



November 16-17, 2019

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For Your Neighbors: The Party

Mark 2:14-17

“What is the greatest commandment?” That’s the question a lawyer asked Jesus. “Of all 613 commandments... which one is the greatest?” But Jesus replied with a two-fer: “You shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...ANNNND...you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We evangelicals tend to major on point A...love God. And we sometimes ignore point B...love your neighbor. So we are in a sermon series asking the question, “What would it look like if we really loved our literal, flesh and blood, right-next-door neighbors?”

First step? Learn their names! How can we love them if we don’t even know who they are? Then we learned that “neighbor” is a verb, not just a noun. The Good Samaritan taught us that “neighboring-love” is not about warm, mushy feelings. It’s about acts of kindness. And remember: this is NOT one and done. “OK...I did my good deed; now I can go back to hiding in my house.” Neighboring ... loving our neighbors through acts of kindness ...is ongoing. It is a change of heart and a change of behavior that turns us into lifelong neighbors, not one-shot wonders. What would it look like if, from NOW ON, Chapel Hill folks were known as those who REALLY know their neighbors, REALLY care for their neighbors, REALLY serve their neighbors, REALLY love their neighbors?

We are celebrating each act of “neighboring” with an orange dot! Every time you perform a deliberate act of “neighboring,” I want you to put an orange dot on the map in the lobby. This is not bragging; no one will know. But it’s like a dashboard that tells us how we are doing. The “oranger” it gets, the better we neighbors we are becoming.

Knowing and serving our neighbors...if we did ONLY those two things consistently... would change us. It would change our neighborhood and it would change our community. But today, I want to ask for a little more. And to introduce our text, I want to tell you what Cyndi and I did two Sundays ago. After 30 years of marriage, we had our very first ever...drum roll please...neighborhood open house. We did this in partnership with two other next-door neighbors. We (and when I say “we” I, of course, mean “Cyndi”)... printed up invitations, hand-delivered them to our neighbors, made appetizers...and then we waited.

That was the terrifying moment. In part, because I prefer to hide in my home. And...in part, because I still remember the time I threw a party as a teenager and no one...not a single person...showed up. That still haunts me. BUT...they did show up! A bunch of ‘em. We ate, we talked, we shared contact information, card games we like to play, conspired on how to get our power lines buried. And EVERYONE agreed we ought to do this again. In fact, the next day, for the first time, we took a walk with a neighbor AND we stopped and talked with another couple on their porch! Woo hoo!

As it turns out, I did NOT end up in a fetal position in a corner after our party. I had fun. I was exhausted...but I had fun. And more to the point...we neighbored. Again...for those of you for whom this is second nature, you might think, "Big deal!" Have mercy! It WAS a big deal for me. But I couldn't ask you to do something I wasn't willing to do!

Because...that's where we're going today. I've asked you to learn who your neighbors are, to love them with acts of service. NOW, I challenge you to consider one step further: GATHER with your neighbors. It's party time! Our text comes from Mark 2: 13-17.

[Jesus] we went out again beside the sea, and all the crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

And as he reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

This is the story about Jesus calling a guy named Levi to be his disciple. We know Levi by another name: Matthew. And we know THAT name because he wrote the first book of the New Testament: the gospel according to Matthew. But before he was a disciple, he was a tax collector.

Tax collectors were the scum of the earth. They were like IRS agents on commission. They were traitors to their own people and collaborators with Rome. As much as the Jews hated the Samaritans, they hated tax collectors more! They were such social outcasts that they weren't even allowed to set foot inside a synagogue. They were rich, but very, very lonely...and very, very despised.

SO...the fact that Rabbi Jesus would invite this unclean guy to "follow him"...was unthinkable! It would have shocked every person in the crowd...especially when Matthew jumped up and said Yes! In fact, he is so excited about his new friend that he throws a party. Of course, the only people who would come to Matthew's party were other tax collectors and "sinners." Which got the religious folk all steamed up because Rabbi Jesus was hanging out with filthy, unclean, irreligious people. And they muttered about it. And Jesus heard them!

Here's his SPOKEN punchline of the story. Jesus said, "Of course I hang out with filthy people; they're the ones that need help getting cleaned up. You "righteous" people don't need my help." But if there was a Greek symbol for air quotes, it would be around the word, "Righteous." What he was really saying was, "EVERY PERSON is filthy; EVERY person needs cleaning up; no one is righteous...especially, those who think they are!"

The call of Matthew is a wonderful demonstration of the grace of God. But...what I really want to talk about this evening/morning... is that party. After this epic moment in his life, Matthew invites a bunch of friends over to meet HIS new friend, Jesus. And he invites them...to a party. A feast. Not a Bible Study. Not a worship service. Heck...they weren't allowed in the synagogue. No... Matthew invites them to a dinner party. And the only thing we are told about Jesus, apart from his slap-down of the Pharisees...is that he was reclining at table eating with them. Not preaching. Not teaching. Not praying. Just...eating. Just partying.

Do you know how much of the Bible is devoted to partying? We view this book as God's word, a guide to faith and life, inspiration, instruction. But it is also a party manual! From beginning to end. For instance, if you take all the Old Testament festivals and feasts which the Jews were commanded to celebrate...Passover and Pentecost and Tabernacles and all the Sabbaths... 80 days out of the Jewish year were set apart for parties, festivals, feasts and rest! More than two months!

And the gospels are FULL of parties. Jesus' first miracle was changing water into wine at a wedding feast. When the prodigal son returns, his dad throws an epic party. Jesus told a parable about a wedding feast. The gospel of Luke alone mentions ten different meals and feasts! And the Bible concludes with a heavenly wedding banquet in Rev 19.

The Bible teaches that something powerful happens when people come together to eat and drink and celebrate. Cyndi and I discovered that with our first Open House. It won't be our last. I've asked you to love your neighbor by learning about them. I've asked you to love them by serving them. NOW...and this is a big ask...I'm asking you to love them by partying with them.

Maybe an Open House like we did. It's a safe entry point! Or maybe a dinner. I know of at least three different CH families who host taco nights for the neighborhood. In fact, one does so every single Monday throughout the summer...and they have soup night every Monday the rest of the year! And all are welcome! Another woman regularly invites 10 neighbors over for cookies get to know each other. Yet another woman hosted a cookie decorating party last Saturday for all the kids on her cul-de-sac so that parents could go have a date...which led to great connections with some very grateful parents!

I want to challenge you to consider doing something in the next two or three months to gather your neighbors together. But this is the most important thing you need to hear: THIS IS NOT AN EVANGELISM STRATEGY! In fact, if you have paid careful attention all fall, you have NOT heard me ask you to invite your neighbors to church. I have asked you to notice your community, pray for your community, engage strangers, learn your neighbor's names and serve your neighbors. I have NOT asked you to leverage those things into a church invitation. Not because bringing your friends to church is not a good thing; but because it can become the sneaky thing.

This may be the most insightful thing I gleaned from the book *The Art of Neighboring* which many of you purchased. In it, the authors talk about the difference between ulterior and ultimate motives. An ulterior motive is something that is intentionally concealed. Hidden. Sneaky. Manipulative, even. It might look like one thing but, secretly, it is another.

By contrast, ultimate means “the farthest point of a journey...[the] longed-for destination.” I quote the book, “The ulterior motive in good neighboring must never be to share the gospel. But the *ultimate* motive is just that—to share the story of Jesus and his impact on our lives.” p. 101-102

When Jesus gave the great commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” there was no “so that....” Love your neighbor as yourself so that you can invite them to church...or so that you can share your testimony with them...or so that you can give them the Four Spiritual Laws.” Jesus just said, “Love your neighbor.” THAT’S IT: knowing, loving, serving, healing, giving to, caring for. If our hidden intent is to leverage that relationship...even for a good purpose... those are ulterior motives. And how do I know this? Because after our party I said to my wife... I’m not kidding... “Wow, now I have a bunch of new friends to invite to church.” And SHE said, “You are NOT going to invite them to church! You are going to get to know them!”

Now...do you think Cyndi doesn’t like our church? Doesn’t want our neighbors to come to church...or to come to Jesus? Of course not. But she knows...and she’s right... our neighbors are BRACING for the spiritual ask. They know I’m a pastor. They KNOW it’s coming...and when it does come...many of them will be saying, “Ah hah...there it is. The bait and switch. He isn’t really interested in knowing me. All he’s interested in is carving another notch in his belt.”

I’m reading a book called *The Gospel Comes With a House Key* by Rosaria Butterfield. She was an atheist lesbian activist who hated Christianity and hated the Church...but whose life was ultimately transformed by Jesus ... through the love of her next door neighbor, a Presbyterian pastor named Ken, who took a genuine interest in her and did not treat her as a project. He and his wife welcomed her into their home for more than two years before she began to trust them.

Here’s what she said about that experience:

I would not have fallen for this if I had felt stalked... What you can’t do is make sneaky little raids into people’s lives... and then expect people to thank you for that. If you want to have strong conversations, you have to build relationships. If you have good manners, you’ll make sure you have strong relationships before you have strong conversations. That’s true with your children, your neighbors, and everyone else.

Yes, it is. I can’t tell you how important this lesson is for me to learn. I’m a transactional guy. You know what a transaction is. You give something and get something in return. I tend to be transactional in my relationships with non-believers. Of course, it’s well-intentioned. I want them to know Jesus. I believe great things will happen when they do...and horrible things await them if they do not. So there is a reason behind my urgency.

But here’s what happens when you behave this way: you sacrifice genuine friendship. And the Great Commandment calls us to genuine friendship. Friendship that is NOT transactional in nature. Friendship where you listen WAY more than you talk...and pay attention! Friendship that is selfless and generous and patient and not pushy. Friendship where the person never feels like they are a

notch in your belt or a check in one of your boxes. In short...the way Jesus was a friend to you and me.

Ultimately...ULTIMATELY...all who live around us should experience through us the love of Jesus. And if you neighbor well...if you ask more questions than you speak about yourself or how much you know... if you serve without expectation of return...if you live a consistent life of hospitality that disarms fears and opens hearts ...who knows: the Holy Spirit might give you an opportunity to speak into their spiritual life.

But if you jump QUICKLY to that, it's cheating. And in this increasingly hostile and suspicious culture, it will not be effective. I doubt very much that when Matthew invited Jesus to come over, he conspired with him on how to convert his friends. "After desert, I'll bring out the coffee and then, you hit 'em with the Four Spiritual Laws." No...I just think he was excited for his new friend to meet his old friends. And he believed good things would happen when he brought them together.

If you open your home to your neighbors...if you offer genuine friendship to them...I have NO doubt that Jesus will show up. And good things will happen.

So...I invite you...join Cyndi and me and the other Chapel Hill folks who have discovered the joy of gathering. Throw a party. Invite your neighbors into your home. Make some tacos...make some soup...bake some cookies...brew some coffee...pray...and let's see what happens.