

"Fear Factor"

1 Peter 3:13-18

Series: The Art of Neighboring: Week 3

Linda Marr

The Woodside Church

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For the past few weeks, we've been talking about Neighboring -- how to be a good neighbor. Seriously, in the midst of a worldwide pandemic? Yes. ESPECIALLY in the midst of a worldwide pandemic! We are all suffering and hurting in different ways; the need to feel the support and connection of our neighbors has perhaps never been more important. Many of us are stuck at home or certainly around home a lot more. As are our neighbors. I don't know about you, but I can go weeks without talking to any of them.

True confession -- as I was working on this message, I went outside for a breath of fresh air. And across the street, I saw my neighbor, my good friend, who I hadn't seen in weeks. And, was it my first thought to run over and say hi? Nope, it was, "I need to finish this message". Thankfully, God gave me a nice figurative smack on the head -- and I ran over and we were able to spend a few minutes catching up on our families and our lives. I may have mentioned to her that I was writing a message on being a good neighbor. Ouch. Talk about practicing what you preach.

Last week we talked about that time factor -- busy, busy, busy. Clearly, that's a stumbling block for me. This week we're looking at another stumbling block that can get in our way -- the Fear Factor. Talk to my neighbors? I barely know them! What if they think I'm weird? Because I sure think they're weird! Or attack my views? Or worse yet -- ask me about my faith! What do I say? We have NO THING in common...

Have any of you gone on a mission outreach somewhere in a different community or maybe a different country? Gone into Philly to serve meals, the Bahamas to restore houses or Haiti to build churches? Why does it often feel easier to jump on a plane than to reach out to the neighbor next door? Maybe because we can go and do our serving thing, drive back to our safe neighborhood, zip into our garage and shut the door. Done! We've served! When we reach out to someone on our block, in our neighborhood, it's not a once and done thing. We can't get away if our outreach is awkward, if we make a blunder or if our offer of help is rejected. But these are the people God has put right in front of us. Think about that -- our neighbors are God ordained. I know, sometimes God really has a sense of humor right? But he asks, no commands us, to serve them.

And so, what if those neighbors ARE way different than us? They have weird bumper stickers on their cars -- or maybe they are one of those people who have LAWN signs. True confession -- I am one of those people! I've always liked words -- have had little signs with pithy sayings around my house forever. One of my favorites is this one "Do you ever think we give God a headache?" Karen Houser and I used to shake our heads in conviction over this one! I can trace this love of signs all the way back to my mom mom -- I always remember the saying hanging over her basement door, "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice." Hmm. I should make THAT a lawn sign.

Dave Runyan, the author of the book we used as reference for this sermon series, confronted this issue. When he moved into a new neighborhood, he noticed the guy right next door had bumper stickers plastered on his car with lovely sayings about the hypocrisy of Christians. “Great” he thought, “Wait ‘til he finds out I’m a pastor! This is a guy I should probably just avoid. And as luck -- or in this case God would have it -- he bumped into the guy at the first neighborhood gathering he went to. And yep, the guy let him have it. “Oh I hear you’re a pastor. You think I’m going to hell huh?” Talk about an awkward way to start off. He then went on to hit Dave with all the things that were wrong with the church and with Christians in general. Dave felt attacked and defensive; the conversion did not go well.

Dave went home, feeling defeated and thought, “Ok, we should clearly just keep our distance from each other. I’m sure there are other nicer people in the neighborhood.” But that really didn’t sit well with him, so after a night of tossing and turning, he decided to go back and try to talk with his neighbor. Wow. I don’t know about you, but I would have gone with the “avoid the guy at all costs” plan. Too awkward. I am not a fan of dissension, particularly when it’s aimed at me. I would have been fearful of getting another earful, maybe the door slammed in my face. But you know what? When Dave knocked on the door and said, “You know man, I just didn’t feel good about our conversation,” it broke the awkward barrier and his neighbor said, “Me either; I’m so embarrassed” and he invited Dave in and they had a chance for real conversation, where the guy revealed some deep hurt done to him by the church and Dave was able to share his faith journey.

Generally, there is often a back story for anger. It would have been so much easier to stay afraid and keep their distance. But because they pushed past that small hurdle of awkwardness, they were able to move past the fear and anger and actually became great friends.

This is a particularly contentious time isn’t it? Lots of dissension about everything from mask wearing, to back to school and let’s throw in a presidential election for some extra fun. And we are surrounded by opinions and diatribe and ranting on social media and TV -- it’s almost impossible to get away from. It can make us fearful of those we don’t know or suspicious of our neighbors and what they believe. Jesus asks us to see past the fear; ignore the labels and take time to know people. Like Pastor Dave, most often we will find we have more in common than we thought. 1 Peter 3:14-18 tells us:

“Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. Worship Christ as Lord of your life. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

And if our worst fears are realized and there are just some neighbors who do not respond to our outreach, or are rude, God’s got us.

“Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will grant you his blessing.” 1 Peter 3:18.

And guess what - when you are kind to someone who is mean or rude, you are not only showing them the grace and love of Jesus, it also IS a blessing to you. It keeps anger from taking over your heart and gives you peace. The peace that only Jesus can bring.

Jesus also calls us as believers to be in the mix -- not watching from the sidelines and judging. We should be a part of what is happening in our neighborhoods; Jesus was. Like so many of us, I was deeply upset when George Floyd was brutally killed. It tore something inside of me as I saw/heard the pain in my neighbors' voices. So when it was announced there would be a peaceful rally in Yardley, I decided I needed to go. I'd never been to a protest rally. None of my friends could go with me. It was a hot, hot day. My youngest daughter Caroline offered that I could go with her boyfriend and his sister, 50 something me and 20 something them. Nothing awkward there. Walking down to Main Street was weird -- everyone in masks, keeping their distance. I felt very solitary. We silently gathered, trying to keep a safe distance from those not in our family circle, and then the chanting started. Ok, I am more used to singing at Women of Faith, than chanting on a street corner. I awkwardly joined in, very softly at first, but our voices quickly became a beautiful chorus. At one point they asked us to take a knee, on the rough concrete. So again, awkwardly, I knelt and you know what -- I did what came naturally. I prayed. I prayed for those who were killed, for those who had endured years of racism, those who had no voice. For my neighbors -- those directly impacted and those kneeling in solidarity. And when I looked around I felt a strong connection -- a strong love for my neighbors. I saw past the masks -- to the 20 somethings with purple hair; the police who stood by sweating in their dark uniforms, my black neighbors whose experience was so much different than mine, the other awkward moms trying to do what we can to support. Powerful feelings of love and community - for just pushing past my awkwardness and fear and showing up.

What are some other ways we can reach past our fears and reach out to our neighbors during a pandemic? Take that neighborhood map we made a few weeks ago and memorize it. Memorize the names, what we learn about our neighbors when we make the time to stop and listen as we walk around the block, and pray for our neighbors. It doesn't have to be kneeling on uncomfortable gravel at a hot rally. Pray as you walk past their house. Pray as you look out your window. Take the time to check on your neighbors -- a simple call or text can be just the comfort someone needs.

Depending on your circumstances, you might be able to take it a step further. Invite neighbors to a socially distanced cul-de-sac gathering -- bring your own food, mask and chair. Or sit on your front lawn or driveway and talk to people who walk by. With school starting at home for many, this will be a trying Fall. Are there safe ways you can gather with some families in your neighborhood? Socially distant walks? Head to an open area for some rec time? Kickball with masks, kind of ups the "cool factor" doesn't it? Reaching out and connecting with neighbors does not have to be scary or hard. But it is so, so important.

In John 17: 20, Jesus says, "I am praying not only for these disciples, but also for all who ever will believe in me through their message. I pray that they all may be one, just as you and I are one. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you have sent me."

So that the world may believe you have sent me. Talk about importance! Our actions -- our pushing past fear or busyness or whatever holds us back, to reach out to our neighbors with gentleness and respect -- we are showing them Jesus. And the salvation, freedom and peace He offers to all. Don't ever fear you are without a role to play in God's Kingdom. Simply by reaching out, being a good neighbor, we can be Jesus to others. Reaching out. Being a good neighbor. Sharing love. **This** is our observable unity, our tangible love, our actionable faith that gives the ultimate final best proof that Jesus is real and he is who he says he is. It's the highest evidence we can offer the world that the good news of Jesus is REAL.

So simple. So profound. So life changing.

May we Go and do likewise!