the reign of God. If our faith is just one facet of our life among many other facets, that doesn't speak very convincingly of God's reign and rule over the universe, does it?

Now let's bring all this back to the practice of journaling. As Frost points out, we track a lot of things...our spending and our saving, our exercise and our calories, our time. Journaling, then, is simply a way, a time tested way, of tracking our life with God. We note our awareness of His Presence and activity in our lives. We record and process our experiences, encounters, and the events of our days. As we reflect on our days through journaling we allow God to draw our attention to what He wants us to take note of...perhaps as a lesson to learn or as a next step of guidance.

Journaling allows us to slow down, which allows us to keep pace with the Spirit. (Whereas we value speed, the Lord values slowness.) Through journaling we can record insights, questions, feelings, doubts, uncertainties. If we are cultivating the habits of blessing, eating, listening, and learning, then journaling allows us to record the fruits those habits produce. Journaling also allows us to record and remember for posterity's sake. Who knows...perhaps the journaling of your life with God will become a cherished keepsake to your kids and grandkids.

Personally, journaling has been a great gift to me. It helps me slow down. It helps me focus. It allows me to jot down thoughts, ideas, feelings that I'm liable to forget. It gives me something to look back upon and see God's goodness and faithfulness in my life.

The whole point of this habit, as Frost puts it [and I'll edit a little], "*...is about reshaping our identities around our fundamental calling as [the beloved children of God and] the sent ones of God.*"

Possible Discussion Questions

- *Do you think of yourself as a "missionary"? If so, what does that look like for you? If not, why not?*
- *How do you alert people to the reign of God in your life? How do we (CUMC) alert people to the reign of God?*
- *As you consider relationships between Christians, is there anything qualitatively different about those relationships? Should there be? Explain.*
- *As you consider the relationships you're in and how you conduct yourself in those relationships, is there anything that an observer would find "surprising"? How does your functioning in relationships alert people to the present reality of Jesus and His Kingdom?*
- *What areas/issues of justice are you involved in (or would like to get involved in)?*

- *Share about a recent time when you experienced beauty and/or wonder.*
- *How whole and integrated would you describe your life to be? Where, or in what ways, do you experience disintegration, fragmentation, or compartmentalization?*
- *How do you pray, or what do you pray for, when a friend, family member, or loved one is sick or in need? What are your expectations of God when you pray?*
- *Of the missional priorities outlined in this chapter—reconciliation, justice, beauty, and wholeness—which do you gravitate toward? Which do you find most difficult/challenging, and why do you think that is?*
- *What areas or categories beyond reconciliation, justice, beauty, and wholeness can you think of in which we can highlight the reign of Christ?*
- *What’s your experience with journaling? Do you feel drawn to the idea...curious, intrigued? Or do you feel resistance towards it? Explain.*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Journaling

- Continue to look for opportunities to Bless people...
- Continue to create opportunities to Eat with people...
- Continue to make time to Listen to God...
- Continue to make time to Learn Christ...

Now let’s add the habit of journaling. You don’t really need to create yet another designated time for journaling. Rather, incorporate journaling into your listening and learning time. (Or incorporate listening and learning into your journaling time.)

As you journal, reflect on the day (either the day that lies before you or the day you just had, depending on the time of day you journal), keeping in mind that the goal is to be mindful of Jesus and His Kingdom throughout the day. Capture your thoughts and feelings, any ideas or images. Ask God questions; perhaps write out your prayers (you’ll likely find that slowing down to write out your prayers helps keep you focused). Perhaps pray for the various people you interacted with or who you will interact with...depending on the time of day you journal.

There’s not one right way to journal. Make it your own. Allow it to be a special time between you and God. May it reshape your identity around who you are in Christ.