

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 81 | Loving Our Neighbors, Part 1: Who Is My Neighbor?

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Ben Sooy



Autumn: Welcome to the Vision For Life Podcast, an ongoing conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and Church at-large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, host of the Vision For Life Podcast, and Ben Sooy is joining me today. Ben, welcome.

Ben: Hey!

Autumn: Hey! So glad to have you. I've known you for a while. We were just discussing, I think I met you in 2015 and you said that was the second time you had moved back to Denver.

Ben: Yes, that's right. You think you get out and they suck you back in. In 2015 I started working at Hope in Our City, which is a ministry partner of Fellowship, and my wife Kate and I also became members of Fellowship Denver back in 2015. And so we worked together on Summer Kids Club in Sun Valley and a bunch of other stuff since then.

Autumn: Yes, and have been friends since then. And you are someone who I have enjoyed working with, thoroughly appreciate your friendship and Kate's friendship, and I have learned so much from you. So, I'm really excited to have you join us on the podcast today. So that is one fact about your life—how long you've known me—our listeners may benefit from knowing a little bit more about you.

Ben: Well, my claim to fame is I'm in a band with Jesse Cowan. We're called A Place For Owls. Uh and we write songs together and play shows and also-

Autumn: I can attest to that!

Ben: Yeah, 'I can attest to the fact that you play shows, [but] I'm gonna make no statement about the quality of those shows...'

Ben: I also work, as my day job, I work full time at an organization called Mile High Ministries and Joshua Station, which is a Serve Denver partner of Fellowship Denver Church. I also—Kate and I—we spent the last couple of years doing other church ministry stuff elsewhere and we just restarted our membership, Autumn, at Fellowship Denver.

Autumn: Ben, I am so overjoyed about that. Welcome to the podcast. We're really, really so excited to say welcome back to being a regular part of our life here at Fellowship Denver.

Ben: That's right. It's felt really good. It feels like coming home in a lot of ways.

Autumn: You mentioned Mile High Ministries and Joshua Station, which is where you currently work. And you also mentioned that is one of our Serve Denver partners. We have existing partnerships with many organizations around the city who work to address different needs in the city. So, Hope in Our City works with refugees in particular. We have different partners who work in the area of job training and a Serve Denver partner that is a food bank near our building. So, these are different organizations that are working to address actual needs that people have in our surrounding community. What is the work of Mile High Ministries or Joshua station in particular?

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 81 | Loving Our Neighbors, Part 1: Who Is My Neighbor?

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Ben: Yeah, well, Mile High Ministries has been around for over 30 years now. I've heard legend that—so, one of the first staff members of Malcolm ministries is Jeff Johnson—I've heard legend of when Fellowship Denver started, Jeff Johnson was one of the first guys to preach for Dave and Hunter at Fellowship. So, there's been a long term connection there, Mile High Ministries has done a bunch of stuff in the city of Denver for the last 30 years. Joshua station, we're celebrating our 20th anniversary this year, Joshua station is a two-year supportive housing program for families coming out of homelessness. This is a place where families can move from chaos into stability, move from relational isolation into true community. And I guess the last few years, Mile High Ministries, we've started to focus more on three interrelated problems, which I think I'll talk more about later. But the first problem is homelessness, which has been on the rise in our city every year, like clockwork for the last 10 years. Unaffordable housing, which it's more—I don't even know if this is grammatically correct to say it this way—but it's more unaffordable to live in Denver now than it has ever been, right.

Autumn: Yeah, you and I were just talking about a headline that we read this week that says Denver is now the fifth most expensive area in the entire country.

Ben: Yeah, it's cheaper to buy a home in New York City right now than it is in Denver, Colorado, which is kind of ridiculous to me. And so the first problem we see is homelessness, the second problem that we see is unaffordable housing, that crisis that we're in, and then third problem we see is social isolation and loneliness. Denver is becoming one of the loneliest, statistically, one of the loneliest cities in the country to live. Back in—this is even pre-covid numbers—back in 2018, Denver was the third loneliest city in the country. Number one was—I always flip it whether one and two—one was Las Vegas Nevada, two was Washington D.C., and three was Denver, Colorado.

Autumn: I don't know, Denver is the third loneliest in the fifth most expensive...why do people keep moving here?

Ben: It's also somehow the best place to live in the world, right? There's some real cognitive dissonance because there's a Denver story that we tell ourselves that this is a fun, engaging, adventurous place to live. But one of the things that I'm realizing, especially being in community with families that are formerly homeless, is that Denver is a great place to live, and a really adventurous and kind of engaging and vibrant place to live...if you can't afford it, right? If you can afford—when we first moved to Denver back in 2011, we were surprised because the normal get-to-know-you question is like, what do you do? But in Denver we found that folks more asked, especially young hipster folks that were living in Cap Hill where we lived at the time, they would ask, like, what's your thing? And what they meant by that was, what's your expensive, all-consuming hobby? Like, do you do ultimate frisbee? Do you go skiing? Do you hike? What do you do? right? And so, one of the things I realized is that Denver is a great place to live if you can afford the "good life," and our particular definition of the good life which is recreation, freedom, feeling untethered.

So, the reality though is that Denver is lonely in two different ways. One, it's lonely if you grew up maybe in a historically poor community and your neighborhoods are changing. You know like we've been in Denver long enough to remember when Northwest Denver was the Latino neighborhood in our city. Uh, now it's where you go to spend \$17 for ramen and get really good vegan ice cream, which is just a different experience. I love—I'm lactose intolerant, so I love the vegan ice cream just to be clear. But the reality is that if you grew up in Northwest Denver, and your neighborhood is now called LoHi, and there's this process that we call gentrification where your neighborhood is changing. The housing prices go up, so if you rent you feel forced out because you can no longer afford the rents in your neighborhood. Or, if you own your

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 81 | Loving Our Neighbors, Part 1: Who Is My Neighbor?

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home, we have friends that felt forced to sell their historic family home because they could no longer pay the property tax on it because the property tax goes up every year based upon the price of the neighborhood that you're in. And so these are the problems that we see of where homelessness is worse and feels worse and it seems worse than it's ever been in our city. Like that visible kind of homelessness that we can see out there in the world of tent camps and folks on the side of the road. But also, homelessness is increasing in a sort of invisible way that we can't even see, like families that are doubling, tripling up three families in a three-bedroom because that's what they can afford. Families that are scraping together money to stay in a motel for the night, teenagers who no longer feel safe at home because of a complicated or traumatic or abusive situation at home that are couch surfing with friends. And it's easy to... you know, you don't end up homeless without some sort of breakdown in family or community, and you don't end up homeless without running out of spare couches and spare bedrooms to sleep in. And so, we're seeing homelessness as a crisis on affordable housing; I think that more and more of us are feeling the pinch of that. And this social isolation and loneliness pieces is just on the rise.

So, Mile High, we—as we see these problems—we're trying to do redemptive work in the city of building more affordable housing, creating more communities where the formerly homeless can find rest and sanctuary and stability, and we're trying to invite more and more, especially Christians in Denver, to be folks who are doing that redemptive work of getting out there and befriending folks that are struggling. But the reality is, we talked about this a minute ago, but the reality is that these problems not only affect the poor and the very poor in Denver, but they affect us all in some degree. And I think strangely this is like a weird gift that, like, maybe this is an opportunity for us that maybe we're middle-income or double-income, no kids, we're sort of like 'Denver's fine...we're paying more in rent than we would like to,' and that's like 'we're feeling the pinch there,' and then, you know, one of the things I think about a lot is what does it mean to be an anchor person in a city like Denver where it feels like you're making a new group of friends every two years or so because folks are moving in and folks are moving out? That feeling of maybe isolation and loneliness that a lot of us experience in the city, and that feeling of the pinch financially that we're paying more in the house, and maybe we're like, maybe this is an opportunity for us to build empathy for our neighbors who are poor and very poor and struggle in ways that are deep and profound.

Autumn: Thanks Ben, that look at the heart behind Mile High Ministries, Joshua station, is so helpful for setting the context of our conversation today. And not only today's conversation, but this conversation is going to lead into several weeks in which we're thinking about the biblical idea of loving our neighbor. And you use some words earlier that I'm just going to start using too, that love of neighbor has- it carries this intrinsic work ethic. So, we're going to talk about that idea today and in coming weeks.

And then another thing you mentioned were issues specific to Denver to the area that we all live in, work in, that many of us love. We want to see people in Denver thrive. We want to see people in Denver experience hope, and come to know Jesus, but also have their actual needs met. And so, in our conversation today, we're going to pull those threads together. But I want to start with what is the theological underpinning for the work that Mile High Ministries does? For part of what we talk about here at Fellowship Denver as one aspect of why we exist as a church in the city, this idea of love of neighbor and, in our work together before at Hope in Our City, when we would do kids club together, you and I talked about this a lot. And you taught often on this topic, and I learned so much from listening to you process the passages in the New Testament that talk about how it is that we actually love our neighbors. And so, one of the topics

that I asked you to talk about today is that very thing. And this idea, this theological concept that turns into this real action and posture in the way we live, is what will carry through in all of these conversations in coming weeks as we ask, how do we invest in the people around us? How do we build up our city and the people in our city? How do we work towards a Denver that is thriving or a neighborhood or a neighbor who is thriving? So let's start there with this idea: what passage do you want to turn to today, or what story do you want to share with us?

Ben: Yeah, Luke 10 is a passage that I think about a lot. The good Samaritan story is what it's mostly called. And I'm just going to summarize it real quick. So, a teacher of the law comes to Jesus and says, 'What is the most important commandment of our Scripture?' Like, 'What's the thing that I can't miss about what we call the Old Testament?' but what Jesus and other Jews would call the Scriptures, right? And Jesus—and I love this, this is a prime teacher move—He answers a question with a question. He says, "What do you read in the Scripture? You're the expert on the law," and the expert on the Old Testament says, 'You shall love the Lord your God with everything that you are and all that you have, and you shall love your neighbor in the same way that you love yourself.' And Jesus says, 'You've answered correctly. If you do that, you'll live.' And life here is not only like good quality of life here but also eternal life with God, right? And this is the part where it gets sort of off the rails, where the expert in the law goes, now, desiring to justify himself, He goes, 'Who is my neighbor?' And this is a really interesting question because it's clearly trying to do what humans always try to do, which is creating an in-group and an out-group, and the in-group we're going to care about and the out-group were not gonna lift a finger for, right? And he's trying to baptize that instinct that humans have to create in-groups and out-groups with religious language and in a religious context, and he's trying to get Rabbi Jesus to do the same. So he says 'Who is my neighbor actually?' So if I'm supposed to love my neighbor in the same way I love myself, 'who is my neighbor?' And Jesus tells a story which is the famous good Samaritan story where someone gets in trouble, and the person who helps the person who's in trouble, and helps them in a profound and practical way, is a Samaritan, which, if you know about the cultural context of first century, Palestine Jews and Samaritans did not get along with each other. It was like the hated enemy, the person who's going to be like, you see them coming towards you on the sidewalk and you cross the street to avoid them, right? That was Jews and Samaritans.

Autumn: So if there were in-groups and out-groups within this man's social, cultural, religious framework, the Samaritans were already an out-group.

Ben: Yeah, they're 100% out there. Like, they're worse even than the Roman occupiers, right? They're blood traders, they're folks that have not followed after the true God of Israel, they've mixed in their religious practices with the pagan—there's a bunch of religious and social and cultural reasons to hate Samaritans if you are in the mindset of the person dialoguing with Jesus in the story, right? But Jesus is not having any of that. And so He chooses in this parable in this story to make the person who actually loves their neighbor in a practical way the hated enemy and the person who's in the out-group. And so, for me, there's a couple of takeaways and a couple of real profound lessons for life. One is there's no person that I can determine to not be deserving of my assistance or my help. There's literally no person in the world who earns their way out of the right to be helped by me, right? The second is in the story, the good Samaritan, he put the guy who was beat up on the side of the road on his donkey and took him to an inn and paid money. It cost him time and effort and energy, and it was a real like, he practiced, like you said, a work ethic of love your neighbor.

And so one of the things that I just like to reflect upon is what does it actually mean to love your neighbor in the same way that you love yourself? So, first of all, how does a healthy person love themselves? Like if you're hungry and you've got a fridge full of food, does a healthy person sit passively and say, 'I wish I had a sandwich,' or would you go into the kitchen and make a sandwich? A healthy person would go in and make a sandwich. If you are struggling to pay rent in your home, and you have the physical ability to work and go out and find a job, does a healthy person wait at home and passively wish I wish someone would pay for my rent? Or do they go out hustle and work hard to find a job and provide for themselves and their family, right? Like a healthy person loves themselves by advocating for themselves, working hard for themselves, moving heaven and earth so that they get the stuff that they need, right? And I think sometimes we- there's a there's an episode of the Simpsons—Jesse will love this—there's an episode of the Simpsons where Johnny Cash guest stars as a Space Coyote, and at some point in the episode Homer Simpson eats a Chilean insanity pepper that's so hot that he hallucinates and he sees Johnny Cash appear as a Space Coyote and Johnny Cash says, 'Find your soulmate, Homer.' And so he's going around trying to find this soulmate, and he goes to all of his friends, and his friends are like, 'No, I'm more of a compatriot. I'm more of a-' and my favorite one is Moe Szyslak says, 'I'm a well-wisher in the sense that I do not wish you any particular harm.' Like, I am a well-wisher in the sense that I do not wish you any particular harm. And I think we—this is a dumb, stupid analogy—but it's like, I think we think that we're being obedient to love our neighbors in the same way that we love ourselves if we have not actively sought to destroy our neighbor today, or we've sent out positive vibes into the world, or we've just left them alone, which is something Colorado's love to do. Like, I feel like sometimes the Colorado golden rule is just leave me alone and I'll leave you alone. And so, we think we've loved our neighbors when we've just left our neighbors alone or maybe we haven't actively sought to destroy them, but Jesus says you love your neighbor in the same way that you love yourself, and a healthy person loves themselves by working hard. It's like a sweat work ethic sort of love. So, I think we're called to love our neighbors, especially those hated enemies, those others, those folks that society says, 'what's the point of them?' 'Why do they even exist?' 'Why can't we just get them out of here?' Like, we're supposed to love them but not just with warm feelings in our heart, but it's those warm feelings that manufacture in actual action and often sacrificial, self-emptying love sort of action.

Autumn: So, from this story, we see these demonstrations of love as being costly. It is not passive, it's self-sacrificing and it doesn't determine—love itself does not, or cannot, in the way it's described in this story—determine who is a worthy recipient. It seems though that our lives, particularly our modern notions of life, are constructed in a way that makes the sort of love demonstrated in the good Samaritan story particularly difficult at times. Difficult maybe for us to conceive of in a way that pulls that illustration into our reality. So, what are some of the hurdles that we might experience that keep us from practicing that kind of love?

Ben: Well, you know, I mentioned that Coloradans, we seem to be taught a lesson that, well, it's you know, we talked about it as individualism, right? An extreme sort of rugged form of individualism which is 'you leave me alone and I'll leave you alone.' And there's also a thread that I think is bad in American culture, but then I'm gonna—hot take—particularly bad in Denver culture, which is, there are some people that deserve help, and there's some people that don't deserve help. And we can put qualifiers whether that's based upon in the same way that contemporaries in Jesus's day would say the Samaritans are undeserving of help, and no way in heck would a Samaritan help out an Israelite. We are just wired to create these in-groups and out-groups of people that we're like, 'we're okay if we don't help them.' But we- you know, my grandma would say growing up, she would say 'charity starts at home.' And, you know,

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 81 | Loving Our Neighbors, Part 1: Who Is My Neighbor?

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Ben Sooy



we were poor-er, but what—I love my grandma, no shade on grandma—but what that translated to sometimes was ‘charity ends at home.’ We, because we sort of have these scarcity mindsets, and we create in-groups and out-groups, whether it's around family, or ethnicity, or income level, or some sort of cultural context, whatever. We say we're going to help out people that look like us, think like us, act like us, vote like us, believe like us. But if folks are those outsiders, we're not going to do anything. So that's sort of that first divide of individualism which teaches you that there's some people that don't deserve help, and of course people that are like us do deserve help though.

But then there's also a culture of box checking and check writing. So, another story that I think about a lot is from Luke 14. Jesus says when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind; don't invite your friend, your neighbor, your rich relative, somebody who can pay you back, but prioritize relational space with folks that are struggling and folks that society says, ‘What's the point of them?’ And sometimes our—what we're taught in sort of American culture—is like, if you see a problem, a problem of poverty, a problem of whatever, our go-to solution is, ‘can we write a check or can we raise funds for that?’ Now there's great nonprofits like Mile High Ministries, and Cross Purpose, and Hope in Our City, and a bunch of others who do need checks written. So be—I don't want, you know, my coworker who works with donor development to be like, ‘You just demonized everyone who writes a check.’ But, so there is financial generosity that needs to happen. But sometimes what we do is, once we write that check, then we think we've accomplished love our neighbor in the same way that we love ourselves. And sometimes we even do it with like service days and service projects, right?

So, I helped coordinate volunteers at Mile High Ministries, and you get a sense of sometimes this is a group of people who, like, this is the one time of year that they're interacting with poor folks. But they're not doing it in a way that they're actually trying to get to know people or broaden their horizons, or learn from, but it's just like, here, this is the time when we, in the name of Jesus, come in and give hot dogs and share the gospel. But it's like this is a box to be checked instead of, what Jesus seems to call us to is a lifestyle of rhythms of the cruciform virtue, self-emptying love, pouring yourself out for the poor and the oppressed, right? And so, one of the hurdles that I see in—broadly, but it's bad in our city—is like, because we're taught to only value people that are useful to us or maybe entertaining to us, that as soon as a relationship starts being costly, we pull back. And we use even weird cultural language of like ‘I'm cutting toxic people out of my life this year,’ but what you may actually mean is you're cutting costly people out of your life. But if you're the least bit self-aware, you gotta' realize, brother, I am deeply problematic, and I am deeply difficult to love. I'm insufferable. You know, I need people around me that will love me in my most difficult times. I need friends who are just as committed to my joys as they are to my sorrows. And I'm starting to be convinced that part of the reason why Denver maybe a particularly lonely city is a lot of us sort of carry around a question in the back of our brains of like, ‘Will I actually have people love me and care for me even when I am difficult and less fun and less maybe vibrant—I feel less vibrant and exciting?’ Right? And we feel that pressure to pretend to be more fun together, useful, whatever, and that creates some distance between who we really are, which is difficult to love 75% of the time if we're being generous, right? But we carry around that question, and that anxiety, and that loneliness of, ‘Will I have people that care for me on my most difficult days?’

So one of the things, this is sort of paradoxical, but like one of the things that I found is ‘when you try to move beyond that sort of, ‘there's useful people and useless people,’ and you try to move beyond this we're just going to serve the poor through checking a box through a service opportunity or just writing a check or whatever is that, when you actually

try to take on the rhythms of Jesus, the way of Jesus, in a way that you're in regular relationship with folks that struggle financially maybe in ways that you don't, and you're trying to create belonging for others in a way that's not conditional based upon how they respond, just like, good days, bad days, hard times, good times, you actually weirdly get belonging too because when you are out there making space for others and you're showing the love of Jesus manifest in loving someone in a hard time, in a crisis situation, whatever, there's more of a feeling of like, 'I think God and the people of God will take care of me in a crisis time too.

This was played out for us a little bit; so, my wife Kate and I, we experienced a miscarriage earlier this year in January- it's one of the most difficult things we've ever sort of been through just as a family, as a couple. And we realized that, as we shared that information, some of our friends and even church friends were not really able to hold that well for us, and maybe didn't treat that grief with the gravity that it sort of we needed it to be treated with. There was some sort of like maybe dismissing comments, and that's always hard to experience. Strangely, the folks that were able to love and care for us and hold us in that time, the best were our friends and neighbors at Joshua Station which are formerly homeless. And I don't know why, but they were like, one lady in particular named Ashley, just really was able to treat Kate and myself with tenderness, gentleness, deep empathy; and I don't know if it's because she suffered too that that built like a category for 'I know what suffering is like, so I'm going to- I know what I needed when I suffered deeply, so I'm going to try to model that for you,' but it's this, when you, strangely, when you move beyond these hurdles that we experience as sort of American, Denverite, some of the stuff that forms us more than the gospel of Jesus forms us sometimes, and you're trying to create belonging for others unconditionally, you start experiencing that belonging for yourself unconditionally, which is just tremendous, beautiful, right?

Autumn: It is. It is really beautiful.

As we look back at this section within the context of the story of the good Samaritan and then the story from Luke 14 that you mentioned in which Jesus called to love of neighbor is self-sacrificial, requires something of us, it is not directed towards any particular person because that person has earned it or because of their worth, and it is an assumption for someone who is seeking to do what the student of the law came to Jesus asking, anyone who truly desires to follow Jesus. Jesus responds, this is a part of following Him. This is His assumption, that we extend this sort of love, which is the sort of love that Jesus has given to us, and that because Jesus has given to us, we are actually able to do it in light of these hurdles, these cultural hurdles that sometimes can feel so strong. So, this sort of ethos of Colorado that says I can make my own way, you can make yours, and so long as we don't conflict with each other too much, we'll both be okay; and this idea that is really sort of what you're saying is like we extend this kind of cost-benefit analysis over all parts of our life, including the relationships that we think are worthwhile and the ones that we deem to be not worthwhile based on what they grant to us or whether or not we see them as being too costly. When we remove those hurdles in light of the love extended to us, the love that we then are able to extend to others, we don't assess people in this cost benefit analysis sort of way, then the experience is actually what you shared, just that you experienced with this lady named Ashley who was able, in a difficult time, not to expect anything of you, but to simply extend love and grace and presence in a time that was really difficult. I think that's our desire. That's the heart of Jesus displayed in these stories. That is his expectation of his followers. And we are actually, because of that, because of Him, able to do this. And then the experience is one of love and grace, even as you yourself, Ben and Kate, received. Let's shift then that application, use that lens—this is Jesus's expectation of us, He empowers us to do it, we received this kind of love from Him and probably

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 81 | Loving Our Neighbors, Part 1: Who Is My Neighbor?

Featuring: Autumn Gardner and Ben Sooy



likely have received it from people within the family of God too, or people who we know in our lives who have extended this sort of love to us—and use that lens then to talk again about the particular work of Joshua Station, the reality of the needs of some of our neighbors, people who live around us who we encounter each day, and then to ask, so what is the call then to the Church, to the family of God in this place that we live to love these people who are our neighbors?

Thanks for listening to today's conversation. This conversation with Ben about how the Gospel compels us to love our neighbors and really challenges us to weave our lives into the lives of others, particularly into the lives of vulnerable people, as a genuine expression of love—an active, not a passive sort of love—is an extended conversation. And so, today, in part one, we're focused on that: how the Gospel compels us. We're going to release part two of this conversation that talks about the active part of loving our neighbors, and how that looks at my Mile High Ministries, how that looks in Ben's work at Joshua Station, and what we as the Family of God can actually do to support and love vulnerable people in our midst, in our communities. We'll release that next week.

If you have questions, comments, suggestions about today's episode or anything, send all of those any time to podcast@fellowshipdenver.org. Thanks for joining us on the Vision For Life Podcast.

Thanks to Adam Anglin for our theme music and to our producer Jesse Cowan.