The Art of Neighboring

chapter 1

Who Is My Neighbor?

What if the solution to our society’s biggest issues have been right under our noses for the past 2000 years? When Jesus was asked to reduce everything in the Bible into one command he said: Love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself. What if he meant that we should love our actual neighbors? You know, the people who lived right next door.

The problem is that we have turned the simple idea into a nice saying. We put it on bumper stickers and T-shirts and go on with our lives without actually putting it into practice.

But the fact is, Jesus has given us a practical plan that we can actually put into practice, a plan that has the potential to change the world. The reality is, though, that the majority of Christians don’t even know the names of most of their neighbors.

No question that getting to know your neighbors can sometimes be intimidating. If you’re like most people, when you watch the news you can’t help but feel overwhelmed. There are endless stories of child abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, teen pregnancy, out-of-control debt, and laundry list of other issues. Not only does it make you want to turn the channel and escape, but it also makes you wary of strangers, even the ones that live on your block.

We know this isn’t the way it is supposed to be. This isn’t what Jesus envisioned for us and for our world. We know we can do more. And we know we can’t just sit around waiting for someone else to do it. But it’s hard to know where to start. Right?

Start by looking around your neighborhood. What problems do you see? The yard across the street is full of knee-high weeds. You know the husband just got laid off from work. Should you call code enforcement? Maybe local government will be the one to help.

Next door there are teenagers, and the smell of pot seeps out the windows on a nightly basis. You wonder if you should call the police. That will take care of the problem. Won’t it?

There’s a family a couple of doors down with several children. It’s clear that none of them speak English very well, and you wonder if the kids are even in school. Should you contact someone in the school district? Surely they are equipped to handle this sort of problem. Aren’t they?

These problems aren’t hypothetical; they likely exist just outside your front door. We can always hope that somebody else will handle them. But what if we could be part of the solution? And what if the solution is more attainable than we think? What if it all starts with getting to know the invisible neighbors that surround us?

Have you ever wondered about the invisible family that lives in your neighborhood? You’ve never met them but you know they exist because you’ve glimpsed signs of life around their house.

There’s the dad. You know him by the sedan he drives. When his garage door opens at 7:30 each morning. He’s already inside his car. The motor starts. He backed out of the driveway and takes off down the street. Each evening he zooms straight into the garage again. The garage door opens and then shuts, and he’s inside the house without a trace.

Then there’s the mom. All you’ve glimpsed of her recently is her minivan. She zips their kids around to all kinds of activities, probably going to soccer, karate, music lessons, and play dates. You know about these activities mostly because of the different uniforms that the kids are wearing as they pile into the car. The stick figure decal on the window is also helpful, a kind of suburban map legend on the rear window that tells the neighbors how many kids the family has and what they like to do.

Their kids always seem to hang out in the backseat. You can’t really see much of them because the windows are tinted. But you can see the glow of the dual DVD players as the van passes, so you know they’re in there.

And what about the three middle-aged adults who live in the house on the corner? What’s their relationship, and why do they share the same house? And who lives across the street? There never seems to be any grown-ups around – only teenagers coming and going at all hours and playing their music really loudly. And why do the folks catty corner leave their garbage cans by the curb for days? Do they travel a lot?

It’s so easy to draw negative conclusions about the neighbors we’ve only glimpsed. A unkempt Yard, a slew of tattoos, a weird haircut, or loud music. It can all cause us to make assumptions about the people who live around us. But it’s these very assumptions that keeps us from befriending them.

What if things could be different though? What if we took the time to get to know the people next to us and discovered they aren’t so menacing after all? We may find that the people on our block are normal people just like us. They go to work, hang out with their kids, and put their pants on one leg at a time. At the end of the day, they long for a place to belong, a place to be accepted and cared for. They want to do something significant with their lives, something that really matters.

What good things might happen if you truly get to know the people in your neighborhood and they got to know you?

**An Unexpected Messenger**

in 2009 Dave (one of the authors of the book) gathered a group of ministers in the Denver area so they could think, dream, and pray about how our churches might join forces to serve our community. They invited their local mayor, Bob Frie, to join them and asked him a simple question: how can we as churches best work together to serve our city?

Predictably enough the discussion that followed revealed the usual laundry list of social problems similar to what many cities face: at risk kids, areas with dilapidated housing, child hunger, drug and alcohol abuse, loneliness, elderly shut-ins with no one to look in on them. The list went on and on and then the mayor said something that began an amazing process. He said “the majority of the issues that our community is facing would be eliminated or drastically reduced if we could just figure out a way to become a community of great neighbors.” He made the point that government programs are not always the most effective way to address social issues. He went on to say that relationships are more effective than programs because they are organic and ongoing. The idea is that when neighbors are in relationship with one another, the elderly shut and gets cared for by the person next-door, the at-risk kid gets mentored by a dad who lives on the block, and so on.

After the mayor left several of the ministers felt embarrassed. Jay (the other author of the book) remembers sitting there and just blurting out, “am I the only one here who’s a little embarrassed? I mean, here we are asking the mayor how we can best serve the city, and he basically tells us that it would be great if we could just get our congregants to obey the second half of the Great Commandment.” In a word, the mayor invited a room full of ministers to get their people to actually obey Jesus.

You know the Great Commandment, right? Love God with all your heart mind soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. It’s a teaching found in Matthew chapter 22 verses 37 through 40 and repeated in the Bible for the purpose of reminding us how important it is. In Galatians 5:14 the apostle Paul says it most succinctly: “the entire law is summed up in a single command: love your neighbor as yourself.”

Love your neighbor as yourself. Could it be that simple? Dave remembers thinking, Jesus is a genius! He is asked to pick one commandment that is more important than all the others. And he share something that would change the world, if only every person who believes in Jesus would actually do it.

As they talk to other leaders in the area they found that from the perspective of the various leaders there wasn’t a noticeable difference in how Christians and non-Christians neighbor in their community.

That was a moment that galvanized them. They realized something was wrong. They knew this isn’t the way Jesus wanted it to be. They had to do something!

The various churches came together and each of the participating churches held a three week teaching series. They develop video interviews, servant outlines illustrations. Soon after the sermon series was launched people responded and began taking steps to get to know their neighbors. Stories about block parties and new relationships began to orient. The city leaders began to talk about the initiative as well as the value is created in their communities, often people simply learning their neighbors names and maybe working with others to throw a block party. The results were immediate. New friendships evolved, strangers became acquaintances, and acquaintances begin moving towards genuine relationships with one another.

At this point your head is probably spinning right now. It’s likely that your schedule is already packed and the idea of becoming a good neighbor might sound impractical or even scary at first. But we invite you to lean into those issues. If you do we have no question that you will discover that Jesus really is a genies. And that his master plan actually works.

The solutions to the problems in our neighborhoods aren’t ultimately found in the government, police, or schools or in getting more people to go to church. The solutions lie with us. It’s within our power to become good neighbors, to care for the people around us and to be cared for by the people around us. There really is a different way to live, and we are finding that it’s actually the best way to live.

Often it’s easy to take the teachings of Jesus and turn them into clichés. We are tempted to dial into these slogans whenever we are in crisis. But experience shows that the slogans alone leave us hollow.

So what would it look like to take the teachings of Jesus seriously and orient our daily lives around them? Let’s be honest – we need to do a whole lot more than stick a fish symbol on the back of our car.

We invite you to immerse yourself in John 17, an entire chapter that recounts Jesus prayer just before he is arrested. First, Jesus prays for himself, then for his disciples. Then he concludes by praying for us.

What he prayed his powerful he prayed that everyone follows him would be one, that we would be brought to complete unity. Jesus has a burning desire for there to be unity among all believers. In fact he tells us that there is something so sacred and beautiful about our oneness that it will draw people to God who aren’t in a relationship with him.

When you think about that you will likely come face-to-face with the fact that while you are probably doing a decent job having relationships with your brothers and sisters at Lakeshore, you’re not doing a good job of even remembering your neighbors names.

One of the greatest things that we can do as a follower of Jesus, one of the worthies endeavors we can undertake is to take the Great Commandment seriously and learn to be in relationship with our literal neighbors. We all need to get back to the basics of what he commanded: love God and love others. Everything else is secondary.

Jesus said the most important thing we can do is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are discovering that Jesus was actually really smart. You could even say that he was and is a genius. When Jesus was asked to reduce everything important into one command, he gave us a simple and powerful plan that, if acted on, would literally change the world.

This simple plan also offers us a different kind of life. It’s a way of living makes sense and brings peace to people’s souls. Whenever we center our lives around the Great Commandment and take very literally the idea and practice of loving our neighbor, there’s a great freedom, peace, and depth of relationship that comes to our lives. By becoming good neighbors, we become who we are supposed to be. As a result, our communities become the places that God intended them to be.

Relationships are progressive and don’t all happen overnight, but there are some simple steps you can take that will start you on an amazing journey. Make no mistake, neighboring is not always easy. Yet it is powerful and significant. And it is essential to experiencing the full life that Jesus promises.