

So, how did you do this week? Do you know your neighbors better today than you did this time last week? That's what we are praying happens as we go through this series called *Sent Home*. We are exploring the idea that God sends us home on the mission to love him and love our neighbors as ourselves. Last week we said we need three attitudes or postures to live this out: Open hearts, open eyes and ears, and open doors.

We started with open hearts, both to the God who sends and the neighbors he sends us to. The challenge of last week was to begin knowing and praying for your neighbors by name. We have some brand new neighbors at the end of the street that Martha met and introduced herself to, so we got to fill in another box on our neighborhood map, and we are looking forward to connecting with them soon. I hope you made some progress on your map or at least found yourself a little more mindful of those who live around you and curious about what God might ask you to do.

This morning we move to open eyes and ears. God gave us two of each, so they must be important. They are essential to neighboring because the more we know, the better we can love, and the results are significant. When we make the effort to get to know someone and hear their story, it communicates worth, creates relationships, and often gives us an opportunity to share our story and help them see where their story connects with God's story. But using our eyes and ears to love requires time, focus, and intentionality. So let's talk about how we do that.

**Love notices.** It requires us to be observant so that we can see a person and know what is happening in their lives.

**[Acts 3:1-4] Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. <sup>2</sup> And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. <sup>3</sup> Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. <sup>4</sup> And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us."**

The Spirit has come on the day of Pentecost and the Church has started, and Peter and John are headed to the Temple to pray, *living normal life*. On their way to love God, they get an opportunity to love their neighbor. They could have walked right past this guy because they had somewhere to be, but they were instead **interruptible enough to stop, observant enough to see, and caring enough to engage**. With open eyes and ears, they understood what was happening in his life and chose to love him. Notice their loving of him didn't start with action, but recognition. Peter says, "Look at us." You can imagine this guy goes to the temple every day, asks for alms, on autopilot, and probably gets enough to get by. And while dropping a few coins would fulfill a material need, it wouldn't fulfill an emotional one. But Peter makes eye contact with the guy to communicate his value and acknowledge his humanity. It's like he's saying, "We see you". And while what he's about to do for him will change his life forever, perhaps the most loving thing he did for him that day was to show him he mattered.

I was thrilled and proud to hear the story of one of our Life Groups who decided to go out to White Rock Lake the past few Sundays and position themselves along a well-traveled pathway to offer "Free Prayer" to those who passed by. They got waves, curious pauses, and chatted with several people. And, for a couple folks, they got to share their story and be prayed for. This

group set up shop in their neighborhood and put themselves out there to tell their neighbors they are seen, their story matters, and we are willing to care for you. From my understanding, a couple relationships have been formed that continue to grow today.

There is so much power in a story, and when we care enough, to pause long enough, to know that story through open eyes and ears, that expression of love tells the other person they are significant. Everyone in your neighborhood longs to experience that, so if you are looking for a place to start, start there. Barna put out a study that said the number of core people in someone's life dropped from 2.9-2.1 from 1995-2004, meaning we all have fewer people in our lives who know us well, and Cigna's annual loneliness index is currently 1 in 5 even before Covid, which is why they consider it an epidemic. That's why we start with knowing names and hearing stories, because letting someone be seen and known is one of the most loving things any of us can do for our neighbor. So then, once we know a story, how do we proceed?

**Love gives what it has been given.** We are a conduit of the love of Christ and are called to pass on what he has given to us.

**[Acts 3:5-8] 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.**

The man looks at Peter and John expecting something. He now moves towards them after they moved towards him. Peter doesn't have a pocketful of cash, but he does give him what he has, and that is the grace God has given him. Peter extends that grace of God by the loving act of healing him, and the guy's life is literally changed forever. His body didn't work. Now he's leaping for joy. He was unable to go to the temple. Now he's there praising God. His tomorrow was going to look like today, but now it's been rewritten. That's the potential we have of learning a story and loving our neighbor.

Now, we could look at this and think God's not going to work miracles through you or you aren't capable of changing someone's life forever. But that's not the point of this story. The point is that we all can say what Peter said. "What I do have I give to you." We are not called to be the Savior of our neighborhood. That job belongs to Jesus and he's already taken care of it. But if we stop long enough to learn their stories, the more we know, the better we can love. The more we know, the more we'll see all kinds of opportunities to show love, and God will show us what he wants us to do. And rest assured, **God will give you everything you need to fulfill the need he's calling you to fulfill.** That may be friendship, a cup of sugar, manual labor, babysitting, or spiritual investment.

A few months ago Martha had gotten to know one of our neighbors, learned she was sick, was praying for her, and checked on her often. One day she called Martha and asked her to come to her home to pray with and for her. Martha learned her name, learned her story, prayed privately for her, and from there an opportunity came to love her by giving to her what God had already

given to Martha. God didn't perform a miracle and heal her body that day, but he did use Martha to help heal her soul and bring her peace. Imagine the impact you could have if you learned what someone needed and were able to give to them what God gave to you in order to meet that need.

We have cities burning in our nation and that may make you angry and cause us to ask what we can do. But it should also be a check for us to consider if any of it is a consequence of us not neighboring. When we care about what's going on with our neighbors, our first instinct will be to love, and love changes lives. **What would happen if we loved our neighbors with the same passion and fervor as those burning down buildings?** The church would do what it was sent to do, and that is to manifest the Kingdom of God where we live. When our hearts are open to our sending God and the people he sends us to, and when our eyes and ears are open to see and hear what is going on in their lives, love is informed and love can give what God has given to us. And when that happens...

**Love gets noticed.** Acts of light cannot be ignored in a dark world.

**[Acts 3:9-12a] 9 And all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. 11 While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's. 12 And when Peter saw it he addressed the people.**

This man has been changed by the love of his neighbor, and the results are on full display. The love of Peter and John have transformed him physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And in the midst of that, a bond is formed. We are told he is now clinging to Peter and John. You can see him just grabbing on to them and not wanting to let go. **Born out of an act of love, a relationship is formed.** Love leads to connection. Love binds people together. And if you plan on living like this, don't be surprised if people start caring about you.

Beyond the man, an amazed crowd witnessed this and were drawn to them. That's because love is attractive. Its effect draws people in, and that creates opportunities to love more people.

As many of you know, we have been delivering Boxes of Hope to our refugee neighbors to the east. This is only possible because of your generosity, because you have given what God gave you. Our most recent delivery got a lot of attention. This man was one of several people who saw what we were doing and inquired. As we got to know his story, we recognized he had a need and were able to meet it with another box. He said he grew up going to church but hadn't in a while, but he was inspired to say he'd give Jesus another chance. We loved our neighbor, that love was noticed, and we got to show love to someone else. Hallelujah!

But it doesn't stop there. As love gets noticed, love also gets an opportunity to tell its story. People gather around and Peter takes this opportunity to talk about Jesus and his story with him. He tells of the events of the last week of Jesus' life, but I want you to see what he says in v 15.

**[Acts 3:15] 15and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses."**

Peter gives a lot of details, but the most compelling part of he says is what he has experienced himself. He saw the resurrected Christ and it is now part of his story. And it's only after he shares his story that he invites them to know the Jesus he knows.

**[Acts 3:19-20] 19 Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, 20 that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus.**

Through love and relationship, he shared Christ. Remember, this is not a covert evangelization strategy. He stopped at the gate, noticed the man, gave to him what God had already given him, shared his own Jesus story, and then invited them to a saving relationship with Christ.

When we love like this, people recognize there is something behind it. Loving, extending grace, is disruptive, and its impact is felt by the object of our love and noticed by those around. And as hearts are connected through the expression of love, people are going to ask for your story. All we have to do is what Peter did. Tell them what Jesus means to us and what we have witnessed him do in our lives.

Some of our people involved in RCI, Refugee Connect Initiative, threw a virtual baby shower for a Muslim woman from Afghanistan. They delivered decorations and gifts and let the children put them up, and then all got on Zoom to celebrate. She now calls these women her family in America. As they were planning the event, the woman asked why we were doing this. Our team got to tell her we love Jesus and he wants us to love our neighbors and that's what we are doing.

I know some of you are hesitant to share your life story, much less your faith story. That's not new. Read chapter 4 this week and you'll see the believers pray for boldness in sharing Jesus. You may feel ill-equipped, you may feel afraid, you may feel like it's not appropriate. But know this: Your story is not politically incorrect, not inappropriate, or not something that should be kept hidden. **Your story is central to who you are and sharing it means you are sharing your life, which is what neighboring is all about.** Living and loving like this changes the Gospel from something you're trying to convince someone of, to something you have been convinced of yourself. When we do that, we show someone it's possible for God to have the same impact in their story that he has had in yours.

**Allow interruptions.** For any of this to be possible, we have to be available and have the margin and willingness to pause when open eyes and open ears recognize an opportunity to know and love our neighbor. Earlier this week, Martha went for a walk and on her way out I yelled "Be interruptible." I got a text fifteen minutes later that said, "I got interrupted!" When you start to know your neighbors by name and pray to God about them, your awareness and sensitivity to those around you grows, as does your desire to love them. But it all starts with a willingness to stop. Be interruptible!

**Ask questions.** The old adage that encourages us to be interested more than you are interesting. Or, as Mitzi suggested this week, we need to have open noses too, to be noseey! This is not intended to make people research projects. It is loving to genuinely want to get to know someone and, as I have already said, the more we know, the better we can love. We've added some

conversation starters on our resource page on our website. Our world is in upheaval, people are hurting, and people are eager to connect with someone else. Love that way, and see what God does with it.

**Advance grace.** Jesus said apart from me you can do nothing, but if we abide in him, the Spirit will bear fruit in our lives, and pour out his grace on us to pour it out on others. You have everything you need to fulfill the mission God has sent you on, and if what you have to offer is the grace of God, whatever he asks you to do will be significant.

I was reminded this week of the number of instances in Scripture where God saw what was going on with his people or he heard their cries, and then he acted in love. When you and I live with open eyes and open ears, we follow the example of the one who is called Love, and we'll know how best we can love our neighbor. Slow down, pay attention, and see who and how God wants you to love this week.