The Art of Neighboring – Week 3

The Fear Factor

Unfortunately, we live in a culture of fear and suspicion these days. Is it any wonder – given the 24 hour news cycle that's just a click away? Is it any wonder when people that we disagree with are demonized and called horrible names? When we are continuously exposed to these types of stories, it's easy to become conditioned into thinking that everyone has a hidden agenda or that they are out to get us in some way.[i] Instead of looking forward to engaging with people we live and work near, and building a relationship, what is our response? We tend to draw back, avoid and ignore them, and seek to protect ourselves. (PAUSE) As we begin this morning, think with me for a moment about people or homes you've seen around your neighborhood or here around the church.

Perhaps someone sports a yard sign or flag for different politicians than you support, does that make you

wary of starting a conversation and building a relationship with them?

Are there kids on your block who are the same age as your children or grandchildren – but you know their parents don't have the same values as you do? Does it make you uneasy when your kids go there to play?

Is there a family on your block or at your workplace that always seems to always have drama or someone who just gives off a vibe that makes you uncomfortable?

As we seek to be good neighbors, how do we handle these situations, what do we do? First, and foremost, hear me say that God does not call us to blindly dismiss all of our fears and to jump head-long into every one of our co-worker's or neighbors' lives. Sometimes, our fears are valid and can keep us from getting caught up in dangerous or unhealthy situations.[ii]

That was the case for the neighbors who lived in the house across the street from where I grew up. When I was a teenager, a young family moved in – a husband and wife and their 3 year old daughter. He had a loud muscle

car that he like to work on while he blasted country-music, but they seemed nice enough, at first. But then the adults on the street began to notice some troublesome behaviors. The home became a gathering place for our neighbors' friends and beer flowed freely. Before long the yard and the curb became littered with beer cans and other trash, and the visitors began making inappropriate comments to neighbors. Then, on our quiet cul-de-sac, unfamiliar cars started showing up across the street. Sometimes the driver knocked on the door of the house – never entering, sometimes our neighbor came to the cars. As a self-absorbed teenager who wasn't home much, I was oblivious to this new unwelcomed traffic, but fortunately the adults were tracking it carefully. The situation got so bad that my dad would walk me and my mom to and from our cars. Eventually, with help of the county narcotics squad, a number of the participants were arrested and the family moved away. Our neighborhood was right to be wary of them. And although we are to love all of our neighbors, I wonder if any amount of

neighboring would have changed the activity that was occurring there.

But much more often, our fear or wariness is unfounded, and we need to lean into our discomfort. Some folks, like me, are more introverted, and taking the initiative to build relationships with strangers can be a challenge. Trust me, I get this.

Other times, as we mentioned a few moments ago, we have been taught or conditioned to distrust or openly reject those we perceive to be "other." This was true of my dad and the next family that moved into the house across the street. My dad was a wonderful man in many ways, but someone – I don't know who or when – instilled a deep sense of prejudice in him against anyone with darker skin. After our white criminal neighbors moved out, a young man and his 4 year old daughter moved in. They were friendly and quiet, they kept the house and the yard up nicely, (PAUSE) and they happened to be from India. (PAUSE) And my dad wanted nothing to do with them. Finally after some time, they won my dad over – the daughter was adorable and stole

his heart, but I think he always saw this family as the exception to his mindset. My dad passed away when I was a young adult, and I never had the opportunity to ask him why he believed this way. I have wondered often what fear drove his thinking and kept him from other meaningful relationships. I wished we could have talked about how everyone is made in the image of God, and that everyone is worthy of love and respect.

And here is another thing we need to remember. It's likely that our neighbors are just as wary and suspicious of us as we are of them. Depending on where they get their news or what social media platforms they use or who they follow, they may also be on high alert when they meet us. This happened to one of the authors of The Art of Neighboring, Jay and his wife, when they moved into a new neighborhood. They didn't want to wait on their neighbors to take the initiative to meet them, so Danielle, Jay's wife, decided to bake apple pies that they would gift as they introduced themselves to the neighborhood. They were quickly reminded that the art of neighboring can be awkward and messy.

They reported that most of the neighbors responded very positively to their unexpected appearance on their door steps. Most were appreciative and expressed thanks for the pies. Others were surprised, almost embarrassed that they hadn't taken the first step to welcome the new folks. But most seemed happy to see them and initial conversations were pleasant.

However, one neighbor was quite the opposite. When Jay and Danielle knocked on his door, he opened it just a crack. Instead of saying hello, he told them to leave.

"We just want to give you a pie," they said. "We just moved in around the corner, and we're taking pies to all of our neighbors."

"What ever you're selling, we don't need it," he said. "If it's a sample, you can leave it on the porch."

"We're not selling anything, we live right over there," they said, pointing to their home.

"No, we don't need anything," he said. "Just go away." So they did.

As they walked back home, Jay and Danielle tried to put themselves in their neighbor's shoes. The man spoke with an accent and they wondered if their American forwardness was too much for his cultural upbringing. Perhaps no none had ever reached out and tried to get to know him. Maybe he really thought they were solicitors with an agenda. Even with these possibilities in mind, it was hard for them not to take the rejection personally.

A few days later, Jay saw the same neighbor outside doing yard work. He walked over and introduced himself again. This time, the neighbor was a bit more receptive, sharing that salespeople were the only ones who ever came to his door. Even after this positive exchange, it took the family a good while to warm up to Jay and Danielle. Finally, they came to understand that he really was just afraid. (PAUSE)

So where do all of these stories leave us this morning? Hopefully they remind us that someone has to be the first to break the cycle of fear. We also need to remember that following Jesus' commands may not always be neat, easy or even safe. So where do we begin?

As is almost always the case, we begin with intentionality. Isn't that what Jesus did? He intentionally chose to invest his time in the poor, the oppressed, the sick and the lonely. When the Pharisees pressed him about this, Jesus simply replied that they were the ones that needed it.

During his farewell address to the disciples at the last supper, Jesus encouraged them to do the same. "A new command I give you," he said. "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **35** By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Be intentional about loving, he told them.

As we continue to pray and discern about how God is calling us to love our neighbors, may we remember that God is already at work in our neighborhoods, and that God will give us discernment about when and how to engage our neighbors. Instead of starting with a block party or showing up at our neighbors' doors unannounced with pies, we may need to begin with a friendly wave and an introduction when we see each other outside. Maybe it

means moving our chairs to the front yard where we actually see each other or hanging a swing from the tree in our front yards Being a good neighbor may simply mean slowing down and being aware of what God is already doing. (PAUSE)

We can do this as churches too. Tabernacle Baptist Church in the fan – the church where Jay and I attend when I'm not serving elsewhere, began to intentionally ask how they could be better neighbors to those who live around them. Tabernacle has always had a food pantry and the ministry has evolved over the years. Now, in addition to addressing food insecurity, the church is working intentionally to build community. Every other Saturday, the morning begins with a community breakfast where church members and neighbors gather together around tables to built relationship and to check in with one another. Then neighbors are invited to shop for items in the community room (instead of receiving a pre-loaded bag of food – some of which they might not care for or be able to eat). As the ministry has focused more on community building, they are delighted that a

number of the neighbors they serve are now active volunteers in the ministry, they feel a part of the Tabernacle family and now they are giving back.

This week in Tabernacle's weekly newsletter, April, the minister of community began her article this way: This Saturday, we're expecting a crowd. We are sure to have new neighbors coming for food, but we are also likely to have new people from the community coming to be a part of helping their neighbors. If you're part of the regular team, take a moment to introduce yourself, show someone the job you love, and help them find their place. Every smile, every shared task, every bit of guidance helps new volunteers see what makes this ministry such a meaningful part of who we are.

Further down she noted: From now through Mid-December, our collection will focus on shelf-stable items for the Christmas meals we share with our neighbors. Beginning this Sunday, bags will be available to pick up with an attached list of needed item and these items have been added to the amazon list. We're also inviting the wider community to join in this effort. Bags went out on

Election Day as we welcomed neighbors into the building to vote, and some were even returned later in the day! We will also be inviting other building users to join in our collection. I applaud them not only for making it easy for members of the congregation to contribute, but also for inviting the wider neighborhood to participate on election day. Their creativity and commitment to responding to the emerging food crisis is a model for us all.

There is a young man named Wes who runs a homeless shelter. He noted that most of the people he hosts end up there because of isolation. They became distanced from friends, family and neighbors, and then it took only one bad break for them to end up needing the shelter.

Good neighboring combats this isolation and loneliness. There is a lot of peace that comes from knowing and loving our neighbors; and if we lean into our initial discomfort, we can grow into people who are motivated by love, not those controlled by fear. Eight of us witnessed this first hand as we gathered at the

Homeland Security Office to support Carmen who left her home in the center of the state at 4:30 in the morning to be here for a 9:00 a.m. checks in appointment. After greeting her with warm hugs and a time of prayer, she said that she had been fighting fear and anxiety as she drove, but now that she was not alone, but supported by her brothers and sisters in Christ, she was able to enter the check-in with courage and peace. She was changed by the encounter, but so were we.

May it be so for each of us and all of us as we continue to live into the commands to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strengths and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

[ii] The Art of Neighboring, p. 61
[ii] Ibid. p. 62