Art of Neighboring Week 4 – For the Love of God

Romans 12:9-18

Today we complete our four-week series on the art of neighboring. If you haven't been with us for the whole series, here is a quick recap. In week one, we addressed the question who is our neighbor, and asserted that Jesus wants us to be good neighbors to those who live closest to us. We were challenged to fill out this grid to see how many of our neighbors we could name and how well we knew them.

In week two, we talked about ways to create time to be a good neighbor. These strategies included focusing on what was most important, eliminating time wasters, and allowing ourselves to be interruptible. Last week, we talked about the fear factor – what to do when we fear others and when they fear us. We were reminded that seeing all of our neighbors as people made in the image of God can help us lean into our fear and discomfort and get to know our neighbors on a deeper level.

This morning, we wrap up our series by looking at our motivations for loving our neighbor and planning our next steps of action. Jay and Dave remind us that when we begin to love our neighbors, our motives matter. The most important thing that you can hear me say today is that we don't love our neighbors to convert them, we love them because WE are converted. Hear that again. We love them because we are Christ followers who are committed to living out the greatest commandment period. We are called to love our neighbors unconditionally without expecting anything in return.[i]

We heard this in the beginning of our Scripture lesson this morning – Let love be genuine, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; out do one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

In order to love our neighbors unconditionally, Jay and Dave assert, we need to discern between an ulterior motive and an ultimate motive. Often, we have an ulterior motive when we do something, don't we? We do something extra at work or volunteer at church because

we want to, but if we're honest, we sometimes we also want recognition, or praise -- or at work we'd like a raise or promotion. Perhaps we do a favor for our neighbor so we then feel free to ask them for one in return. When we love our neighbor, we need to be careful that our ulterior motive is not to share the gospel or convert them to Christianity or to expect anything else in return. If our neighbors perceive or learn that these are our motives, they will feel like we've done bait and switch or that we are being manipulative.

Is there anything wrong with wanting to share Christ with our neighbors? Of course not, in fact sharing the gospel with others fulfills the Great Commission in Scripture. And this can certainly be our ultimate goal. An ultimate goal is an eventual point or a longed-for destination, but it is not an agenda we bring to our relationships. Often, when are committed to being good neighbors and loving folks unconditionally, they will ask why we are invested in loving others. If you help a neighbor repair their home or car, or work in their yard, you may discover it offers opportunity for deeper and

richer conversation. Then, we have the perfect opportunity to share that we are Christians and we are seeking to model our lives after Jesus. We can share what a difference Christ has made in our lives and what a difference a relationship can make for them too.

This principle is based on Matthew 5:41 – it is part of the beatitudes, the hard sayings of Jesus. This one reads, if anyone forces you to go with them one mile, then go with them two. Some of you may know the history of this challenge. You many remember that in Jesus' day, the Israelites lived under Roman occupation. At any time, a Roman soldier could order anyone to stop what they were doing and carry his heavy pack for one mile. I would be willing to bet that everyone knew exactly how far a mile was, they knew exactly how long and how far they had to go to comply. Imagine their shock when Jesus said, if someone commands you to go with them one mile, then go with them two. You're kidding, right Jesus? That would be a four mile round trip from wherever you started and it would take up a

significant amount of your day. Why would Jesus command this?

Well, imagine a soldier's reaction to the following scenario. The person who has been conscripted to carry the soldier's pack gets to the one mile point. Instead of putting down the pack and turning back the way he had come, he says, "Let's keep going, I'm going to carry this pack a second mile for you." If I were the soldier, after I got over my initial shock, what would my first question be? "Why?" Why would someone volunteer for such a thing? The simple answer is - it is during that second mile that we have earned the opportunity to share our faith. That opportunity rarely comes when we are doing only what is required.

I imagine that some of you have extra-mile stories – here is a light hearted one. After my sophomore year in college, I spent a summer on mission in the Smoky Mountains. Many of us had jobs in the tourist industry and we spent our off hours leading VBS and worship services in campgrounds and shepherding youth groups that came on their summer mission trips. We were

encouraged to see our work colleagues as our neighbors and to love them. Three of us worked at the local grocery story where we met Valerie, a young adult who was living alone in a nearby campground. We wanted to love Valerie as our neighbor, so we started to hang out with her when we had free time. Half way through the summer, Val decided to adopt a puppy and I went with her to help bring him home – and of course he did what untrained puppies do all over my lap on the way back. We helped her with small tasks on her camper and invited her to campground concerts and programs. Eventually, Valerie asked the question we hoped she would – why are you all so nice, why are doing all of these things for me? Having earned the opportunity to share a verbal witness, we were able to share our faith with her, and she chose to become a Christ follower too.

I share this story for two reasons. One to show that loving our neighbor is not always convenient or easy (and sometimes we have to establish clear and healthy boundaries). But also to remind us that no act of kindness we do for any neighbor is ever wasted. We may feel like

a small act of kindness doesn't matter much, but –like the story of the boy with the small lunch of loaves and fishes – Jesus can take what we offer and multiple it in ways that we never would have imagined. But as we engage with our neighbors and coworkers, we must always be mindful that our motive is to love them as God commanded, and to discern when/how we might have the opportunity to share our faith.

So, as I have throughout this series, I encourage you to start somewhere, and feel free to start small. Maybe join with a neighbor you already know to sponsor a bring your own snacks and drinks block gathering in someone's yard or driveway. Have a sheet where folks can give their address, phone and email to share relevant information with each other – our block uses this all the time to report petty theft, lost pets, and other helpful information. If this sounds like too much, invite someone over for coffee or tea and spend an hour getting to know them. Pull your neighbor's trash can back from the curb or pick up a package off their steps if it's pouring rain. Take a walk and introduce yourself to people you haven't

met yet. The important thing is that we start somewhere and see what God does as we follow the command to love our neighbor.

And I want to remind us to apply these principles to the neighbors who are seated around us in the sanctuary this morning. If there is someone you don't know or don't know well, visit with them in the Gathering room when the service is over, invite them to sign up for a service opportunity and get to know each other while you are making a difference in our community.

Working together we can impact not only the lives of those we love, but we will continue to be changed too. Just ask those who just returned from rebuilding homes in Tennessee. (PAUSE)

As we close this series today, my prayer is that the community and the world will know WRCOB and her members as the neighborhood church with a global vision - where people love well.

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[i] The Art of neighboring, p. 102-103.