Have you had any spiritual conversations this week? Are you praying for 2 or 3 people with whom God would allow you to have a spiritual conversation? All month we’re talking about having spiritual conversations with people.

But let’s remember that we’re not talking about gigging frogs.

In Jan Karon’s book, At Home in Mitford, Father Tim is sitting in a modest house down by Mitford Creek visiting with the man known simply by the nickname, “Homeless.” Homeless was on the prayer list of every churchgoing person in Mitford—the one guy in Mitford that churchgoing folks would have said needed the Lord worse than anyone.

But Homeless told Father Tim that Homeless was rather suspicious of church people, for Homeless believed the only reason they ever tried to help him was just so they could convert him. “You people…make me feel like a frog you’re tryin’ to gig.”

That’s the danger in the kind of conversation we’re having this month about spiritual conversations with people who are far from God. People might feel like frogs we’re trying to gig. So let’s remind ourselves that this is not about conquests or bragging rights or human trophies to show off.

I’m talking about having genuine, sincere spiritual conversations with people. This month is about loving Jesus and people enough to have spiritual conversations with them.

I want to define a “spiritual conversation.” By “spiritual conversation” I mean a two-way discussion about matters of faith and spirituality between people who care for and respect each other.

Maybe the following will help you understand what I’m talking about…

1) Spiritual conversations probably involve more questions than answers on our part.

2) Spiritual conversations help people consider the words and example of Jesus, without us feeling we have to “close the deal” then and there.

3) Spiritual conversations require us to be ready to answer questions. Nothing prepares us for these conversations like reading the Gospels and other New Testament letters. (Next week we’ll talk about some general content that you might want to share.)

4) Spiritual conversations require our willingness to say “I don’t know,” and to decide if it’s something we can get back to people on. (If someone asks, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” you probably are not going to be able to figure that out and get back to them. But some questions you’ll be able to research.)
5) Spiritual conversations have an ultimate motive but not an ulterior motive (Doug Pollock, God Space).

Here’s what I mean by that: On the one hand, one cannot love people and love Jesus without ultimately wanting people to love and follow Jesus and know they are loved and redeemed by him. For example, I was in a dialogue group for years with Christian evangelicals and Muslims. We really did dialogue, and learned from each other. But I didn’t hide the fact that I’d love for them to follow Jesus. I said to one of the men one day, “I cannot love you and love Jesus and not want you to know Him as I do!” It’s not unloving to want someone to follow Jesus; it’s unloving not to want them to follow Jesus. That should be our ultimate motive.

But, on the other hand, we cannot have an ulterior motive for a conversation. If you have an ulterior motive it means your act is manipulative, your true intentions are concealed and your interests are selfish. We have to find the balance between wanting everyone to follow Jesus and wanting that particular conversation to lead to a decision.

6) Spiritual conversations are of eternal importance.

Let’s prepare for those conversations…

Broaden your circle.

I think my favorite title for Jesus is “friend of sinners.” Religious leaders were appalled at the people Jesus was hanging out with—“sinners”! Jesus didn’t just hang out with them; he seemed to seek them out—even people who had gotten themselves into some pretty awful messes.

There ought to be lots of us here who are criticized as “friends of sinners.” If there aren’t, then why not? Jesus certainly was, and we are supposed to be following Jesus, right? Doesn’t “Christian” mean “little Christ”?

Jesus was kind, so we’re to be kind, right? Jesus prayed often, so we’re supposed to pray often, right? Jesus memorized Scripture, so we’re supposed to memorize Scripture, right?

So why aren’t we friends of so-called sinners?

It’s time some of us broadened our circle of friends.

Shop intentionally in places where you’ll get quality, honest service, but where you will get to know people who are far from God.

Join a civic club or sports club or garden club or some group outside the church in which devoted Jesus followers will be in the minority.

Have a neighborhood cookout at your house and get to know your neighbors.

If we aren’t careful, the longer we are followers of Jesus, the smaller our circles get until they include only Christians.

If your circle has shrunk to include only Christians, you need a larger circle.

If your conversations have shrunk to include only Christians and people who agree with you on everything, you need larger conversations.
If your heart has shrunk to loving only Christians, you need a larger heart.
Let’s be friends of people who are far from God.

Bend your knees.
In the Old Testament book of Ezekiel, Chapter 22, there is an interesting story about God’s desire to spare a sinful group of people. In verse 30 God speaks, “I looked for someone to stand in the gap on behalf of the people so that I would not have to destroy them. But I found none. So now I will pour out my wrath on them.”

God was looking for someone to pray. God was hoping, if you will, that someone would step forth and plead for the people so that He would not have to destroy them.

I don’t understand God’s ways. I don’t understand why God has chosen to wait for us to tap into His power before He exercises it.

But maybe there is someone God loves for whom you can plead. Perhaps God is waiting for you to stand in the gap and plead with Him for some particular person. I don’t understand how our prayers determine God’s actions but somehow, by God’s own design, they do.

Would you pray for people who are lost?

Pray specifically for two or three people with whom you can have a spiritual conversation. Pray that God will provide the opportunities and give you the courage to have that conversation.

Open your mouth.
When you finally are sitting with someone and you sense that nudge from God’s Spirit to have a spiritual conversation, you’re going to have to open your mouth. No one has ever had a spiritual conversation without opening their mouths and saying something.

There seem to be two extremes here.

One is being silent. Not saying anything. A common reason given for not having spiritual conversations is that we are going to let our lives be our witness. The great weakness to that position is that we aren’t that wonderful!

The other extreme is being passionately overbearing. Saying things that unintentionally drive people farther away from Jesus instead of helping them one step closer to him.

Now, if I had my choice I’d probably wish we said too much than too little. One man told Dwight L. Moody, the Billy Graham of the 1800’s, that he didn’t like the way Moody did evangelism; he thought Moody was too aggressive. Moody answered, “Then perhaps I could learn from you. How do you do evangelism?” “Well, I don’t,” the man admitted. Moody said, “I like the way I do it better than the way you don’t do it.”

I’d rather us do it poorly, I think, than not to do it at all.

But having bad spiritual conversations or not having them at all are not our only two options. We can have spiritual conversations well!
The first practical, on-site step to beginning a good spiritual conversation is to open your mouth. To say something. That is the absolute hardest part—the first words.

So here are some suggestions about how to initiate a spiritual conversation…

1) “At church yesterday, the pastor talked about ____.” Have you ever thought about that?
2) “What is your faith story?” or, “Would you tell me about your spiritual journey?” or, “Is religion, or God, important to you?”
3) Read news stories through eyes of faith, and look for opportunities to use them. (We’ll talk more specifically next week.)

You might simply respond to something that the other person says.

1) If someone mentions the death of a colleague or of a famous person in the news, you could ask, “Do you ever think about death, and what happens when we die?”
2) If they have suffered a crisis, offer help. Take a dish. Buy their lunch. Care for them. And if the opportunity arises naturally, speak of how your faith strengthens you in hard times. Don’t help them as some sort of manipulative means of forcing Jesus on them, help them out of love. (Remember “Homeless” who said when church folks helped him he felt like a frog they were trying to “gig”?) Don’t manipulate people, but out of the same love that compels you to help them physically, look for opportunities to have a spiritual conversation.

Close your mouth.

Listen to people. If you are in a spiritual conversation, really listen to the other person without thinking of your response before they finish. Hear people; don’t try to figure out your answer before you know the question.

Open your eyes.

When you open your eyes, what do you see?

Jesus saw lost people as reachable.

Today’s text quotes Jesus: “Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”

What do you see when you look around you? Do you see people who are unreachable? Have you written people off?

Or do you see in them opportunities?

Bill Parcells, famous NFL football coach, once told a story about two salesmen who were sent to Australia to sell shoes to the Aborigines. After arriving, one called back to his boss and said, “There's no opportunities here; the natives don't wear shoes.” The other called back and said to his boss, “There are a lot of opportunities here. These people don't have any shoes!”
How do you see your lost co-workers and neighbors and friends? As people who don't wear shoes or as people who don't have shoes? Jesus saw people as open and available for spiritual conversations.

**When you open your eyes, what do you see?**

**Jesus saw people in need.**

Look at the following, from Matthew 9:36: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

(There is a short video produced by Fellowship Bible Church in Little Rock in which a man leaves his home in a great hurry and stops by for what he hopes will be a quick cup of coffee. Other people, however, keep delaying him…from the boy skateboarding down the street who delays him from backing out of the driveway to the man in front of him in line at the coffee shop who takes too long to order.

But then…then a stranger walks up and hands this hurried guy who is frustrated with all those people a pair of glasses. With those glasses on he sees a caption underneath the face of individuals around him. One man’s caption reads, “Discontent with life.” A lady’s caption reads, “Struggling to find purpose.” The barista’s caption reads, “Fighting addiction.” And then he sees the annoying kid on the skateboard whose caption reads, “Just needs someone to care.”

Obviously we don’t have magic glasses, but it doesn’t take even a great deal of insight to know that people all around us are hurting. Sometimes in ways that would be hard for us to imagine.

**When you open your eyes, what do you see?**

**Jesus saw lost people and loved them.**

Mark 10 tells the story of the exchange between Jesus and the rich, young leader. The sincere young man had followed the Ten Commandments, and mistakenly thought a good relationship with God is primarily about following rules. Jesus wanted more for him. Verse 21 says, “Jesus looked at him and loved him.”

Do you love people?

Some of us are indifferent about lost people. Some of us might even be a bit put off by lost people.

But, as I heard somewhere, “90% of evangelism is love.” Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5 about persuading people to embrace the good news of Jesus and says in verse 14, “Christ’s love compels us!”

Love is as much a choice as an emotion. That means we often love who we **choose** to love. So let’s choose to love people who are unlike us, who are outside the walls, who don’t share our values, or who, perhaps, do share our values but have been unable to embrace the full message of Jesus. And let’s ask God to give us love for people.
When you open your eyes and see lost people, what do you see?

Jesus saw lost people and wept.

Luke 19:41-42 reads like this: “As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.”

Jesus saw lost people and cried. Do we cry or do we turn away apathetically? Or perhaps snarl judgmentally. Jesus saw lost people and cried.

When the religious leaders looked at the crowds they had disdain for them. Jesus had compassion for them.

When the religious leaders looked at the crowds they saw hard-hearted transgressors. Jesus saw people in need.

When the religious leaders looked at the crowds they scowled. Jesus wept.

When the religious leaders looked at the crowds they wrote them off. Jesus looked and said, “The harvest is plentiful.”

How do you see the world?

I remember an old gospel song from days gone by…

*Let me see this world, dear Lord, as though, I were looking through your eyes.*
*A world of men who don’t want you, Lord, but a world for which you died.*
*Let me kneel with you in the garden. Blur my eyes with tears of agony.*
*For if once I could see this world the way you see, I just know I’d serve you more faithfully.*

So how do you see the world?