

In the middle of April I walked out of my house and saw something I don't think I've ever seen while living in the Dallas area. PEOPLE!!! I'm not just talking a few here and there. I'm talking people all over the place, walking, talking, sitting, running. The first month of the stay-at-home orders wore people down and it's like we all decided to break out at the same time. Over the next couple of weeks, that phenomenon did not stop. I saw people out and about all the time. I saw people sitting in socially distanced circles in their driveways, gathering in parks, sitting in yards, or across the alley from one another. People wanted connection, and their neighborhood was where they found it. This was the kind of stuff I'd only heard about from ages past, and it felt like I was witnessing the renaissance of the American neighborhood. And as I joyfully witnessed this day after day, all I could think about was "What an incredible opportunity for the church."

I wanted to do a series on it then but the events of the summer caused us to pivot. But I couldn't let go of this idea because I didn't want us to miss this moment. Covid is too big for God to let it go to waste. And while the church couldn't gather, we had been scattered to the places we lived, and God is in the business of using the scattering of his people for his purposes. Before Covid, our neighborhoods, whether houses on the same block or apartments in the same building, used to be the place we slept before getting to the next day of unending activity, not a place of dwelling and community. But all that changed six months ago, and I believe God wants to use it to call us back to a fundamental purpose as his people that our pre-covid pace and priorities caused many of us to forget or neglect, and our legitimate desire to regather in person may make us miss. What if all of us being stuck at home is a reminder we've been sent there?

That's what we're talking about over the next three weeks in a series we're calling *Sent Home*. We worship a sending God who calls us to the grand mission of making him known wherever we are, and that mission includes where we live. Over the next three weeks we are going to look at three key ingredients to living out this mission: an open heart, open eyes and ears, and an open door. We'll unpack what those three things mean, challenge you to take them on, and equip you with some very practical ways to live this out so that we can capture this moment. So we begin this morning with the open hearts, that for us to live this out, our hearts have to be open both to the God who sends and the people he sends us to.

You are sent to where you live. For any of this to matter, we must first believe and commit to live out that idea. It's one the New Testament declares over and over.

21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." (John 20:21)

14 "You are the light of the world...16 let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14, 16)

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)

8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

All of these passages declare the heart of God and the substance of our mission. After Jesus' resurrection, he makes it clear that if you are to be a follower of his, you have been recruited into fulfilling the mission he began. As he was sent, he now sends us, the Church, in his place. Our mission is to glorify God, recount how the Gospel has changed our lives, show the love of Christ through our actions, and make disciples. This is not a church program. It's the Church's purpose. Too often, though, we fail to see our neighborhoods as part of that mission.

A couple years ago I was hauling some bulk trash to the front yard and I noticed a man walking towards me. I recognized him as a guy who lived down the street, and he came up and introduced himself, confessing some embarrassment that we hadn't formally met after all the years we lived on the same street. We chatted for a while and he said "Well, I hope we get to do this again soon." It was now my turn to be embarrassed. I said "Actually, we're moving in two days, and that's why I'm throwing all this stuff out." It was a humbling moment. After years living on the same street, I didn't even know the guy's name, much less have any impact in his life. But that moment was also convicting and inspirational. As Martha and I moved into our new home, a bigger and nicer home, we agreed that this home can't be just about us.

There's a difficult but right question we all need to ask ourselves. If you moved today, would you be missed? Previously, my answer was an unequivocal "no". We were the nice family with three young boys, but most of our neighbors didn't know our names, stories, or feel our presence.

This is where we have to begin because if we don't consider where we live as part of our mission, we're going to miss this moment. Too many of us view our homes exclusively as a refuge or a retreat, a place of hiding and escape, rather than a base of operations to live out our God-given purpose where we live. Don't get me wrong. Our homes can and should be used as a place of rest and safety, but it's intended for so much more.

There's something easy to miss when we look at those passages. "Sent, go, ends of the earth, all nations". We read Acts and see how the church spread throughout the Mediterranean area. Missionaries still go today, and that's good and right and praise God the Good News of Jesus has covered the earth. But you know what happened when those words were spoken? Most of the people who heard them went...home. Not because they were out on the mission, but because they knew they could do exactly what Jesus was calling them to where they lived. So can we.

This idea also timely because it challenges something we're all thinking about right now. We're a few weeks away from regathering in person, and I can't wait! Last Sunday was so life giving to me, and it is good when the body of Christ gathers to worship him and be together. But we'll make a huge mistake if we think being in this building means we can start being the church again, that somehow it's been on hold for six months. That's dangerous and untrue. The past few months should remind us that we don't have to get people to church because the church has gone to them. You are the church! And the distance between their front door and yours is much shorter than it is between their front door and the doors of this building. The church started as a neighborhood movement, and there's no reason it can't be like that again.

So you've been sent to where you live, and **where you live is no accident**. God has you where you are on purpose for a purpose.

[Acts 17:26-27] ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

Paul is speaking to Athenians and telling them they are subject to the sovereignty of God and he determines the time and borders of nations. But nations are made up of people, so the same is true of us individually. You live in the place you live, in the year 2020, because of the hand of God. And since God is a God of order and intentionality, your time and your place is purposeful.

God knows people will seek him, whether because of evidence of God all around, global disruptions that increase questioning and spiritual sensitivity, or witnessing a compelling God-centered life lived out in front of them. Our God desires to be found, so he is not far from anyone who tries to feel their way to him. Think about searching for something in the dark. You can't see but you know it's there, and your hands go out to feel your way to it. It's similar to how some find God. And here's why that matters. Perhaps God is not far because you are so close, and he intends for them to find Jesus by finding you.

If we believe that, it changes the way we look at those who live around us. As your heart opens to the God who sends, your heart begins to open the people he sends you to. **You'll begin to believe your neighbors are not random strangers but God-ordained relationships waiting to happen.** God sovereignly placed you where you live to help others feel their way towards him, and the two resources of proximity and time make you the perfect person for that. Other than maybe your co-workers, there's no one you're around more or more consistently. He has given you your own personal parish, and I pray each of us will begin to wake up each day with a growing sense of newfound calling and responsibility.

So, once we agree we are sent, not randomly but specifically, what are we supposed to do when we get there? Jesus sums that up in one command.

[Mark 12:28-34] ²⁸ And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. ³³ And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

As we see multiple times in the Gospels, Jesus delivers what we know as the Great Commandment. If we are to sum up the mission of God sends us on, it's to love him and love our neighbor. We have gotten so good at considering "neighbor" as anyone in need that you can provide for that need, and that's true, but we forget Jesus is also talking about the person living

next door. God has sent you on a mission, to live in a specific place at a specific time, to love God and to show the love of God to those you call neighbor.

And given what Jesus says back to the scribe, living this way means you are living out what is at the very heart of the Kingdom of God. That **your home is a Kingdom outpost**. Kingdom is a word we throw around a lot. A definition I really like is **God's reign through God's people over God's place**. That means our homes, and our influence in our neighborhoods, are to be used for the purpose of the King, to reflect the character of the King, and to live out the values of the Kingdom he is establishing. When people walk by our home, they should know what it's about and who it ultimately belongs to.

When I was a freshman in high school, my dad, stepmom, and I went out of town, leaving my brother and stepbrother at home. Upon our return a couple days later, my stepmom was immediately engaged by a neighbor when she got out of the car. Apparently, my brothers had thrown a party. And the reason my neighbor knew was not because of all the cars in the street or people in the area. That could have been at any house. It was the 30' wide "Grand Opening" banner my brothers hung in the front yard. You see, the banner helped everyone know what that home was about and what you could expect when you entered or engaged the people living there.

Now, I'm not suggesting we hang Jesus banners in the front of our homes. But the way in which we live is a banner announcing what our lives and our homes are all about and what they can expect from someone who lives there. And the more you consider your home a Kingdom outpost, the more your home becomes a place known for the values of the Kingdom of God: centered on love, full of joy, kindness, friendliness, and acceptance, and eager to help.

This is not a covert evangelization strategy, it's a way of life. If we pretend to care for someone just so we can try to get them believe in Jesus, people will see right through that. As the authors of *The Art of Neighboring* say it, "We don't love to convert others, we love because we have been converted." This is a call to love your neighbors like the people of God have been known for for centuries and then let God take care of the rest.

What happens if we prioritize our lives to live this way? We live in the days of isolation, fear, polarization, and apathy. People are looking everywhere asking who is going to make this world a better place. We are the people to do it, and we have been given a supernatural mission, power, and inspiration to be the solution. Jesus gives us the way to do it in this passage. If we love God and we love our neighbor, we will change our city one neighborhood at a time.

Learn your neighbors.

Oh, it just got real! We are encouraging you to start this journey by learning the names of your neighbors. It's hard to love someone if you don't know their name, but once you know someone's name, something changes, and a relationship can begin.

We're going to have a page on our website full of resources for you to use during this series *and after*. If this is a way of life, it's going to take longer than three weeks to establish, but we want to get you going. The first thing I'm challenging you to do is to download the neighborhood map (one for homes, one for apartments), chart out your block, and write the names of your neighbors

in each home. It's going to be very eye opening because most of us are not going to be able to fill the whole thing out. Here's mine. We've lived on our street for two years and you can see I have a lot of work to do. I bet you do too.

If you do have work to do, what comes next? You guessed it. Talking to people! Look, you can go to some app and get everyone's names. And if that's the way you want to do it, that's fine. But you're not turning this in. So I want to encourage you to actually talk to your neighbors, introduce yourself, and ask for (and remember!) their name. To do this you'll need to be open, interruptible, humble ("I'm sorry. I know we've met before, but I forgot your name."), and willing to take risks, and trust God with results because sometimes it will work, and sometimes it won't.

Martha often accuses me of being aggressively friendly. Recently, we were walking on a heavily wooded trail in a park by our house and a family was walking towards us. As we got closer, they all turned and were looking at something. I'm thinking a beautiful butterfly or something like that. So I come up behind them, lean in, and ask "Did you all find something interesting?" The mom slowly turned around and, through her mask, said "No. I'm teaching them how to social distance." Whoops. I was close enough for a group hug! She didn't want to talk to me after that.

However, this week, as I was finishing up a jog, I ran by a guy's house who I see out running from time to time. We usually lament the heat and our aging bodies not doing what they used to, but he engaged me in a conversation. Now, I'm breathing heavy, listening to music, and don't want to stop my run, and I was tempted to keep going. But guess what? I'm practicing what I'm preaching, so I stop, have a conversation with him, and ultimately ask him his name. You should have seen how his whole demeanor changed. He actually took a step towards me that acknowledged the connection we were making. I don't know what will come of it, but I know his name and he knows mine. And that's how all this stuff begins. Start there and see where it goes.

Pray for your neighbors by name.

As I heard someone say recently, talk to God about your neighbors before you talk to your neighbors about God. Praying for them will help you see your neighbors the way God sees your neighbors. Pray you would learn and remember their name. Pray God would give you an opportunity to connect with them. Pray God would give you a genuine care and concern for them and an opportunity to love them as Christ commands. And go to our webpage for more prayer resources, for yourself or you can use as a Life Group.

The Art of Neighboring quotes the mayor of the town the authors are from where he says, "The majority of issues that our community is facing would be eliminated or drastically reduced if we could just figure out a way to become a community of great neighbors." There is no group of people better equipped to answer that call than followers of Jesus. I believe every person who is part of the Fellowship family wants to have a Kingdom impact through their life. That can happen in a lot of ways but, over the next few weeks, let's all consider what is possible when we just go home.