

Date: August 11, 2019

Series: *The Art of Neighboring*

Title: *Learning the Art of Neighboring Begins at Home*

Preacher: Mark Adams

Scripture: Various texts

Good morning! We have missed you guys! Last Sunday night Sue and I returned from two weeks in Europe starting with a tour of St. Mon Michelle and the D-Day beaches in Normandy, and ending with the Tatum Military Festival in Edingburgh, Scotland. I can't believe all the things we saw and did in those two weeks! I can't believe how far we walked! I think our average was 14,000 steps a day, many of those steps going up and down steps!

On our last day, Hugh, Bob, and I enjoyed one final hike up to a place called Calton Hill to see the monuments and views it provides. On the way we passed a homeless man sitting on the sidewalk. Like so many others on the streets of Edinburgh this one had a sign that said he needed help. Most people just passed him by, as we were about to. The streets are so crowded and there are so many homeless people they just kind of blend into the background. Sure, some see them and throw a coin or two in their hat, but most just go on by.

But this time was different. As we approached this individual, I noticed a young boy about seven years old. He had a pizza box in his hand and he gently, almost reverently, set it beside the poor man. Then the little boy walked back to his parents who were standing nearby. As I saw what he did, my first thought was, *"Those parents are raising their son right! They are teaching him to obey our LORD's command to love our neighbors!"* My second thought was that God let me see this as a reminder of the fact that learning the art of neighboring begins at home. As parents one of our primary jobs is to teach our children to empathize with hurting people and to love and help them.

With that in mind, as we share communion today as a church family, I want us to remember that Jesus first taught the art of neighboring to His first followers. Now, I tend to think of this group of men and women as a family. Jesus and His first disciples enjoyed a "home" of sorts for those three years of His earthly ministry. Think of it. This group stayed together. They slept in the same place. They shared their meals. They ministered together. Plus Jesus taught them, as a father would his children, the lessons they would need to learn in order to fulfill His Great Commission. All this learning began in that "home" they shared. Like the parents of that boy who gave the food to the homeless man in Edinburgh Jesus raised HIS first children right. I mean, Jesus' parental teaching worked because these first followers turned the world upside down.

Here's the question of the day. What can we learn from Jesus' "parenting?" What did He teach His first "children" that made them so effective at sharing the hope that is only found in Jesus?

(1) First, He taught them to have the right ATTITUDE toward each other.

You see, this first group of followers---this first spiritual family---they were vastly different, incredibly diverse, and yet Jesus taught them to have an attitude of love and respect for one another that allowed them to experience an amazing unity---a oneness that made it possible for them to work together.

In my mind this was miraculous because a first glance these men and women would tell you that if any group of individuals were destined to NOT get along it would be them. They were as different as night and day in temperament, age, economic standing, politics, and culture. Any other group of people that was this dissimilar would have been plagued with irreconcilable conflict. They would have been fighting all the time. Yet miraculously this group of gals and guys hung together and experienced a truly supernatural unity. In fact,

their unity was so solid that after Christ left the earth, they continued to be unified, rooted in their dedication to their Master and His cause in spite of all that could potentially divide them. The women came from different economical strata---Joanna from the court of Herod and Mary the wife of a carpenter. But the fact that men and women would work TOGETHER in that culture was simply unheard of.

And speaking of the men---PETER had a “type A” personality that would drive wedges into any group. If you were a part of this bunch I imagine you would constantly find yourself biting your tongue to keep from saying, “Peter for once would you please sit down, stop talking, and let us think!” JOHN was soft and sentimental and would no doubt irritate the daylighters out of more focused analytical types. ANDREW was the quiet one. Then again if you grew up with a brother like PETER who couldn’t keep his mouth shut, you would probably be quiet too. THOMAS was the perfect example of a questioning skeptic. He was a man who had honest doubts that he was not afraid to share. Many scholars think he was the type who was always obstinate about his negative point of view and pessimistic about any positive perspective.

Among these men, there were not only conflicting temperaments, but there were also more serious, political, professional, and cultural differences that threatened the disciples’ capacity for unity. For example, MATTHEW was a tax collector. Now, having a tax collector in a group of 1st century Jews was a recipe for disaster. These revenue collectors had sold themselves out for their own financial gain in the service of the enemy, the oppressive Roman Empire. They worked for the vile, pagan Romans and made a living by being a part of their subjugation of God’s people. It would be an understatement to say that tax collectors were not popular people. They were hated and despised.

And if tax collectors were gun powder, zealots were the match. Well, there was a disciple named SIMON, and he was a ZEALOT. Some think JUDE was as well. This meant that they were members of the resistance force plotting against the Romans. Think of them as Michigan Militiamen thrown in with an ATF agent and you get the picture. It is amazing that SIMON or JUDE didn’t slit MATTHEW’S throat one night and yet they obviously forgot their differences and worked together to turn the world upside down. And then there was NATHANIEL, who, as Christ noted, was squeaky clean--a Jew with no guile. Throw him in with MATTHEW, whose very occupation as a government bureaucrat would make him suspect as being one with a compromised integrity. Then to all this add four or five fishermen and well, do you see what I mean? This diverse group had every reason in the book NOT to get along---and yet they did!

They worked together; side by side, they experienced amazing UNITY! Why? How? Where did this cooperative attitude come from? I like how Joseph Stowell, president of Moody Bible Institute explains it. He says: *“When lives are consumed with the preeminence, presence, and passion of Christ, then personal agendas and idiosyncrasies fade into the background.”* Jesus’ presence with these disciples transcended all those factors that would tend to create division. You see, Christ has a wonderful way of lifting us above and beyond our differences and calling us to an agenda so compelling that followers can’t afford NOT to get along. We become ONE when we love God and are devoted to the furtherance of His kingdom. These men and women had a powerful unity because they ceased to be consumed with their differences when they became consumed with Christ. And we should note that this unity---this attitude of love and respect---was and still is an answer to Jesus’ last prayer that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. Remember? When Jesus knew the cross was near, He prayed one final time for His followers both then and now. John 17 records that Jesus did not pray for our success or safety or happiness. He prayed for our UNITY. Listen to His prayer in verse 20, ***“I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in Me because of their teaching. Father, I pray that they can be ONE. As You are in Me and I am in You, I pray that they can also be one in Us. Then the world will believe that You sent Me.”***

Jesus uttered these words because He knew that our success at His great commission depended on our unity. He knew that this quality of miraculous ONENESS in spite of diversity is a powerful magnet to draw lost people to God. In fact, I think it should have precedence in OUR prayers. We should join the Apostle Paul and make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. This is why I tell you every Sunday that as members of this church we are CALLED TO PEACE.

Now, this does not mean we compromise our convictions or beliefs. We don't abandon the truths of Scripture. Embracing UNITY does not mean that you can believe whatever you want. UNITY would be impossible under those conditions. But it does mean we understand how important UNITY is and so we constantly guard our attitudes and do everything we can to cherish and protect unity. We don't waste our time arguing over things that don't really matter. We have too much work to do---work that affects eternity.

One thing that tickled me during our trip these last two weeks is how people could look different---but sound the same. For example, in France we saw people of all races speaking French and in England, no matter what a person's skin color, they all had that "Pip Pip Cherrio" speech. In Scotland our waitress for breakfast every morning was obviously from the nation of India, but she spoke with a VERY Scottish brogue. On our hike that last day, Hugh and I climbed up on this Parthenon deal and we saw an Asian couple getting wedding photos taken. The groom was wearing a full kilt. And I could hear his brogue as well. It's like that in a church. We look different---but we speak with the same "accent" --- we share the same message of God's great love for all people. We respect our differences because we know on the inside we are the same. We are all sinners dependent on the love and grace of God.

I want us to pause now and gather around the LORD'S table as a church FAMILY. As we do, let's renew our commitment to love and respect one another so that we can continue to experience UNITY---the kind that we need to experience to be effective disciples. Here at Redland it is our custom to invite all Christians to join us around the table even if you're not a member of this church because if you are His, this is yours.

THE ORDINANCE OF COMMUNION

Isn't it good to gather as one around the table like we have done! It's a great reminder of the fact that though we are different---we are ONE! Here's a second thing that made these first followers so effective, a second lesson Jesus obviously taught them.

(2) They had the right FOCUS.

Jesus taught his little "family" to look at everything through the lens of eternity. So, they lived for, they focused on, things of eternal significance. They were willing to suffer persecution and hardship because they believed that our time here is temporary at best and that the news they carried had eternal ramifications. So, they traveled all over the world giving every day of their lives to share the only Good News that makes Heaven attainable. In short: they believed that Heaven was real and lived like it.

Now, most of us SAY we believe it is real as well. We give a nod to the theology of Heaven but then we live as though THIS WORLD is all we have. If we expect to have any impact on our culture, we need to turn from this way of thinking and be more like these unknown disciples. We must witness and give of our tithes and offerings...we must serve others with a sense of urgency, as if someone's eternal destiny depended on our efforts because it does!

Our time here is limited. In comparison to eternity it is the snap of a finger. We don't have even a moment to waste on temporary things. Listen---the greatest trap of any follower is the trap of temporalism. If life is not

defined by the long-view---if all we live for is the here and now---then we become vulnerable to materialism, hedonism, sensualism and the pursuit of prosperity, power, and position at all costs. And when we live this way, not only will our lives be powerless and ineffective. It is also inevitable that we will be plagued with disappointment and despair.

Peggy Noonan, former speech writer for Presidents Bush and Reagan was dead right when she wrote the following paragraph in FORBES magazine, *"I think we have lost the old knowledge that happiness is over-rated--that in a way, life is overrated. We have lost somehow a sense of mystery---about us, our purpose, our meaning, our role. Our ancestors believed in two worlds, and understood this to be the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short one. We are the first generations of man that actually expected to find happiness here on earth, and our search for it has caused such unhappiness. The reason: If you do not believe in another, higher world, if you believe only in the flat material world around you, if you believe that this is your only chance at happiness---if that is what you believe, then you are not just disappointed when the world does not give you a good measure of its riches, you are despairing."*

Noonan is right. If this is all there is, then as Paul says, we ARE a people without hope; but when we realize that this is only temporary, that the REAL life is yet to be, then we can have peace in the midst of pain and joy in the midst of hardship. C.S. Lewis notes, *"Aim at heaven and get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither."*

You know, eternity is the only reality that can resolve life's insolvable dilemmas. Only an eternal perspective enables us to adequately cope with life's disappointments and frequent unfairness---like three mass shootings in one weekend. So, effective followers of Jesus view all of life -- its good times as well as its bad through the lens of eternity. They measure the worth and value of every activity and involvement not by the bang it creates in this life, but rather by the benefit it contributes to our eternal home. Here's one final thing that made these first disciples so effective.

(3) They followed the right PERSON.

They left everything, their tax collecting career, their fishing nets, the court of Herod, their involvement in the anti-Roman underground, and they followed Jesus Christ as Lord and Master. This choice made all the difference in the world for these men and it still does for us.

You see all of us are created, designed to follow. But most people these days forget this and in fact yearn instead to LEAD. You could accurately say that we live in a day and age in which unprecedented attention is paid to LEADERSHIP. You can't walk into a bookstore without seeing shelves that bulge with books on the subject, books on visionary leadership, strategic leadership, team-building leadership. You can get books about what goes in to making great corporate leaders, political leaders, military leaders, nonprofit leaders. There's a whole genre of best sellers out now about leaders in history, everything from: Leadership Lessons of Abraham Lincoln, to Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun. But nowhere can you find books on what it takes to make a great FOLLOWER. This is because in our culture there is this general idea that following is what you get stuck with if you don't get to lead. It's like a T-shirt I heard of that says, *"If you ain't the lead dog the scenery never changes."*

Everyone wants to be a pitcher or a quarterback or a cheerleader. Everyone wants to be the team captain. Everyone wants MORE followers on social media. I find myself becoming susceptible to this. I signed up for Instagram a few months ago so I could see more pictures of my granddaughter, Emma. Now I've learned to post my own pics---especially from our trip---and I noted that after one posting I had 28 hits, 28 "followers." I

looked it up and the person with the MOST Instagram followers is a soccer player from Portugal---Christiano Ronaldo. He has 308 million followers who regularly “like” his posts---but I’m getting there!

My point is we all want to LEAD---to BE followed not to follow. But the truth is following is a fundamental part of our lives. Think of it. We enter this world as little followers. We follow our parents around and learn from them and imitate them and model them, and drive them crazy. But we’re not just BORN with the need to follow while we are little. It goes deeper than that.

You see, a follower is what we are at the core of who our being. God created us to follow. Being made in His image means we are designed for a following relationship with our Creator. Life only works when we choose to FOLLOW God. Joe Stowell says, *“Self-management is not only the essence of the first sin. It is the very character of sin itself.”* Think about it. Adam and Eve gained anything but a better and more independent life when they decided to do things their way instead of God’s. Everything broke around them. They became enslaved. Plus, they didn’t cease to follow. They instead got locked into following their misguided, misdirected fallen instincts instead of God. Once proud, productive followers of their Creator, after their sin, they struggled as pawns of an adversary who was bent on their destruction. My point is we all follow something in life...self and sin...or God. The only freedom we have is to choose Who or what we will follow. If we follow anything in life other than God we destroy ourselves because, we are built to follow the One in Whose image we were created. We are designed to live connectedly with God...Who cares for us, Who with superior wisdom and power can guide and protect us. Someone in Whom we could find fulfillment and satisfaction.

Douglas Coupland, the author of several best-selling books once said, *“Here is my secret. I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God...I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind as I no longer seem capable of kindness, to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love. To be happy and fulfilled, we need something more in life than we can supply ourselves.”*

Let me ask, who or what are YOU following? Who’s your teacher and guide in life? Remember, when Jesus entered history He made an incredible claim. He said, ***“I am THE way and the truth and the life.”*** Are you following THE way or YOUR way? These first disciples would tell you that life only works when we follow the right Person. Today I invite you to follow their example and abandon whatever lesser lords you serve and give your heart, your life, your allegiance to Jesus Christ. Decide right now to follow Him. If you are here and are a Christian ask Your Master this morning where He is leading you. Perhaps He is telling you that you need to follow His leadership more closely in the way you relate to your spouse or your children. Maybe He is telling you that you have not been following Him when it comes to the way you do your job or interact with your co-workers or neighbors. He could be guiding you, leading you, to join this church. But, whatever God leads you to do...I advise you to do it. And if that involves walking this aisle and making your decision public, now is the time to do so.

Won’t you come as we stand now and sing?