

“Just Walk Across the Street”

Romans 13:8-10

Series: The Art of Neighboring Week 1. Learn Their Names

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoggund

The Woodside Church

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It started with a mailbox. It was my day off and, as usual, I was consumed with my home improvement list. During my whirlwind of worry about my own stuff, I happened to look out and see my neighbor across the street struggling with her mailbox. She was trying to install a new one and it wasn't cooperating.

Walking across the street I said, “Hi Linda, is there something wrong with your mailbox?” “I just bought this new one but it doesn't fit on the post,” she explained. Normally her husband Jerry did these projects but he wasn't feeling well so she decided to get the job done. Unfortunately Linda needed some tools, screws and a block of wood to properly attach the mailbox to the post. Knowing I had all three, I ran back inside, grabbed the stuff and, in no time, the job was done.

Now to be honest, up to the moment, I often couldn't remember her name. I know what you are thinking, “How can this guy memorize a whole sermon and forget people's names?” But I do. Sometimes my brain fails me and I forget people's names. It seems to be happening with increasing frequency the older I get. Linda told me her name in the past but it would slip out of my mind due to lack of use. And to be really honest, at that point I had probably lived across the street from her for twenty years. I could not call the lady who lived right in front of me for two decades by her first name. I'd wave. Say, “How are you doing there?” But that was it. The mailbox changed all that. From then on Lisa and I became better neighbors to Linda.

Seems like such a small thing. Yet neighbors rank very high on Jesus' list. Last Sunday we reviewed what Jesus calls the First and Greatest Commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Matthew 22:37; Deuteronomy 6:5

Then, in the same breath He adds:

And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Matthew 22:39-40.

Jewish people in Jesus' day didn't call the Bible the Bible and they never call it the Old Testament. They call it “The Law and the Prophets.” So Jesus is saying, “Here is the sound bite, the executive summary, the bottom line of the whole Bible: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” It's all right there. This leaves such a profound impression on Jesus' followers it shows up several more times in the New Testament. Paul says in Romans,

The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word,

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:9-10.

Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. Romans 15:2

In Galatians Paul writes,

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself. Galatians 5:14

James agrees,

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. James 2:8

And John reminds us if we don’t love our siblings and neighbors, we can’t say we love God (1 John 4:20-21). Now you probably know when the Bible uses the term ‘neighbor’ it can mean anyone – even our enemies. Yet what if Jesus wants us to begin by loving our actual, literal neighbors – the people who live nearest to us in our neighborhoods – a neighbor like Linda?

This came as a rude awakening to Dave Runyon and Jay Pathak. These two pastors in the Denver suburbs were passionate about helping their community. They gathered other pastors in their town for a meeting with their mayor. They asked him: “If you could wave a magic wand and change anything about our city what would it be?” They expected the mayor to wish for solutions to homelessness, poverty, addiction. He mentioned some of these. Yet at the end of the conversation he said, “The smartest thing pastors can do for the city is to start a neighboring movement.” It turns out people who have close bonds with their neighbors live longer. Where people know the names of their neighbors, crime is 60% lower. During natural disasters, neighbors are often first responders. When the mayor finished Dave, Jay and the other pastors were stunned, shocked and somewhat embarrassed. The mayor of their city was telling a group of pastors to do what Jesus says – His second most important commandment. Then the mayor ended with this convicting postscript: “There doesn’t seem to be much difference between Christians and non-Christians when it comes to loving your neighbors.”

Together these pastors decided to lead their people to love their neighbors. Now usually pastors like to set the bar high to challenge their people. “Let’s go out and love our enemies as Jesus says.” That’s true. Yet Dave and Jay recognized this might be graduate level Christianity. To start, they agreed to set the bar as low as possible, to make it easy. The first step to loving your neighbors is learning their names. How can you really get to know your neighbor if you don’t even know their name? Instead of waving and saying, “Hey man” it’s better to say, ‘Hey Mike.’ Once you know a person’s name the relationship begins to grow. You move from “Hey Mike” to “Hey Mike, how are you doing?” to “Hey Mike, I have to move this couch can you give me a hand?” to “Hey Mike, how did your Mom’s surgery go?” Knowing someone’s name is the doorway to turning a stranger into an acquaintance and then a friend.

I'd like to give everyone a test today. Pull out the Block Map. If you don't have one you can easily do this by drawing a tick-tack-toe grid on a piece of paper. In the center house or square write your name and address. Now can you write the names of those who live in the eight houses around you? The people across the street, those on either side of you and those who live behind you. I realize this may not be the exact layout of your block or you may live in an apartment building or condo. Regardless, just choose eight houses which are near or around you and write the names of those who reside there. Next, in the middle part of each box write some attribute you know about each family: was born in England, works as a chemist, is retired, loves to go running. Now in the bottom part of each box write something about their heart, their joys, their concerns such as: just had a new baby, is looking for work, visits an ailing parent, has an upcoming surgery.

As you look at your box you may feel a little discouraged because you don't know very much about the people who live around you. I've lived in my home for twenty-six years. I can fill out information about three houses across the street and the house on either side of me but the three houses behind me are completely blank. If your block map is blank don't be bummed. Pastors Dave and Jay say this is very common. When they present this to congregations all over the country they find only about 5% of the people can fill in the names of everyone around them and only 10% of that 5% can fill in the second part of all those boxes and almost no one can write in the last part for everyone on their block map.

Would you join me in starting a neighboring movement? It begins by learning people's names. Now more than ever, as we struggle with the loneliness caused by the COVID-19 shut down, it's essential for us to actually, practically love our neighbors. Social distancing is not the same as social isolation. Loneliness and isolation affect everyone's physical and emotional well-being. Many people feel cut off from their normal interactions. At the same time, there are a lot more people walking around the neighborhoods. As a result, we have a unique opportunity to make friends with the people who live near us. These connections will make a big difference in their lives and ours. The key is to find ways to do this from six feet away. Infectious Disease Epidemiologist Dr. Karen Giesecker says,

“Right now, we don't need churches to create a bunch of new programs. What we need is for the people who attend those churches to simply be good neighbors and to do it in a careful thoughtful manner.”

There are several resources on the Woodside website for how to practice the Art of Neighboring during Covid 19. Here are a few:

- When you see people outside make a point to talk with them. Tell them your name. Ask them theirs. Write it down on the Block Map
- Ask how your neighbors are doing during this crisis
- Build a Neighborhood Directory
- Ask if they want you to pick up anything from the Grocery Store for them
- Have neighbors bring chairs and drinks and sit down outside six feet or more apart. You can do this in the backyard but if you sit in the front yard more neighbors might join you.

There are lots more ideas on Right Now Media which is free from Woodside. Just go to Right Now Media and search for “The Art of Neighboring.” If you don’t have a free Right Now Media account let us now on the Connection Card and we’ll get you set up. Remember, the best place to start loving your neighbors is learning their names. From there it can go anywhere.

Remember Linda? Normally, her husband Jerry did all the home improvement projects. After all he was retired and had the time. Yet this time he wasn’t out there because he was sick. In truth, Jerry had cancer. He lived with it and fought it for a long time. I guess the occasional conversations I had with Linda when I saw her outside made her feel more comfortable asking me to pray for Jerry. And then came the moment when Linda asked me to join their children gathered around Jerry and pray for him just before he passed away.

She continued to live in the house and we enjoyed talking with her whenever she was outdoors working on her garden. Jerry was a veteran and one day I noticed Linda putting up a very tattered American flag. So the next time I was in Home Depot I picked up a new flag for her. We host a Growth Group at our house on Monday nights. One time God said to me, “Why don’t you invite Linda?” I did and she said, “Sure. That sounds great.” She became friends with the other members of the group. One time, I was doing a home improvement project at my house and we could not host it so Linda graciously opened her home to the Group at the last minute.

Eventually, it just made sense for her to sell her home and move closer to her children and grandchildren. We were truly sad to see her move away. Over time, Linda had become more than a name to us. She was a dear friend and a sister in Christ. I’m sorry that it took more than two decades to get to know her.

A new young couple with a little girl bought the house from Linda. I was determined not to let it take two more decades before I got to know them. So I baked some chocolate chip cookies and Lisa and I walked across the street and gave them the cookies with a welcome to the neighborhood card. It turns out that Andrea and Jeremy already knew us. They were both classmates of our daughter Kristin. God made it easy on us.

Who is your neighbor? If you don’t know, maybe it’s time to walk across the street.