June 25, 2017
Lead Pastor Jim West
BLESS—Eat Together
Luke 5:27-32

Our text this morning will be Luke 5:27-32. Our tradition at Colonial is to stand and read the scripture aloud together. So please stand and join me as we read God's Word together, the words will be on the screens. (Read scripture followed by a short prayer).

As most of you know, as part of “What If the Church?”, 50 churches in the Kansas City Metro have come together around this movement called BLESS. BLESS is an acronym that describes how we as believers can live intentionally to bless our neighbors in the places where we live, work, play and learn.

The B stands for “Begin with Prayer”…emphasizing the practice of praying specifically for our unbelieving neighbors.

The L stands for “Listen and Engage” …this was the message you heard last week about how we ask good questions and listen carefully to the stories of people we meet in an effort to engage with their stories and build relationships.

The E stands for “Eat”, and that’s the subject of my message this morning.

The S stands for “Serve” and the final S stands for Story, such that we share our story and the story of the Gospel with our neighbors. So that’s what BLESS is all about, and as I mentioned earlier, the BLESS movement is something that is being preached and put into practice all over the metro in 50 different congregations this summer. Isn’t that amazing to think about? It is simply mind-blowing to consider what God might accomplish through His church if we were to intentionally put these rhythms into practice.

Now, notice I said “rhythms.” BLESS is not a program…the whole concept of BLESS is that we live in these rhythms, and the way our team talks about it is that we “breath in and breath out” all five dimensions of BLESS. In other words, we breathe in prayer in our personal relationship with God, and we breathe out prayer for others to come to know Him. We breathe in the joy of being known and loved by Jesus so that we can breathe out meaningful questions and intentional listening to bring value and hope to the lives of our neighbors.

So how does the “breathe in and breathe out rhythm” concept apply to eating?

I have no idea. My wife tells me that I literally “inhale” my food, so that may count for something.

Actually, I think we can understand “breathing in” a meal pretty well, right? I don’t know about you, but I like to eat frequently. I need to eat frequently. God instilled an appetite into every human being such that we are dependent upon meals…every day…several times a day. And every time we eat, every time we take in food to nourish our bodies and to sustain our existence, what do we as Christians do? Let me rephrase that: what should we do? We give thanks, right? And as
Christians, we also REMEMBER Jesus, right? That’s how he set it up for His followers on the night that he was betrayed, according to scripture. You’ve heard these words a thousand times, but hear them again in light of what we are talking about with BLESS. From 1 Corinthians 11 we read “On the night that Jesus was betrayed, He broke bread, and after giving thanks he said, ‘This is my body, given for you; whenever you do this (eat!), do so in remembrance of me.’”

Christians “breathe in” meals with gratitude and remembrance of all that Christ did to give us “the Bread of Life” and “Living Water” that fully satisfies our weary souls. We celebrate this rhythm in the church as we gather around the Lord’s Table…we share a meal together…and we call it “communion” because we not only commune with Christ, but we commune together around this table…it is where we are assured of our forgiveness and reminded of our identity as the Body of Christ.

Now before we move to looking at “breathing out” this ministry of the table, let me take you on a quick tour of the scriptures so we can understand the significance of food and sharing meals in the Bible.

Most of you know that all throughout the scriptures there is profound meaning and imagery surrounding food. In fact, when we study the scriptures, we find that eating particular foods and abstaining from other foods served as identifying markers for the people of God. In other words, the Israelites were set apart from the other nations with other gods based upon their diet. Look at Leviticus 20:23-26. God is speaking to His people through Moses, and here is what He says to them:

You shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you…I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

So, before Jesus…before the Messianic age, food (among other things) served to set apart the Israelites from all the other nations. God declared some food to be unclean, and the Jews were to abstain from those foods and to generally avoid participating with those people who consumed such foods.

However, as we get into the New Testament, Peter has a vision in Acts 10 where God teaches Peter to open his heart to the Gentiles…people far from God…and how does he communicate that vision? He uses food to make His point. He tells Peter to eat foods that were formally deemed “unclean” and were thus offensive to the Jews. Remember this story? Peter argues with God that he had never eaten anything that was common or unclean. And then God says, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” The point is clear: In the age of the Messiah, since Jesus died and rose again, food is no longer to serve as a means of differentiating one group of people from another; rather, the sharing of a meal will illustrate how the walls of hostility, mistrust, and division have been broken down through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.
Ironically, it will be the indiscriminate practice of sharing meals together with all kinds of people that will become the identifying marker of Jesus followers…the Church. And of course, nobody modeled the ministry of table fellowship better and more often than Jesus of Nazareth.

When we study the life of Jesus, He is always eating! In fact, Jesus was so often eating and drinking with people that it became a form of ridicule. He acknowledges his critics in Matthew 11:19 when he says, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

Indeed, the wisdom of Jesus eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners has been justified over and over again all throughout history. Jesus demonstrated that sharing a meal with people who are far from God was a critical Kingdom strategy.

Consider Levi…the tax-collector in Luke 5. Now, before we deal with this story, I just have to tell you that I have a son named Levi and he plans on being an accountant…is that weird? Nevermind.

The Levi here in Luke 5 is likely a dishonest tax-collector, but even if he is not dishonest, the Jews assumed he was a scoundrel because most tax-collectors over-charged and made quite a bit of money off their fellow citizens. They were hated, excluded, and detested by pretty much everyone. That is everyone except for Jesus. When Jesus sees Levi sitting at his tax booth, he issues an invitation: Follow me! What the text does not record is that Jesus apparently said, “Follow me over to your house for dinner!” Jesus invites himself over for dinner, which was also his strategy later in Jericho when he invites himself over for dinner at the home of another tax-collector named Zacchaeus. Here’s what we read right after Jesus calls Levi to follow him: “And Levi made a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.”

Jesus intentionally arranged meals with people who were far from God. Why? Why would he do that? That’s a good question, and that question was raised by the most learned religious men in that day. In vs. 30 we read, “And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’” And here’s how Jesus answered that question in Luke 5:31-32, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

I love this story for many reasons. First of all, when I challenge myself to identify with the story, I must first identify with Levi, and here’s why: Jesus called me when I was still a sinner and far from God. Paul says it this way in Romans 5:8, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” How many of you know that Jesus came looking for you in the exact same way that Jesus came looking for Levi? How many of you know that in every sense, Jesus invited himself over to our house so that we might see our sin, repent, and be saved through fellowship with Him? How many of you know that when Jesus says that He came as the Great Physician to bring healing for the sick, that he was talking about you and me?

“Jesus, friend of sinners”….that is what he was called. And why? Because he ate meals with people who were far from God. But when people came to know Jesus over the course of a meal,
they experienced profound life-change. Remember how Zacchaeus responded to dinner with Jesus…he made an about face, promised to make restoration, and tradition states that Zacchaeus went on to be a very devout follower of Jesus.

Notice also how strategic Jesus was by inviting himself over to Levi’s house. Not only did he get a chance to influence Levi, he also got an opportunity to meet with all of Levi’s less than reputable friends! Jesus said wisdom is justified by her deeds…and once again we see that Jesus was brilliant, strategic, and very effective…and he also set an example for his people to follow.

We will see Peter, Paul, and other Jesus followers utilize the table as a means of sharing the love of Christ with a hurting world. Inviting people who are far from God to share a meal has been a key Kingdom strategy now for centuries.

Think about it: there is something remarkably powerful about sharing a meal with another person. We have lost a bit of that mystery in the West, but even today in many parts of the world it is a tremendous honor to be invited into someone’s home for a meal. I have shared meals with people all over the world…India, China, Kenya, Malawi, Guatemala, Haiti…and in every case my hosts were incredibly honored to have me as their guest, and I was so humbled and honored to be welcomed to their tables. Sharing meals together creates a form of intimacy, acceptance, and friendship that can hardly be replicated in any other way.

When we invite people into our home for a meal, we are saying, “We want to know you better, and we want you to know us better. We want to hear your story, and we hope you might care to learn our story.” We are also expressing care that becomes specific instead of general.

One of my best friends from high school, David Rosenfeld, was recently in town on a job assignment, so we had the opportunity to have him over for dinner. When we were teenagers together, David and I shared untold numbers of meals together at my house and at his house. David is Jewish, so it was always fascinating to see how his family prayed before a meal in comparison to how my family prayed before a meal.

However, unbeknownst to me, my old high school buddy had developed some serious food issues in the last 30 years! When I invited him to dinner, he texted me a formal looking card that his wife had created that listed all the foods that David could NOT eat due to his chronic migraines. Not only could he not eat gluten products, but he could not eat anything with soybean products, or sugar…he couldn’t even drink tap water! Lord have mercy! So my wife Christy and I planned everything out to have a meal of fresh fish cooked with corn meal, some veggies and fruit, and he brought the wine! However, several minutes into cooking the fish, we realized that the vegetable oil came from soybeans, so I fried an entire separate batch of fish in Canola oil, just for him. That’s what I mean by caring for somebody in a specific way rather than a general way. To serve people food that they delight in…food that they enjoy…food that doesn’t make them sick…shows a person that you care for them in a specific and personalized way.

Think of David as he wrote the 23 Psalm. He reflects upon the magnificent love of the Shepherd, the LORD, and he writes, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

“Preparing a table” for another person requires planning, preparations, attention to detail, and the decision to give up doing other things so that another person or family is honored with hospitali-
ty and meaningful conversation. In other words, it is an expression of love to “prepare a table” for another person, particularly if that person feels that they are hated, left out, excluded, or marginalized…as was the case for Levi and Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman at the well and so many others…that is until Jesus invited them to share food and drink…and then everything changed.

So, if Jesus utilized meals to express love, care, and inclusion to people who were far from God, what do you think Jesus would have us do to express care and concern for our unreached neighbors? Yep…invite yourselves over to their homes for dinner! Or…it may work better if you invite them to your homes for dinner. Try it both ways and let me know how that works out for you!

Now I know some of you are a bit hyper about your house looking just right, and that obsession with your house being a mess keeps you from having people over. So here is some theological reflection on that subject: get over it! Seriously, people don’t care what your house looks like: they care that you invited them to share a meal. If you invite me over and your house is a mess, I’m relieved…seriously! Now, if you can’t get over it, invite your neighbors to join you for a family picnic at a park or to share a meal at a local restaurant. Even sharing a coffee serves to break down barriers and build relationships.

Alright, you get the point. Breathe in meals at the Lord’s table…remember and be thankful…and breathe out meals in your neighborhood, inviting people far from God to see who Jesus is in the way you care for them around a meal. It worked for Jesus, and Jesus will make it work for us, too. WE just need to trust Him. So church…Begin with Prayer, Listen and engage, and invite your neighbors to share a meal with you. Next week we’ll look at the rhythm of service.