The art of Neighboring

Chapter 4

The Fear Factor

When Jay and his family moved into a new neighborhood one of the first things his wife, Danielle, did was bake apple pies. She loved baking, so sharing her treats was an easy way to introduce themselves to their new neighbors. They didn’t want to wait for them to make the first move, which they thought could be awkward.

Then they learned how truly this process can be. The good news was that they encountered mostly positive responses. People were appreciative and thank them for the pies. Others were surprised, almost a little embarrassed, that they had done something to welcome them first. But most seemed happy to see them, and they enjoyed meeting them.

One of their neighbors, however, went in the complete opposite direction. He wouldn’t even open the door to say hello. And when Jay and Danielle approached he spoke to them only from a tiny crack in the door. He actually told them to leave! It was as though he thought they were there to sell something or distribute religious literature.

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

“Whatever you’re selling, we don’t want it,” he said. “If it’s a sample, you can leave it on the doorstep.”

“We’re not selling anything,” they said, pointing to their home 200 feet away. “We live right over there.”

“No, we don’t need anything. Just go away!”

So they did.

On the way back home, they discussed what had just happened. Jay said seriously, what could be threatening about apple pie.

They tried to put themselves in their neighbors shoes. It sounded as if he spoke with an accent, so maybe their American forwardness was too over-the-top for his cultural upbringing. Or perhaps no one had ever reached out and try to get to know him. This neighbor had also asked them several times if they were solicitors. Maybe he just did not believe them when they said no. Regardless, they couldn’t help but take it personally. The episode left them feeling very confused.

A few days later, Jay spotted the same neighbor out in front of his home doing yard work. He walked over and introduced himself again. This time he was a bit more receptive. He told Jay that the only people who ever came to the door were salespeople, and he thought for sure they were selling something. Jay reassured him (again) that they were not. Even after that positive exchange, it still took the family while to warm up to Jay and Danielle. If they saw their neighbors driving in the neighborhood, they waived, but they didn’t wave back. Eventually, though they returned the wave.

So what was up? As they got to know him better, they realized that he was really just afraid – afraid of the unknown. He had fallen prey to one of the primary obstacles to neighboring in our culture today; fear.

NON STOP NEWS

it’s no wonder we live in a culture of fear and suspicion, given the 24-hour news cycle that’s just one click away. Anytime, any day, you can turn on the TV or hit a link to view multiple scary or downright cringe worthy stories. The natural response is, “wow, we live in a sick and broken world.” And it’s true – there are some really messed up people out there.

The problem is that when we are continually exposed to these types of stories, a subtle shift can take place and how we view the people around us. It’s hard not to believe that those really sick people are everywhere, when in reality, they are the exception. And you can’t help but wonder, are there just that many more sick people in the world than in generations past? Or is it possible that because of technology, our awareness of peoples brokenness is much higher now than it has been in the past?

These days it’s easy to be suspicious of people you don’t know:

* perhaps there’s a man who lives alone on your block. And for some reason, you’ve always had an uncomfortable feeling whenever you see him.
* Maybe there are kids in your neighborhood who are about the same age as yours. But you know that their parents don’t have the same values as you do, and you feel a bit uneasy every time your kids ask to go over there and play.
* How about that house on your block where nobody ever seems to be home? It’s not abandoned; it’s just that no one is ever there. You wonder what in the world is wrong with those people.
* Is there a family on your block that always seems to have drama in their lives? You can tell they have a ton of baggage, and maybe you are just not sure if you want to enter into their chaos. It’s just easier to keep them at a healthy distance.
* Or maybe it’s the idea of long-term commitment. You know that if you get to know a particular neighbor, you’re going to be in one another’s lives for years to come. Going down to the soup kitchen one night a year is one thing, but when you get to know your neighbors they are always there. There’s no getting away from them, nowhere to run and hide.

We are not recommending that you simply dismiss all your fears and blindly jump in to everyone of your neighbors lives. After all, at times our fears are valid and can save us from dangerous and unhealthy situations. On the other hand, our fears are often unwarranted and may be obstacles to obeying the great commandment. So if were going to neighbor well, we must have the courage to wrestle with our fears.

A few years ago Lauren and I (this is Dave talking) went to a party at one of our neighbors homes shortly after moving in to our first neighborhood. To put it nicely, there was a lot of drinking going on. Now, if you are going to learn how to neighbor well, then you are going to need to get comfortable in environments where alcohol is being consumed. There is a difference, however, between people having a few beers and being hammered by 4 PM on a Saturday afternoon.

At this particular party, a number of people were getting sloppy drunk before sundown. Our kids were very young back then, and both Lauren and I felt unnerved about exposing them to adults who were clearly very intoxicated. Worse yet, we weren’t the only ones who brought our kids; there were kids running around everywhere. And we started to wonder if this should have been an adult only party.

A series of questions began to run through our minds. Should we make up an excuse to leave? To be honest, that didn’t seem like the right thing to do. Should we hold on to our kids and tell them they had to be next to us at all times? Anyone with children knows that’s a ridiculous notion. Or should we let our kids become friends with their kids?

I remember after that party, Lauren and I really struggled to figure out what we should do when faced with such dilemmas in the future. Looking back, the main thing it forced us to do was to ask God to lead us as we engage our neighborhood. We believe this is what God wants of each of us. After praying about it, we decided to continue attending parties while keeping a very close eye on our kids.

To be sure throughout this journey we have often thought, this neighboring stuff is just too messy, I’m not sure it’s worth it. And being honest here – you may get to a point where you just want to throw in the towel. But fortunately we are learning the value of leaning in and embracing the tension. All you can do is remember the words of Jesus. Remember that neighboring really matters. And remember that being a good neighbor is something that both changes the people who live around us and changes us as well. As Lauren and I wrestled through the situation with the party, we found ourselves asking God for guidance. And as a result, we grew closer to him.

GRASSHOPPERS AND GIANTS

when the Israelites first considered entering the promised land, they came to the border and stopped. In Numbers 13 we read their story. The Israelites sent 12 spies into the land, and all except two came back with fearful reports. “Everywhere we looked, the whole country flowed with milk and honey. But the people who live there are giants, and there is absolutely no way that we Israelites could ever take possession of the land.” They even went so far as to say that their enemies saw them as nothing more than grasshoppers.

However, two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, saw things differently. They could see that fear was distracting the others from the promise of God’s provision. The fear was all in the 10 spies perception, declared Joshua and Caleb. Did the other spies ever actually interview the people to find out how scary they really were? Though there was much to be afraid of (fortified walls, potential for war, better weapons), there was no way that they could tell what their enemies were thinking. They were not mind readers. Did their enemies really see Israelites as mere grasshoppers, or was that only how the 10 fearful spies perceived the situation? What we’re saying is that fear changes not only our image of others but also what we assume they think about us.

Unfortunately the nation of Israel believed the 10 fearful spies. So God became angry at their cowardice and lack of faith, and as a result, they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. They were on the doorstep of something that God wanted to do through them, but their perceived fears kept them from what God had laid out for them.

40 years later the Israelites came to the border of the promised land again. Everyone from the previous generation, except Joshua and Caleb had died. A telling statement comes from Rahab, a woman who lived in the land. She explained how, years earlier, things were the opposite of what the Israelites thought was true. Joshua and Caleb had been right all along. When the spies entered the land 40 years earlier, everybody in the land was afraid of them. They did not see them as easy prey, as the 10 spies had imagined.

Rahab said to them, “I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.” (Joshua 2:9-11)

the Israelites perception have been wrong all along. They had always feared their neighbors, perceiving them as giants. But in truth their neighbors feared the Israelites because of their God.

Fear has a way of distorting our perspective. When we are afraid of others, we think of ourselves as less important and less powerful. The world is big, bad, and dark, but Rahab’s words can give us encouragement when applied to our situation. We may be afraid, but often things are not as they seem. When we are following God into our neighborhoods, we have nothing to fear. And often it’s our neighbors that need to be rescued from their fear.

And keep in mind that most of us have been conditioned to be afraid of our neighbors, and they to be afraid of us. Someone has to break the cycle of fear. God has given us an invitation to go forward not backward. First Peter 3:13 – 16 offers a further perspective. Peter asks:

“who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.”

This text is often applied in the context of apologetics and learning how to explain to people what we believe: that we should always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks about our hope in Jesus. Yet notice the surrounding context. Peter is quoting from Isaiah 8:12, and the instruction is clear. When you encounter other people, do not fear. Do not be frightened. Even when everyone around you chooses fear, you have a hope that is greater. Live out that hope, and don’t be afraid to talk about.

Balancing our fears and discernment is another issue that we all must confront. When it comes to meeting your neighbors for the first time, you don’t want to abandon your discernment. And certainly caution is justified when you encounter strangers.

Yet there is often a part of fear that isn’t justified, and you have to push past it. Be thoughtful about whom you approach and how. But also know, at the end of the day following Jesus is not necessarily designed to be safe. Safety is a natural desire but it can keep us from being like Jesus in the midst of an unsafe world. Actually, much of our fear is better labeled timidity. It can happen when there is an awkward lapse in social interaction, what a pause lasst too long. Or perhaps someone tells a joke and no one laughs. Or maybe you don’t know what to say first. It can be hard to break the ice. Sure, it doesn’t feel natural to walk up to a strangers door and offer her a pie just baked. These are the times when you whisper to yourself things like: “this is strange. These people are going to think that this is really weird.” Or “I’m sure and there has to be someone on this block better suited for this.” Even “this isn’t the right time; maybe I’ll take the initiative and reconnect week” (or next month, or next year) this feeling of awkwardness isn’t fear – it’s just nervousness about possible rejection. The truth is, awkwardness won’t kill you.

In second Timothy Paul writes: “for the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline” (1:7). God enables all of us to be bold, to take the first step, to be the neighbor we were meant to be. We don’t need to be afraid. When we feel those emotions creeping in, we need to remind ourselves that enduring awkwardness is probably the worst of it.

MOVING TO THE FRONT YARD

Tom and Angela lived in the neighborhood for about 12 years without really getting to know many people. They lived in a cul-de-sac of 11 houses and had limited communication and interaction with the people around them. They admitted that this felt strange because they really had a desire to know their neighbors better, but nobody was making the first move. With the exception of a smile and wave as they passed their neighbors in their cars, nothing really happened. A number of years went by until finally Tom and Angela decided to do something.

One of the biggest factors that had been preventing them from engaging their neighbors was timidity. They were apprehensive about taking the first step, about being socially uncomfortable, particularly when so much time had already passed.

They began by taking one simple step. They switched yards. Their kids that always played in the backyard, and that setting was a social heart of the family. So Tom and Angela simply switched to the front yard. They put up a swing in a front yard tree and added some lawn chairs; that was about it.

Nothing happened at first. Then over the next few weeks, children and even dogs began to migrate into their front yard. Eventually adults followed. Soon both kids and adults were spending more time in their front yard than they could’ve ever imagined. And although he done to attract this traffic was hang out where they could be seen.

Then Tom and Angela decided to go step further by organizing a series of block parties. Surprisingly, the first one they held went over quite well. All the neighbors really needed was someone to step forward and break the ice.

Other parties followed. Sometimes it was a barbecue in someone’s backyard. Other times they organizde potlucks at someone’s house. And a few times they went all out and rented one of those bouncy houses for kids – a really big draw!

The results were powerful. Barriers were broken down, and people started getting to know each other. Soon they were inviting one another into their homes. Neighbors began to assist neighbors in various ways. For a time, Tom and Angela were able to look after a neighborhood girl after school until her mom came home from work.

“Over the last two years, we’ve really gotten to know each other better as neighbors,” Tom says. “A year ago one of the couples on our block went through a divorce. Because of our pre-existing relationship the husband approached me, and we spent almost 3 hours in our driveway talking about what was going on. This type of interaction just would not have been possible without all of the prior time together. Not only would he not have been willing to share, but I don’t think I would’ve been likely to give him the attention he needed.

“Many of our neighbors still tend to hibernate during the winter months. But by spending time together each summer, we’ve developed a level of trust and respect for each other.”

God is already working in your neighborhood. Being a good neighbor simply means slowing down and being aware of what He is designing. By developing real relationships, you’ll find out how God is already moving in a person’s life. You will begin to overcome the fear that you once had and develop trust for another.

FEAR AND ISOLATION

A friend of ours, Wes, runs a homeless shelter. A while back he mentioned to us that most of the people in his shelter ended 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 in the streets.

The genius of good neighboring is that it combats such isolation. Taking that fear across the street or just walking over and learn someone’s name addresses the issue of isolation in our neighborhoods.

Remember it’s easy to make assumptions about other people when you don’t really know about them. So just continually examine the assumptions or perceptions that you have about your neighbors. Ask yourself, is this an assumption or is this true? Maybe if I got to know him, I would feel different.

Confronting our fears regarding our neighbors can be hard work, but it is worth it. There’s a lot of peace they can come to your life when you know your neighbors. You can grow to be a person who is not controlled by fear, a much better way to live.