

Building Relationships

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me." The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

Lk. 10:38-42 (C.E.B.)

Last week we began a series of sermons addressing the concept of "neighboring." In this series we're inviting you to explore the idea of how to be a good neighbor to the people around you. Today, we want to talk about how to build relationships with your neighbor. And your neighbor could be the people who live in the houses near where you live or who sit in the pews near you or who work at the desks near where you work or who sit in the classroom near you.

Neighboring, as I'm using the word, is an attitude that pays attention to the people around us. Neighboring is a mindset as much as anything else, a mindset that begins with an attitude of hospitality.

Last week we invited you to use a neighboring map to identify those people who live behind the eight closest front doors to your front door. We suggested using the picture on the bulletin as a template to create your own neighborhood map. They may be down the hall in your apartment building or a mile away in the country, but there are always eight front doors that are the closest front doors to your front door. We suggested getting three different pieces of information for each of them:

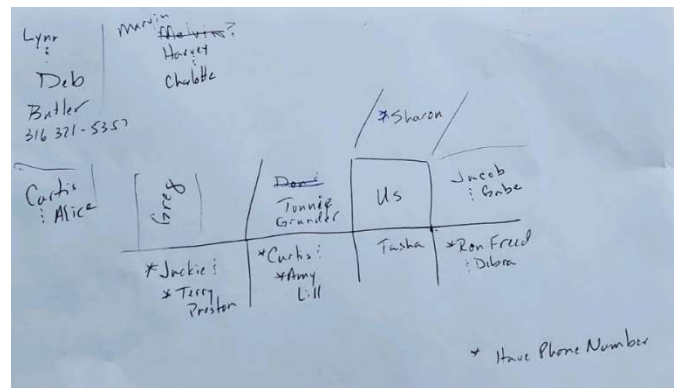
- a. Their names
- b. Something you know about them that you can't observe
- c. Their hopes and dreams

This is what our neighborhood map looks like. We keep it on our refrigerator. It isn't fancy, and it's definitely not to scale. We've added to it as we've met more neighbors. And truthfully, we haven't written down the answers to all three questions; we did, however, get their phone numbers.

Last week we practiced the concept by overlaying that map onto the pews where you sit and invited you to get to know one another at a level you may not have done before. Hopefully we learned how the map works, even if we didn't complete the work.

We know it isn't easy to do, and we know it will take time to finish filling out the map. Whether you are talking about the people in the pews or the people who live in the homes in your neighborhood, it takes time; it takes time to build relationships.

And it doesn't help that the current trends in architecture are working against us. There was a time when homes were built with large front porches, designed for visiting with your neighbors as they walk passed our homes. Most of today's homes have a garage door placed prominently in the front; there is a small entryway, and a privacy fence in the back where the porch has been replaced by a deck.



As an introvert, that design trend has suited me well. When we lived in West Wichita, I rarely saw my neighbors. They did what I tended to do. They drove their car into the garage and closed the door behind them as they went into the house from the garage. The only time I spent in the front yard was when I was mowing the lawn.

Because we're working against architectural and social norms, it's important to be intentional about neighboring, to be creative in our approaches to meeting and getting to know the people who live in the homes nearest our own.

One person I talked to spends time in the front yard tending their garden. Their willingness to spend time outside has offered opportunities to visit with neighbors who walk by. I know others who sit in lawn chairs in their garage, making it more of a front porch than a place to park their car.

As I tried to get to know my neighbors in West Wichita, I realized most of my encounters followed a similar pattern. It began with a casual wave as we saw each other. Then I would introduce myself and begin calling them by name. I would look for something to comment about. We noticed a new car. Or made a comment about their lawn. Eventually we learned to let them know when we would be gone, asking them to watch for packages. Then we returned the favor.

It was a long, slow process. After four years I could barely complete questions a. and b. on our neighborhood map, and I could only do that for about half of our eight closest neighbors.

When we moved to El Dorado, we decided to find creative ways to speed up the process. Our new home is one of several built on the land that was once an elementary school. There is an existing neighborhood across the street from us as well as new homes on our side of the street. We moved in on the first of September, two years ago. And in December of that year, we invited our nearest neighbors – most of whom lived across the street – to our house for Christmas treats.

We were the newest people there, and every one of our guests said the same thing. “We should have invited you to our home!” The next year, we invited a smaller selection of our neighbors for a Christmas dinner. I can already fill out the complete box of our neighboring map for most of those neighbors.

On Labor Day, a year ago, we made invitations and hand delivered them to our “back yard” neighbors, the people living in the new houses on our block. We hosted a barbecue on our deck and all but one couple was able to join us. And again, everyone said we should do this again.

No one has returned the invite – so far – but we know it is *our* goal to get to know *them*, it is *our* desire to love our neighbors. So we will find another time to host another gathering – and eventually fully complete our neighboring map.

The truth is, building relationships takes time. We can let it happen naturally over time, or we can be intentional about it. When we invite guests into our house, though, we know the priority is on those relationships. We spend time preparing the meal, but then we focus on our guests.

We know the work of Martha in the kitchen is important. It's why so many people bristle at the telling of the story in our text for today. There can be no meal if there isn't someone doing the work in the kitchen. But Jesus reminds us that the role of Mary in the living room is also important. You can't build relationships with people if you feel like you are their servant.

It is worth noting that the parable of the Good Samaritan – although a better title might be the Helpful Samaritan – immediately precedes this story in Luke’s gospel. It’s almost as if Luke wants to remind us of the importance of maintaining balance between doing and being. On the one hand there is the admonition of Jesus to “go and do” as the Samaritan did; on the other hand there is the admonition to “sit and listen” as Mary does (Lk. 10:37, 42).¹

When we invited our neighbors to our home, we put the focus on them, on building relationships. What we found is that if we have an attitude of hospitality, our guests are willing to help with the clean-up.

Last week I suggested that learning to be a good neighbor is a direct and positive response to Jesus’ call to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lk. 10:27). And I suggested that we could only do that if we learn who our neighbors are. We gave you “maps” to help you record the information you collect.

The intent is for you to keep that map in view, whether it is on your refrigerator in the kitchen or taped to the mirror in your bathroom. Fill it out over the course of the next few weeks, months, and maybe even years. Remember to get all three pieces of information:

- d. Their names
- e. Something you know about them that you can’t observe
- f. Their hopes and dreams

Here, in this room, we hope to give you ideas about how to gather that information. Last week we practiced by filling out the maps for the people who sit closest to you, serving as a model for how you can do that at home.

Today we will do a similar exercise. This time, I want you to strategize together. Tell each other about one of your neighbors at home. Tell the person next to you what you have learned so far; and come up with ideas together about how you can start a conversation with another neighbor, one you don’t know as well.

Like last week, I’ll give you 3 minutes, even though it’s not long enough.

<< set timer for 3 minutes >>

Thank you. I know it’s not easy to have that kind of a conversation. It makes us think about getting outside our comfort zone, a place we don’t like to go. There is some level of courage required for many of us to invite our neighbors into our homes.

That’s why one couple I spoke with said they hosted a finger food potluck for their neighbors – in their garage. They asked people to bring their own chairs and their own drinks and finger food to share. Almost every neighbor came and everyone enjoyed their time together.

At the same time, it was scary to make the invite; there was anxiety as the day approached not knowing how well it would be received. It was clearly pushing themselves outside their comfort zone.

So, let’s talk about ways to get out of that comfort zone.

Let me begin with a story about why we should learn to do so. It’s one a colleague tells about her son’s experience when changing schools in the middle of his kindergarten year.² On the first day at his new school, when the teacher blew her whistle to have the students line up to go back to class after recess, her son, who was

¹ Craddock, p. 149; Hershberger, p. 25

² As described by “Ia TWO” at DesperatePreacher.com

anxious to make a good first impression, was first in line. But the next student stood next to him rather than behind him – and the rest of the class lined up behind the student they already knew rather than the new student – even though he was actually first in line.

I tell his story because I think we like to line up behind familiar ideas and concepts, to stay in our comfort zones. It feels safer, even when we know it's the wrong place to be standing. It's easy to think we already know who our neighbors are or what they want, for example, so we become complacent and don't realize we are in the wrong line.

But Jesus calls us to love our neighbors. Jesus calls us to welcome people to our neighborhood.

Do you all recognize this sign? It says, "No matter where you are from, we're glad you're our neighbor."

I'm not sure how long it's been here, but today I want it to serve as a reminder that we have publicly claimed to love our neighbors. Last week I suggested we really can't fully love our neighbor until we know our neighbor. Today I want to encourage you to step out of your own comfort zone and start building relationships with your neighbor.



It's what Martha forgot to do.

Let's not let that be our story.

Randy L Quinn
Hope Mennonite Church

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