

Be Neighbors: 2. Time
Luke 10:38-42
May 28, 2017
Pastor Steve Richards

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor? This is the second week in this series that focuses in on that word "neighbor." What does it mean to be a neighbor? What does it mean to go to the people who live next door? Last week, we began with a conversation in Luke 10 between Jesus and an attorney, an expert in the Law of Moses, about eternal life. The attorney knew the command, to love God and to love your neighbor, but Jesus says to know that, to believe that is not enough. The way to eternal life is not having the right answers, but it is doing. Do this – love God and love your neighbor – do this and you live.

So we looked at how to live into this, and each of us was given a map [slide] to represent our own neighborhood, because I think Jesus is saying the path to eternal life cuts through your neighborhood. The middle square marks where you live, and we were invited to look for the eight people who live next door and answer three questions: 1) what are their names; 2) what's happening in their lives; 3) what is a hope or dream that they have. We won't know that just by looking at where they live, we've got to meet the neighbors. And if all of us did this – if all of us were known by the 8 people who live closest to us as the most loving, compassionate, ready to help people – if all of us, in fact, if only half of us did this, imagine what could happen in 250 neighborhoods across the west metro area, simply doing what Jesus calls us to do. In the past week, I've heard from people about the ways that they are trying to meet their neighbors. Someone said, "I'm trying to spend more time in the front yard." When I learn someone's name, I go home and write it down. One person described keeping dog treats to give when people are out walking their dogs. Someone took me up on my suggestion last week of taking chocolate chip cookies next door. One of our faith groups has decided to meet during the summer at different homes and try to invite next door neighbors to join them. We have a member who makes cards on special occasions and takes one to every person in her building. One person on our church staff told me about the cul-de-sac where she lives. They are having a cookout to honor a longtime resident who died recently and a new family has moved into that house so it's a way to welcome the new people. What a wonderful way to welcome someone new. And if you haven't taken that first step or that next step, what could you do? In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others so they will see God reflected through you. It begins by getting acquainted.

The number one obstacle to neighboring well is time. We don't seem to have enough of it to do all that we want to do, much less adding something more. Isn't that one of our first thoughts when there is something more I should do? Where am I going to find the time? What if one thing leads to another, will I have time for it? The amount of stuff in our lives and the schedules we keep can be overwhelming. The new normal when we greet each other is to say, I'm busy. How are you doing? I'm busy. I'm really busy. And some of the busiest people I know are retired people. Where will we find the time and the energy for one more relationship much less the six, seven, or eight that I'm suggesting?

I wonder. Are we living at a sustainable pace? When our youngest daughter went off to college, we thought we were free – that we would have all this extra time, but we very quickly went from have dinner together every night to one or two meals together each week. Today, I wonder how we even had time to raise children. But a year ago, cancer changed our use of time. Suddenly, we had to make time for medical appointments and whole days, sometimes a whole week was

consumed by things we had not planned – and as a result, we spent a lot of time together. We actually had conversations instead of sending each other text messages. But now that we are on the other side of cancer treatments the temptation is to let up on the brake pedal and resume the pace. A pace that is ultimately unsustainable for a healthy relationship with the other person who lives in the house, much less reaching out to the people next door.

At my Dad's memorial service on Thursday, I read a eulogy that he had written for that service. In it, he described all of the things he hoped to accomplish during his retirement. When he retired twenty-five years ago, he hoped he would have ten years before he died. He'd already had a heart attack and his father's heart had given out at the age of 52, so he was in a hurry. It was like the movie "The Bucket List" where two men suffering terminal illnesses made a list of things they would like to do and see in the time remaining before they kicked the bucket. Then they set out to do the things on the list. In the movie, we see them parachuting out of an airplane, speeding in a race car, visiting the Taj Mahal, standing on the Great Wall of China. Each time they did something on their bucket list they crossed it out. Many of us have our own bucket lists. But do you remember how the movie ends? The two men eventually face the question of what really matters. Where does one experience real joy? One of the men, a mechanic by trade, decides that real joy is to be found among family and friends, and so he returns home and in his final days, experiences real joy as he shares a large meal surrounded by his large family. The other man, who has made billions in real estate developments, has no family. Divorced four times, he had a daughter but was estranged from her. But at the urging of his friend, he finally puts on his best suit and knocks on his daughter's front door. She opens the door, lets him in, and they are reunited. Then into the room comes his little granddaughter. He stoops down, greets the little girl and kisses her on the cheek. He takes out his bucket list and crosses out one of the final items on it which reads, "kiss the most beautiful girl in the world." He has discovered – which my dad also discovered by the end of his life – that real joy in life is to be found in relationships.

In Luke 10, right after last week's story of the Good Samaritan, we find a story about Mary and Martha, two sisters who invite Jesus and some of the disciples into their home for a meal. While Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to all Jesus says, the other sister, Martha, devotes herself to cleaning the house and making the meal. And the frantic pace catches up with Martha and she complains to Jesus. Why doesn't my sister help out? That's the cultural practice. That's what hospitality is supposed to look like in the first century. The women in the house are supposed to get things ready for the guests. And if you knew Jesus was coming to your house, you'd have a long list of things to do. But Jesus says to Martha: **You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.** What do we learn about Martha? Verse 40 tells us she was **...distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.** At first, it seems she is the one who understands what's important. Martha opens their home. Martha is the one who cares so much that she prepares the meal. Martha is the one who wants everything to be ready for the guests. But in her busyness, she misses the opportunity to be with Jesus. She gets reprimanded for serving Jesus. Because, if we try to do it all, we are likely to miss the main thing.

Jesus says there is a main thing, not main things – but only one. Jesus did not try to do everything. If anyone should have been in a hurry, it should have been Jesus. God sent Jesus to save the world. But did Jesus try to heal every person? Did he go to every country? And yet, we try to do it all. But his message to Mary and Martha is one thing. Keep the main thing, the main thing. In the story of Mary and Martha, what's the main thing? It's what we heard last week in Jesus' encounter with the attorney: Love God and Love you neighbor – doing that and not just

knowing that. It is being present in the moment to the people next to us, to the people next door. And that's hard to do. We are driven, smart, successful people and that's our problem. We keep adding more things. Greg McKeown has written the book, *The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. And he reminds us that the word decision comes from the Latin meaning "to cut or to kill". We have to say no, to eliminate in order to get to what's essential. Or like the man in the movie, we've accomplished a lot of things and missed what matters most. A few weeks ago, when the temperature got into the 80s, a few children in my neighborhood set up a lemonade stand at the end of their driveway and as a car would come down the street, they would jump up and down, waving their arms to get the driver to stop and buy their lemonade. Have you ever stopped at a child's lemonade stand? It's not really about the lemonade. That afternoon, as I drove down the street, they tried their best to get my attention, but I was in a hurry and I had a lot to do that afternoon and as I drove by I thought if they are still there when I return I'll stop then. But, my to do list took longer than I thought and by the time I returned to the neighborhood, the children and their lemonade stand was gone – and I missed the opportunity to make a connect, to meet the children at the end of the driveway and their parents who were sitting outside watching as the guy with the red convertible didn't stop. I was willing to stop, if it was convenient for me, but that's self-serving isn't it? They are not my neighbors until I see them as my neighbors. I'm tempted to use the metaphorical neighbor as an excuse to skip over the literal next door neighbor. And what I consider interruptions may actually be God's way of trying to get my attention so I will see the main thing.

For Jesus, where he's going is never as important as the people who are present. To be the neighbor is stopping and being open to the interruptions, giving your full attention to the people around you and in doing so you experience the fullness of life. That's the main thing. But it means slowing down and living at a pace that will allow me to be available to those around me.

How are you when you are riding an elevator and there is a person standing next to you? Do you stop and give that person your full attention? How are you in the grocery line or your favorite coffee shop? How are you in that moment when there are people around you? What if this week we slowed down or we looked up from our phones or we walked through our neighborhood, who would we notice and what might God do in us and through us? Love God. Love neighbor. Do this and you live.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of May 28, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Gracious and Loving God, you know that it's not quite as natural for me to love as it is for you. Please keep loving me as I stretch and grow in my ability to reflect your love to others. Amen.

Monday, May 29

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It's good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

Observation: Most likely, Jesus frequently taught his followers to be the world's salt and light. These two images show us key qualities we need to be truly good neighbors. Salt enhances

food's flavor, and can also help preserve it. Light destroys the darkness, revealing all the beauty of God's world and helping those who may have been lost to find their way.

Application: Jesus told his followers, "You are the salt of the earth...the light of the world." Have you ever flown over a city at night? Or come out of a long, dark tunnel into the bright light of the sun? What are the dark corners of your neighborhood, your city, and your world, which need to experience the light of God? What can you do to help shine God's light into these dark corners?

Prayer: God, as I go about my life today, keep me ever mindful of the people who need to find your light in their world. Fill my heart with love for you so overflowing that I cannot keep it hidden. Amen.

Tuesday, May 30

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-8

Naaman, a general for the king of Aram, was a great man and highly regarded by his master, because through him the LORD had given victory to Aram. This man was a mighty warrior, but he had a skin disease. Now Aramean raiding parties had gone out and captured a young girl from the land of Israel. She served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "I wish that my master could come before the prophet who lives in Samaria. He would cure him of his skin disease." So Naaman went and told his master what the young girl from the land of Israel had said. Then Aram's king said, "Go ahead. I will send a letter to Israel's king." So Naaman left. He took along ten kikkars of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothing. He brought the letter to Israel's king. It read, "Along with this letter I'm sending you my servant Naaman so you can cure him of his skin disease." When the king of Israel read the letter, he ripped his clothes. He said, "What? Am I God to hand out death and life? But this king writes me, asking me to cure someone of his skin disease! You must realize that he wants to start a fight with me." When Elisha the man of God heard that Israel's king had ripped his clothes, he sent word to the king: "Why did you rip your clothes? Let the man come to me. Then he'll know that there's a prophet in Israel."

Observation: A Syrian general named Naaman had a feared, seemingly hopeless skin disease. One sign of how seriously he took the disease was that the haughty general was willing to accept a suggestion from a captured Israelite slave girl. A nearly comic string of faulty notions followed. Naaman went to Israel's king, not the prophet (verses 5-6). That king seemed unaware of the prophet's presence in his land, and thought the Syrians were looking for a pretext for war.

Application: One of the Bible's unsung heroes is the unnamed Israelite girl in this story. If you were in the shoes of Naaman, the powerful Syrian general, how likely would you be to listen to an idea from a foreign slave girl? Are there people in your life, perhaps even neighbors, whose ideas you discount without even seriously considering them? Might God ever try to reach you through one of those unlikely people?

Prayer: Loving God, I want to become more and more like the amazing girl in this story. Help me to desire your good for all the people I deal with, and to know how to point them to you. Amen.

Wednesday, May 31

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:9-15

Naaman arrived with his horses and chariots. He stopped at the door of Elisha's house. Elisha sent out a messenger who said, "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan River. Then your skin will be restored and become clean." But Naaman went away in anger. He said, "I thought for sure that he'd come out, stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the bad spot, and cure the skin disease. Aren't the rivers in Damascus, the Abana and the Pharpar, better than all Israel's waters? Couldn't I wash in them and get clean?" So he turned away and proceeded to leave in anger. Naaman's servants came up to him and spoke to him: "Our father, if the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All he said to you was, 'Wash and become clean.'" So Naaman went down and bathed in the Jordan seven times, just as the man of God had said. His skin was restored like that of a young boy, and he became clean. He returned to the man of God with all his attendants. He came and stood before Elisha, saying, "Now I know for certain that there's no God anywhere on earth except in Israel. Please accept a gift from your servant."

Observation: When things got sorted out, and Naaman finally came to the prophet Elisha, he expected a fairly elaborate, formal religious ceremony (verse 11). Offered a different, simpler approach, he prepared to go home in a huff. Rather bravely, his servants finally convinced him that there couldn't be any harm in trying the simple way by bathing in the Jordan. God healed him in that unexpected way.

Application: Review the many points in this story in 2 Kings 5 at which fear of, or arrogance toward someone from a different country or faith could have derailed God's healing purpose. Do any of your neighbors (or co-workers) trigger some of those feelings in you because they are different? Ask God to help you find common ground, and watch for ways to bless that person or persons.

Prayer: Lord God, open my eyes, my ears and my heart to all of the ways you are at work in my life. Keep me from letting my expectations blind me to your chosen ways to help and heal me. Amen.

Thursday, June 1

Scripture: Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus continued on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. He said to him, "Follow me," and he got up and followed him. As Jesus sat down to eat in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners joined Jesus and his disciples at the table. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When Jesus heard it, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do. Go and learn what this means: I want mercy and not sacrifice. I didn't come to call righteous people, but sinners."

Observation: Tax collectors like Matthew worked with Israel's Roman occupiers, collecting taxes (usually excessive) from their fellow citizens. Jesus clearly, even shockingly, welcomed and loved people like that, individuals the "righteous" people of his day called "sinners." Jesus refused to neatly separate the human family into "good" and "bad" members—he aimed to extend love to all.

Application: Matthew was an outcast from respectable society. So imagine the type of friends he had, who came to his house to eat with Jesus! (*The Message* paraphrased “tax collectors and sinners” with vivid precision as “crooks and riffraff.”) Is there anyone in your neighborhood who might be seen as “tax collectors and sinners” in 2017? If so, how do you believe Jesus would treat (and have you treated) such people?

Prayer: Loving Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Help me to see others, especially my neighbors, through your eyes, which lit with love and compassion at the sight of a “sinner.” Amen.

Friday, June 2

Scripture: Mark 5:25-34

A woman was there who had been bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a lot under the care of many doctors, and had spent everything she had without getting any better. In fact, she had gotten worse. Because she had heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. She was thinking, If I can just touch his clothes, I'll be healed. Her bleeding stopped immediately, and she sensed in her body that her illness had been healed. At that very moment, Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples said to him, "Don't you see the crowd pressing against you? Yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus looked around carefully to see who had done it. The woman, full of fear and trembling, came forward. Knowing what had happened to her, she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth. He responded, "Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace, healed from your disease."

Observation: As Jesus moved through an unwieldy crowd to respond to one appeal for help, he sensed that another desperate person had touched him in a way that drew on his healing power. It was a woman whose problem would be serious today, but was worse then. Jewish law (Leviticus 15:25-27) saw her as permanently “unclean,” like a leper. She was forbidden to touch anyone; hence her cautious touch of Jesus’ garment. But “Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him,” and confirmed that her faith had made her whole.

Application: What a burden of shame this woman must have carried, along with her physical issues. Many people saw ailments like hers as judgments from God and treated her as an unclean outcast. Was Jesus being unkind when he called the healed woman forward—or was he freeing her from shame as well as from her physical disorder? Are there things in your life, or some of your neighbors’ lives, that people try to keep hidden?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it was your mission to move the world back towards its intended wholeness. Show me how to join in that mission, in big or small ways, to bless others. Amen.

Saturday, June 3

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12, 19-21

Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us.

We love because God first loved us. If anyone says, I love God, and hates a brother or sister, he is a liar, because the person who doesn't love a brother or sister who can be seen can't love God, who can't be seen. This commandment we have from him: Those who claim to love God ought to love their brother and sister also.

Observation: As John wrote about how we human beings treat one another, he likely thought about himself and Jesus' other disciples. They jockeyed for position, and got angry with one another at times. Yet as they continued to walk with Jesus, he re-shaped their thoughts and actions. John knew from his own experience that loving others with Christ's love doesn't spring from a naturally warm human disposition. This kind of active love comes from God, "because love is from God."

Application: John says, "No one has ever seen God," but he went on to say, "If we love each other, God remains in us." Maybe you are the only Jesus some will ever see. As your capacity grows to take in God's love, to see yourself as loveable in God's sight, how is this changing the way you see and relate to others? Are you able to see the interruptions as an opportunity to be a neighbor (i.e. to be the Jesus that someone can see)?

Prayer: Dear God, you know that it's not quite as natural for me to love as it is for you. Please keep loving me as I stretch and grow in my ability to reflect your love to others. Amen.