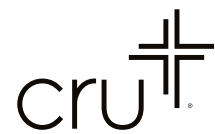


INTENTIONAL

BRYAN NICHOLS



Intentional: A Mission-Focused Adventure Through Jesus' Meals, Miracles, and Parables

Published by CruPress®
100 Lake Hart Dr., #4100
Orlando, FL 32832

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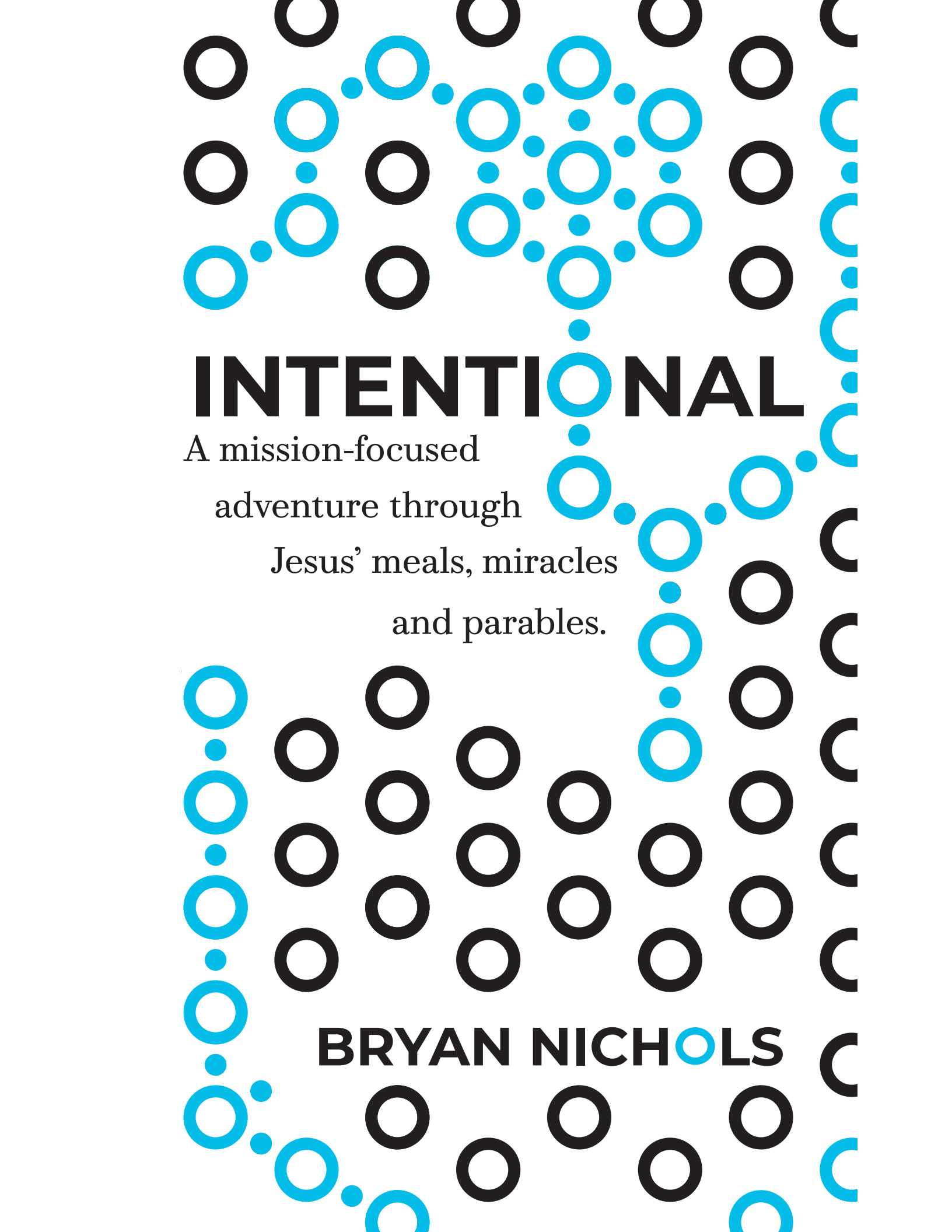
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ISBN: 978-1-57334-278-0

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adventure through
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Introduction

A Resemblance to Jesus

Antoine was seventeen when he was sentenced to thirty years in jail. With vivid detail, he recalls the emotional breakdown that swept over him six months into his prison sentence. It was then that he turned back to Jesus his Savior, whom he had loved and followed intently earlier in his life. “I broke,” Antoine told me. “I cried out for mercy and grace and forgiveness and understanding. And God heard me, and he instantly restored the zeal I had for him several years prior.” Antoine quickly became a spiritual leader wherever he went, starting Bible studies, discipling other men, and even planting a church in a prison.

One prison facility Antoine was assigned to had an honor tier, a section with special privileges reserved for men who exhibited consistent good behavior. Cell doors could be left open. There was

a pool table and a microwave and less violence. Antoine and some friends from his Bible studies received an invite to live on the honor tier, and they gratefully accepted.

In one of their conversations after moving, Antoine brought up the fact that other tiers needed Bible studies, and though the men agreed, no one was willing to transfer back. These men felt they had earned their place on the honor tier. Antoine, however, put in his request to transfer out. Living outside the honor tier would be harder, dirtier, stricter, and messier, but he was willing to make the sacrifice in order to share the gospel and see lives changed by Jesus. Antoine wanted to bear the family resemblance of his Shepherd and Savior. So he sought a way to live the missional, intentional lifestyle Jesus modeled. As Jesus said in Luke 8:21, “My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.” The question for followers of Jesus has been (and always will be): do you want the family resemblance?

The Intentionality of Jesus

Woven through the Gospel of Luke are bright examples of Jesus’ missional, intentional lifestyle. We see Him move proactively throughout the region “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10) and “not... to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (5:32). Jesus further showcases His intentionality with numerous “I must” statements

in this Gospel account, including:

- “I must be about my father’s business,” He says as a boy (2:49, KJV).
- “The Son of Man [i.e., Himself] must suffer many things and be rejected ... and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (9:22, with similar statements in 17:25, 22:37, and 24:7).
- “Zacchaeus... I must stay at your house today” (19:5).
- And “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent,” He states as His ministry kicks off (4:43).

These “I must” statements emphasize that God is pursuing a plan—“A plan,” write D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo, “revealed in the Old Testament, brought to its decisive point in Jesus’ death and resurrection, but only finally fulfilled in the proclamation of the gospel to all nations.”¹

Jesus must be about the Father’s work. Jesus is intentional. Missional. Proactive. And God’s children are propelled into the world by the Holy Spirit, bearing that resemblance. Growing in Christ-likeness is the mark of a Christian. Jesus’ “purpose is not the development of a man; His purpose is to make a man exactly like Himself,” writes Oswald Chambers.²

This study aims to help you grow in Christ-like intentionality with the people God has purposely

placed around you. By modeling Jesus' missional lifestyle, you can love, serve, and share Christ regularly and confidently and, God willing, bear witness to His transformative work in others' lives.

To do this, we will unpack the mission and intention oozing from Jesus' meals, miracles, and parables, as showcased in the Gospel of Luke.

Missional Kingdom

Having withstood the temptations of His adversary, Satan, in the desert (4:1-13), Jesus announces victory and the conditions of His victorious and coming kingdom in Luke 4:18-19. My paraphrase: *To the poor, hope and good news are **here** for you. To the prisoners and the oppressed under Satan's reign, this **new** kingdom releases you. The Lord—Yahweh is His name—His favor, His salvation, and His restoration **now** rule. Let the jubilation begin!*

The Message paraphrase of the Bible sums up Jesus' proclamation with, "This is God's time to shine" (Luke 4:19)! Indeed it is. And in concert with this new kingdom's reign, Jesus:

- Displays His kingdom's restorative strength by performing many **miracles** through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.
- Teaches His kingdom's priorities through **parables**.
- Dines at various feasts and **meals** that are thrown for Him or hosted by Him.

Human history is flooded with reports of kings and queens celebrating their inaugurations with grand feasts, displaying their might through military parades, and circulating teachings, literature, and ethical priorities so the people know the values of their kingdom. Though Jesus follows this familiar inaugural pattern, earthly kingdoms and God's kingdom are staggeringly different. Earthly kingdoms seek power, status, and man-made glory, whereas God's kingdom seeks restoration—reviving marred image-bearers and dispensing new life. Luke, as well as Matthew and Mark, presents an intentional contrast between these kingdoms by telling the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 immediately after the account of Herod executing John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-21, Mark 6:14-44, Luke 9:1-17).

These accounts describe Herod (earthly kingdom) destroying life, and Jesus (God's kingdom) refreshing life; Herod being enslaved to others, Jesus serving others; Herod dehumanizing people, Jesus dignifying people; Herod celebrating human glory, Jesus celebrating His Heavenly Father's provision; Herod exploiting and using people, Jesus welcoming and healing people. And it is this nature of the heavenly kingdom that fuels Jesus' intentionality here on Earth. The Son *must* be about the Father's business of restoration. Therefore, as we seek to be one with the Father and Son as they are one (John 17:22), let's unpack how Jesus used his meals, miracles, and parables intentionally.

Why Meals, Miracles, and Parables

Jesus' meals, miracles, and parables are emblematic of God's kingdom. They beam glimpses of His coming rule and realm. His numerous meals with outcasts, like tax collectors, prostitutes, and the sick—*the scum* as the religious elite see them—trumpet His eternal fellowship in the kingdom with the image-bearers He redeemed and purified. “The LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines,” forecasts Isaiah 25:6-8. “He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.”

Jesus' miracles announce the kingdom's holistic care for people: the spiritually unclean are cleansed and free to worship again at the Temple or synagogue; the socially marginalized are restored to their family and job and life; the disabled are restored to wholeness; the demon-possessed are set free from oppression; and the emotionally drained are refreshed as they unlock a deeper level of intimacy with their Creator and Savior. As Dane Ortlund observes in *Gentle and Lowly*, “Jesus walked the earth rehumanizing the dehumanized and cleansing the unclean.”³

Unearned, unmerited favor (that is, “grace”) colors every horizon of God's kingdom, so, fittingly, Jesus' parables overflow with the theme of tremen-

dous favor proactively and unexpectedly coming to the undeserving. Followers of Christ are molded and shaped by grace. “Looking for sinners,” writes Chuck Swindoll, “He found us in desperate straits. Lifting us to the level of His much-loved Son, He brought us in, washed our wounds, and changed our direction.”⁴

In this study, you will observe Jesus intentionally crossing cultures and social barriers through table fellowship, holistic care, and proclamation of grace and hope. You will also be invited to activate that same style of relational evangelism within your community. As Jesus the Shepherd told His sheep in John 20:21, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

Do you want to enhance your intentionality with others? Do you want your conversations to be marked by curiosity and compassion and confidence? Do you want the family resemblance? Here, you will practice exploring people’s stories over meals, praying for and meeting their acute needs, inquiring about their spiritual journeys, and sharing the hope Jesus alone offers.

How to Make the Most of this Study

This study is intentionally designed to inspire you to take tangible steps of faith within your personal network of relationships, or your “*oikos*” (See **Appendix A**). *Oikos* is a Greek word mean-

ing *household*; however, it does not communicate bricks and mortar and aluminum siding.

In fact, *oikos* refers to “the network of relationships that constituted the ‘household,’ including parents and children, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers, servants, business partners, and others who functioned together with a common purpose,” writes Mike Breen in *Oikonomics*.⁵ As intimidating and difficult as evangelism can be, studying Jesus’ intentionality through the lens of your *oikos* will reveal it to be more natural, more exciting, and more inviting than it is often perceived.

The six studies are labeled ***adventures***, because each aims to launch participants into the spiritual journeys of others. You’ll enter uncharted territory, discovering new stories and perspectives as you explore, serve, and ask questions. Be curious; every person you meet is on a spiritual journey—God is at work in their lives in some fashion—and He desires to use you in the lives of others (See **Appendix D**).

Each adventure is designed to span four weeks. The first will explore a meal, the next a miracle, and the third a parable. Study questions to help unpack the passage are included, along with an action step. *Committing to do the action step each adventure suggests is crucial*. These are modeled after the ***Prayer/Care/Share*** lifestyle Jesus guides his disciples into when he sends them out on mission in Luke 10. Meal studies are paired with an action step of sharing a meal and asking your friend how

you can be praying for them; miracle studies include an action step of intentional care; and parable studies invite you to take a step toward sharing your faith. Finally, the fourth week is an invitation to gather and reflect on your experiences and what you learned from them.

Overall, this material is not linear, so groups can choose which adventure they'd like to embark on together, then continue into any of the others. It's also not necessary to go through all six adventures to have "completed" the material. You can choose however many adventures you feel will strengthen the muscles of intentional prayer, caring, and sharing Christ so that they become more of a habitual rhythm in your lives.

A *suggested rhythm* for these adventures looks something like this: gather to study a meal and have everyone share the person from their oikos they will dine with and pray for; meet two weeks later, allowing for time to carry out the meal, to share what people learned, study a miracle, and plan how they intend to care for their friend; meet two weeks later, allowing for time to meet a need, to share how God led them, study a parable, and commit to starting an intentional conversation where you are able to share your testimony and the gospel; meet two weeks later, allowing for time to carry out the conversation, and share your experience.

Remember to allow for conversation, not a lecture. Every person is a book, so get to know each

chapter. This is an opportunity to listen and offer a description of what God has done in your life (see **Appendix B**) and in cosmic history (see **Appendix C**). People are hungry for rich relationships like these. Today, more than ever, people feel isolated, alone, unengaged, unknown.

The **Prayer/Care/Share** pattern encourages participants to invite others to meals, to curiously explore people's stories, to meet needs holistically, and to share their testimony—all actions that show honor and value to our fellow image-bearers (see **Appendix E** for more about an “Honor/Shame” paradigm). This posture in evangelism stresses thoughtfulness, prayerfulness, curiosity, and intentionality.

A Joyful Adventure

“All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast,” states Proverbs 15:15. Prepare to witness cheerful hearts feasting. Hearts of faithful workers hearing “well done” from their master and receiving unimaginable and unexpected rewards. Hearts of bystanders witnessing Jesus’ miraculous deliverance and proclaiming His astounding power throughout the countryside.

Hearts, which had only known wailing and groaning, now alighted and renewed by Jesus, dispensing laughter, praise, and joy. Frantic hearts now frolicking. Tired, tortured hearts transformed. Rapturous hearts inviting a whole community to come see Jesus.

Scripture teaches that there’s not only a time to mourn, but that there’s also a time to dance, to

laugh, and to feast. With cheerful hearts, let's intentionally celebrate things in our friends' lives and share with them the author of all good gifts, who desires to redeem and reconcile humanity back to Himself, seating them at His table of fellowship.

Session One:

A Meal — *Luke 4:38-44*

Questions:

1. We have all experienced comfortable and uncomfortable meals. If you were present for this one, which would you be? Take a moment to think deeply on the scene and list for yourself ***all*** that you would see, smell, hear, touch, and taste if given a front-row seat in this house with Jesus, Peter, his mother-in-law, and the numerous guests.

2. Simon (a disciple of Jesus who is later renamed “Peter”) invites Jesus as a physical guest into his home. But in what ways was Jesus the *spiritual* host?

3. Jesus’ meals and miracles restored honor and dignity to marginalized people. How did that take place here?

4. Fear of strangers (*xenophobia*) was present in the ancient near east because the slightest bump with the demon-possessed, disfigured, bleeding, sick, or physically broken would render an individual socially and religiously unclean. Why doesn’t Jesus seem to be worried about contact with these people?

5. The Jewish culture Jesus entered into was steeped in the practice of hospitality, that is the welcoming of strangers (*philoxenia* in New Testament Greek). This is why Peter's mother-in-law began serving the people in her house as soon as she was healed. What does hospitality look like in today's world? And what does it look like in your life?

6. We want to grow in Christ-likeness. How are you bearing the family resemblance Jesus displayed in this story? How might you grow in that area?

Challenge:

Look over your *oikos*. Who has God put on your heart? Perhaps someone in your *oikos* just reached a significant goal or experienced something worth celebrating (no matter how big or small or even silly) – honor them, as in the story, by taking them out for a meal or cooking one. Meals and celebrations (even over small things) reflect Jesus, who always gives thanks for God’s provision and knows that all good things come from our Heavenly Father. Let’s initiate and celebrate God, starting with this meal. Each of the souls crammed into that Galilean home had a story—men and women, young and old, battling infection or leprosy, bleeding, demon possession. No two were the same.

So, what is your friend’s story? ***Explore.*** Be an active listener. Get to know the chapters of his or her life. Ask “What can I be praying for?” and commit to praying for your friend daily.

Session Two:

A Miracle — *Luke 4:31-38*

Questions:

1. There is a quality of extravagance in Jesus' miracles. How did that show up in this instance?

2. Why might the setting of this event—a synagogue on the Sabbath—be significant?