

Welcome to Your Neighborhood

Series: There's No Place Like Home

Brad Bailey - November 15, 2015

In the earlier years of television... just 40 years ago...one the central shows that children gathered around...was Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. And Mr. Rogers would come out and all the story telling and singing centered on the question: "**Won't You Be My Neighbor?**"

What that gentile man asked is no small question.

As some may recall hearing, Mr. Rodgers was an ordained minister...and he knew that the call to be a neighbor... is a central issue.

You may recall....that when a religious man asked Jesus what mattered most in being right with God... Jesus agreed that all the commands of God were rooted and flowed from two great commandments.

Luke 10:27-28 (CEV)

The Scriptures say, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.' They also say, 'Love your neighbors as much as you love yourself.' " Jesus said,... " If you do this, you will have eternal life."

Love God...our lives are only going to be right when He is at the center of our hearts and affections...and from this... we must hold the same regard for others as we would also ideally have for ourselves. We are to love our neighbors.

As you may recall, Jesus then tells the story often referred to as The Good Samaritan. A man was traveling on a road through the hills...when he was robbed and beaten to near death. Misguided religious types pass him by...but a man usually deemed unclean....stops...and embraces his responsibility for the man...and crosses he road to help him. He crossed a road of animosity because the wounded man was among those who looked down n his type...and likely would not have even spoken to him. He crossed the road of indifference.

It's rather challenging when we consider our actual neighbors. Do we even cross the street...the patio on the apartment building?

What if we actually sought to follow the great command of Jesus to love our neighbors... our actual real neighbors?

The paradox of our modern urban culture is that we have **more means to connect** yet people feel **more estranged** from those who are closest to us.

Every time I find some discussion about how different things were in the past...and people talk about how it was when THEY were growing up...the most common thing people say: We could play outside...and people knew us...they knew everyone.

When I grew up... I had a neighborhood...where people actually knew each other.

This raises a challenge we are going to take up. For as many recall... the term neighbor holds a significant place in our calling as human beings.

What if we actually sought to follow the great command of Jesus to love our neighbors... our actual real neighbors?

This is a **challenge** we enjoyed taking up a **couple years ago**...in a series we called **The Art of Neighboring**.

We shared the sense that the word “neighbor” should be thought of as simply a noun...something we are just because of passive location...but needs to be given life... to be a verb... “neighboring.”

It was **like a first crack**... so **many found** a **very significant** moment.... When they considered where they lived...and WHO they had been placed around. So we are **going to engage** that **afresh**...over **just two weekends**.

God wants to say: Welcome to your neighborhood. God is there...His Spirit is present.... He wants to know if we will become neighbors... those who love our actual neighbors.

How? Let me offer 4 steps that I think God would speak to us.

1. Becoming neighbors involves embracing the significance of where we live

Acts 17:26 (NIV)

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

God is sovereign... we each are not only here...in some general sense...because He willed it...but our time AND PLACE is that which he has willed. It doesn't mean that everything is good about it...but that there is a greater purpose for it.

However long you are living where you live...around the lives you live next to...there is a significance to embrace.

2. Becoming neighbors involves knowing our neighbors

For some of us...that simple truth hits home... a little close to home. Because some of us don't know many of our neighbors.

> But we can.

We are going to use the great neighborhood block map... Look in your bulletin.

Find your neighborhood block map. Get a pen.

Put down on the center “My house”.

Some of you live like this.

Others have to use your imagination.

Apartments.... Maybe think about it vertically. Maybe think of it creatively.

Think about the people who live closest to you

As we consider loving our neighbors... we can begin with asking how well we know them by **considering three things**...

You'll see an “a, b, and c” in each box that represents the 8 neighbors who live closest to us.

“a” refers to knowing their names...

The “b” represents the next level of knowing someone...which is knowing something about them... not that they drive a yellow car... but something you have learned from a conversation... where they are from or what family they have or what they may do for work
And thirdly, the “c” represents the further level of knowing something about their heart...their dreams...longings... fears.

Sound challenging? It is. If this sounds like a long ways from where you are now in knowing your neighbors... that is where so many find themselves today. When this challenge is initially presented to people across the country... typically, 10% of people know the names of all 8.... Only 3% know something from conversation about all 8...and less than 1% know the heart of all 8 neighbors. I would venture to say that here on the Westside of Los Angeles... we may start with an even greater challenge.

> **This captures the challenge** we want to **share as a community:**

A call to begin to get to know our neighbors over the next few weeks...to take some steps towards knowing their names and more about them.

But what if what we already know creates some difficulty and distance?

Neighbors... they're **strangers...at least at first**. They're **not people we chose**. So naturally we may want to avoid the messiness...it can be awkward at best...and antagonistic at worst.

It's really **not a question of "if" ...but "when"**...because if we get to know our neighbors it will be **a lot like getting to know family...co-workers...**and other lives we intersect with...**we WILL face these issues**. And they raise **awkwardness....perhaps some tension** is us...and likely some **fears**.

And why are we sometimes more reluctant to go love our neighbors than we are to go on a mission's trip to skid row or India?

What if the people that live next door are **annoying?** their **personality is very demanding?**

What if they **live in ways that are very different** from your own?

What if your neighbors are people that **you'd never choose to hang out with?**

What if we discover some their **political perspective** is entirely at odds with ours?

What if their **view towards our faith** is entirely antagonistic?

This week I got an email from a friend here in our church community who said:

“This "neighbor stuff" is cool and such a challenge. I'm finding snippets of opportunities to connect with parents at school. And to be more engaging when walking around the neighborhood. And listening at work. Finding out what other people are going through, celebrations and struggles. Seeing what doors God may open. In new ways Jesus is striking my heart ...a really different heart that wants to be a neighbor.there are some who ...seemed pagan to the point that I felt I needed to "keep my distance" for safety's sake. God is revealing His heart for them, letting me know He'll protect me. And if He has this heart for them, then how

can I not let Him open my heart to them?

He was hearing God's invitation to cross over the distance...which brings us to the next point...

3. Becoming neighbors involves discovering our common ground.

Our whole **culture defines us by our differences....whether age, gender, race, cultural, or political differences.**

Whatever the difference is...

We are **constantly being shaped to see ourselves in CONTRAST to others...not in CONNECTION to them.**

Human nature seems to thrive on conflict...and hostility thrives **on FEAR.**

- **Dismantle False Barriers**

Dismantle the Stereotypes

If you are woman and you think all men are dangerous degenerates...it will limit your relationship to your neighbor.

If you think all people of a **certain racial or cultural background** are a certain way...it will limit your relationship to your neighbor.

If you are political conservative...or a political liberal... and you think everyone who associates with a different political perspective is a certain way... it will limit your relationship to your neighbor.

The same is true with issues of spiritual belief.

One man has written a lot about the desire to **cultivate positive relationships** between **Christians and atheists**...and his first major point is "Drop the stereotypes" [2]:

"If you want people to see you as more than just your label, you're going to have to do the same for them. Not just when it's easy—when people seem to be similar to you—but in every case. In each religious or nonreligious category, many different kinds of people exist. But because we live in a society that associates religious differences with conflict - very often mean-spirited or violent conflict, at that—it's important to be patient and compassionate whenever possible, and to allow people to speak for and define themselves." [3]

Drop the categories...labels... tags.

In turn, it can be a part of what we hope people will do with us. If they discover you go to church... are a "Christian"...do you know what they often wonder next?

> **What KIND of Christian are you?** That is what many people want to ask...and it reflects their desire to know you beyond the label... beyond the stereotype. We hope they will get to know what it really means to us...rather than assume we are like the stereotype in their minds.

In this way...we are following the way of Jesus.

Jesus didn't define relationship by how much someone belonged on the inside of some set of religious moral boundaries.

He didn't stay inside a religious circle. He met people in every difference...ethnically....politically... religiously...and simply shared the light of a new center around which they could find life.

Along with dismantling the false barriers... we can...

- **Discover Common Ground**

Consider how God has sought to relate to us. The whole incarnation expresses the need to identify.

John 1:14 (NIV)

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Then as we noted last week...he **lived it out**...eating **meals with peasants and prostitutes**...which in early Jewish culture was the ultimate expression of fellowship.

The writer of the Biblical book of Hebrews describes how Jesus became the ultimate priest...how he identified with our condition. He explains that "since the children have flesh and blood. [4]

"...he (Jesus)...shared in their humanity" - Hebrews 2:24

We tend to diminish Christ's humanity... at least in terms of real human feelings and experience.

We are more afraid to be human with our neighbors than God has been with us.

"...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses" - Hebrews 4:15

Jesus was ABLE to sympathize with our weakness.

Paul... one of those religious leaders grasped this power of identifying.

1 Corinthians 9:22 (NLT)

I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some.

This is such a rich expression of how we should live... that I want to share how it is paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in The Message...

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (MSG)

I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view.

> **It's about common ground. It's not about becoming deceptive by pretending** to be what we are not... **but recognizing that we actually can relate** to the various experiences that are a common part of the human experience.

Some of us naturally relate to truth in such a way that when we engage someone else...we want to define our differences. Perhaps it helps with clarity. But Paul learned that what we need to start with is common ground...what we can identify with.

Are you approaching others as an advocate or an adversary?

Are you defining the relationship by disagreement...that implies you are against the person...or do you look to affirm whatever is good...and imply that you are their advocate?

The children's television host Mr. Rogers always carried in his wallet a quote from a social worker that said,

"Frankly, there isn't anyone you couldn't learn to love once you've heard their story." - Mr. Rogers

4. Becoming neighbors involves the power of hospitality.

God has an antidote to our separation. It's called hospitality.

In our **contemporary usage** of the word "**hospitality**" ... we may simply think of those who **throw good parties**....where the **setting is elaborate** and the **food is amazing**.

While that **can reflect something** about hospitality...but when we consider the life of Jesus... the centrality of gatherings... many of which were meals... let me ask us:

What was more powerful and prophetic in the way Jesus lived and shared life with others... the menu or the guest list?

As we engage his choices... and the reactions... it becomes profound how significant was his choice of who was being joined together like family. > **It is this that is at the root of hospitality.**

Jesus **used homes and meals to define and declare where God actually was**... eating meals with peasants and prostitutes...which in early Jewish culture was the ultimate expression of fellowship.... and his choices were in such sharp contrast to the religious leaders.

This offended the religious leaders...because they knew that accepting an invitation to someone's home...and sharing in a meal implied they could be included in one's life.

Hospitality has the power to DEFINE relationship.

Jesus understood that it is in such hospitality that we communicate that "my life is not fundamentally or fully separated from yours" ... "I will identify myself with you..." There is a basic level of inclusion in life. That is precisely why it was **shocking and controversial to some... and life changing to others.**

The power of hospitality lies in the significance of INCLUSION.

Hospitality is an expression of inclusion... including others in the common bonds of care.

While it certainly can refer to how we welcome those we may know...it is really defined by how we welcome those new or newer to our lives...the guest or stranger.

The Latin root of the word *hospitality* is *hospes*, which refers to a guest, visitor, host or stranger. Our word *hospital* is derived from this same root word... and the word *hostility* from it's opposite. (*hostis*: stranger, foreigner or enemy.) [5]

In modern urban America, our home is often our final line of defense against the world. At the end of a hard day, you rush through the maddening crowds to get home by nightfall. Once inside your castle, you grab the rope and begin pulling up the drawbridge. You push a button and water fills the moat around your house and out come the piranhas.

We need to re-grasp the power of hospitality...to lower our walls and reopen some doors.

It's a power that sustains life. We use it today in science to speak of a host environment as friendly and hospitable if receives and sustains the life of another.

Every life wants to know where it can be received and given a place to grow.

- William Barclay said that true *“Christianity was and still should be the religion of the open door.”*

Everyone has the power of hospitality within them.

We are all called to exercise the power of hospitality. [6]

Romans 12:13 - “Practice hospitality. (NIV) = “make an effort”... intentional

“Be inventive in hospitality.” (Message)

Some principles for joining in the power of hospitality...

1. Hospitality includes but is not limited by our homes or places of living.

The nature of hospitality sees **huge significance in our homes**... because our **homes are the most notable expression of being a family**... of being included. The meals that are served there express this in the most essential way.

Maybe you have some limitations in the opportunity that your living space provides.

> Hospitality is **NOT just about our living spaces**. There are other ways we can extend ourselves to others.

- **Take time to talk with a neighbor or go visit something they are doing**... Consider some of the **life events and transitions people may be in**...someone moving in...or moving out... getting married or having a child...or starting a job. These all offer opportunities to connect in common bonds of care.
- **Take someone to lunch, coffee...**
- Simply choosing to include a person at work that others haven't

2. Hospitality appreciates the significance of offering what is ‘special’ but is centered in the simple.

Jesus tells us of **banquets**... but also of **basics**... even a **cold cup of water**.

It’s **not about** being **Martha Stewart**...it’s about being Jesus.

It’s about the treatment of the people not the place.

3. Hospitality involves initiative

Jesus was intentional...and he calls us to be intentional.

Hospitality isn’t easy for many of us. The greater value we place on privacy, the less likely we are to practice hospitality. We may think it will steal away the little bit we have in life.

> I ask you to stop and look face to face into that feeling... because it belies the greater truth... that our lives become bigger when they are expanded by compassion and hospitality. Not more comfortable... but more rich... more satisfying.

There is a **lot that could be said** for having **appropriate boundaries and balance in our lives**... but I don’t want us to miss the vital challenge that most of us need to engage. This isn’t easy... but it’s essential.

A Challenge: Join a vision to...

- Connect with the closest 8 neighbors over these weeks of November
- Plan a holiday get together (potentially the weekend of Dec. 6-8)

We even have a **great suggestion**....consider the **first weekend after Thanksgiving...the first weekend in December**....before all the other commitments on the schedule.

Consider a simple cider and desert gathering on Friday evening... or Sunday evening afternoon

Use the term “holiday” rather than Christmas... that welcomes those from Jewish Hanukkah traditions...and secular.

Great to be the host...but even better would be getting neighbors to do it together.

The way of Jesus means following after Him..... learning to love, to give, to serve

Luke 13:18–21 - Then Jesus asked, “What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.” Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

“What is the kingdom of God like?”

.... a “mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden.

The mustard seed is very, very small. The black mustard seed was the smallest seed ever sown by a first-century farmer in that part of the world.

But even though the mustard seed was small, it grew to be the largest of the herbs grown in that area. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches.”

.... God’s working is like “yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”.... this small amount of yeast will affect the 100 people it will take to eat all the bread being made.

God uses small things to accomplish great things.

Mother Teresa’s life’s message was “We cannot do great things we can only small things with great love.” - Mother Teresa

“I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.” - Mark 9:41

CLOSING – A story I shared before...

When elderly **Adele Gaboury** turned up missing a few years ago, concerned neighbors in Worcester, Massachusetts, informed the police. A brother told police she had gone into a nursing home.

Satisfied with that information, Gaboury's neighbors began watching her property. Michael Crowley noticed her mail, delivered through a slot in the door, piling high. When he opened the door hundreds of pieces of mail drifted out. He notified police, and the deliveries were stopped.

Gaboury's next-door neighbor, Eileen Dugan, started paying her grandson \$10 twice a month to mow Gaboury's lawn. Later Dugan's son noticed Gaboury's pipes had frozen, spilling water out the door. The utility company was called to shut off the water.

What no one guessed was that while they'd been trying to help, Gaboury had been inside her home. When police finally investigated the house as a health hazard, they were shocked to find her body. The "Washington Post" (10/27/93) reported that police now believe Gaboury **died of natural causes four years ago.**

The respectable, external appearance of Gaboury's house had hidden the reality of what was on the inside.

In the same way...**we may have neighbors** whose life looks great from the outside... but who are dying on the inside.

Closing: Prayer in small groups

I want to give each of us who claim this life... an opportunity to consider at least one person we now who we can pray for. I want us to consider their need... to pray for an appropriate opportunity... and an appropriate response to their needs.

This is a challenge that I have felt stirred by myself. > Example: Two years ago we hosted a party... three months ago... fire... neighbors all out front...one by one inviting us to stay at their homes if we needed to.

> **In that simple exchange...we became more truly neighbors.**

Notes:

1. About Mr. Rogers: "...what most people don't realize about Mister Rogers and his Neighborhood is that behind the puppets, the tennis shoes, and the simple songs lies an abiding faith and weighty theology. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ordained Fred Rogers as "an evangelist to work with children and families through the mass media." <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/march6/1.38.html>

See also: [21 Heartwarming And Beautiful Facts About Mr. Rogers](#) and [Mr. Rogers Was a Counter-Culture Christian Icon](#)

2. Shared by permission from Charley W.

3. 1. Chris Stedman - "Want to Talk to Non-Christians? Six Tips from an Atheist" at <http://www.qideas.org/blog/can-christians-and-atheists-be-friends-this-atheists-thinks-so.aspx>. Also has recent book *Faithiest: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*

John Shore - What Non-Christians Want Christians To Hear, Posted July 29, 2013 at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unfundamentalistchristians/2013/07/what-non-christians-want-christians-to-hear/>

4. More extended text of Hebrews

Hebrews 2:14-18 (NIV)

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil--¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants.¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.

5. Leslie Flynn gives us this helpful background on the meaning of the English word "hospitality."

The main part of the word hospitality is the word hospital. Ancient travelers, whether pilgrims or businessmen, fared poorly when venturing beyond their own country. Thus religious leaders established international guest houses in the fifth century. These havens were called hospices from hospes, Latin for "guest."

During the 15th century secular interests took over most entertaining of travelers. So the hospital restricted its function to care and treatment of the sick and handicapped. But originally, hospital meant “a haven for guests.” (Leslie Flynn, 19 Gifts of the Spirit, p. 109.)

6. It is here that Jesus' model formed the thinking of the early church.

- For Jesus, the distinctive of hospitality was that you not only opened up your home and your life to friends, those you already know, those you already have relationship with, but you open up your home and life to the stranger, to people you don't know.
- You live in an ever increasingly larger circle.
- Hospitality was a criterion for choosing elders. No one could be considered a leader if they didn't show hospitality. It was required of leaders to be “hospitable” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7-8)
- It was a commandment given to all Christians. And hospitality is a standard by which you and I will be judged eternally.
- Christ even pointed to the practice of hospitality as evidence that we have come to know him as Savior, and a lack of hospitality as evidence that we haven't.