

A Life TRANSFORMED

A Life Transformed Session 3- Neighboring

What transforms a neighborhood?

Where do you live? Picture it in your mind. Perhaps you live in an apartment, a corner condo, townhome or single-family house. Maybe you've got a few acres and your closest neighbors are a mile away. When you think about transforming your neighborhood, you probably think about home improvement projects... after all, if everyone worked on their own little corner of the world, surely the whole thing would improve!

But transforming your neighborhood is about more than re-landscaping, renovating the facade, and decorating the porch for the coming season. True transformation takes a shift from keeping up the exterior of our physical home to a Kingdom-minded perspective that focuses on the souls around us.

It's in the small interactions, the words of care, the sharing of more than a fence, property line or street. Transformation happened when Christ shared himself with us and it's in the sharing of this great work that a neighborhood is transformed.

Why is neighboring important?

Love of God and neighbor is at the core of the Christian life. This is the motivation for everything we do. If this pandemic has done anything for us, it is that it emphasized our basic human need for connection.

The Bible is a story about the relationship between God and God's people. We were *designed* to be in relationship, created in the image of the ultimate relational being. God is and always has been relational. The Trinity (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit) exists within itself, fully complete and content, needing nothing more. And yet God created something outside of God's self to love. God speaks all of creation into existence, forming mankind from the clay and given the breath of life. God declares, "it is not good for mankind to be alone" and then creates a partner.

Last year, we shut down overnight as a result of Covid. Not only did the pandemic push us inside our homes; it pushed us further inside of ourselves. Polarization, isolation, and discord within our country and our own city grew and exploded. The past year has changed so much of what we knew as normal life – the way we shop, gather, spend our time, work and more. Being shut in our homes away from our friends, family, and church has been painful. Many of us have felt the strain on our mental, emotional and physical health simply

because we couldn't see and interact with people in the way to which we had become accustomed.

Even though all of that has changed, and it may take a while for us to fully emerge, one thing has not – the Greatest Commandment. Love of God and neighbor is still to be held at the center of all that we do. It's how we were designed to live and it's how we share the love of Christ. Relationships are how the good news gets preached without words and are the avenue through which a neighborhood gets transformed.

A neighborhood transformed

We peeled ourselves out of the giant moving truck after having driven it from Lexington, KY to The Woodlands, TX in two days. It had been a long journey from seminary to our first pastoral job and moving into a rental, even sight unseen, was a welcome sight. We were exhausted, but ready to start a new chapter and settle into a new community.

Meeting our neighbors proved to be more challenging than expected. No one came to chat as we unloaded the moving truck. No one made their way over to introduce themselves. After a few months we realized we didn't know anyone on our street. We would catch a glimpse of folks getting into their cars leaving for work in the mornings or returning in the evenings. Quite honestly, we fell into the same rhythm. It began to feel awkward. It seemed almost like we all agreed that we had missed the "new neighbor" window of meeting and decided now we'd just never meet.

After we had our son, we were home more and went on walks at all hours of the day and night. Each time we'd see someone in their yard, we felt sad that they'd avert their eyes. I remember trying to put it out of my mind because I had come to the conclusion that the people in our neighborhood just kept to themselves. But a friend wisely suggested that we should be the ones to start waving, approaching, and introducing. It shocked me that I hadn't thought of that. The next time we were out on a walk, I waved at every neighbor I saw. One or two waved and smiled back. On the following walk I did the same thing and more people waved back. Eventually some of our neighbors even began to talk to us. "That baby sure is getting big!" or "How about that storm last night? It was good for the yard."

We stopped waiting for the neighboring to come to us. We decided to intentionally be a neighbor and posture ourselves in a warm, open way. It started with something as small as a wave and a smile. We intentionally decided to *be* neighbors.

Jesus moved into the neighborhood

The Message translation of John 1:14 says that the Word became flesh and blood and *moved into the neighborhood*. Emmanuel, who is God with us, came to be a neighbor – to eat with us, to heal us, and to serve us. God doesn't stay locked away inside of a temple or a celestial home. So if we are to be like Jesus, one of the easiest ways to do so is to be others-oriented and to seek out ways to be a neighbor.

We have already moved into a neighborhood. Wherever we are living, we have neighbors right in front of us. We can move towards them by checking in on them, sharing a meal with them, offering to help them when they have need and so on.

Sometimes living out our faith can seem complicated, when in fact it is actually very practical.

Loving God is to love our neighbors

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” ²⁷ He answered, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”** ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, ^[k] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This small section of Scripture contains two particular teachings that are often referenced separately: the Greatest Commandment and the Good Samaritan. These two messages are so well-known that the wording and concepts are knit into the vocabulary of our culture. They are the *same message taught in two different ways* – a commandment and a parable.

Question and answer

“Who is my neighbor?” is the natural question that arises after the Greatest Commandment is given. The Greek word for *neighbor* utilized here does not tend to clear things up entirely, but it simplifies things. *Plesion* simply means ‘near.’ Your neighbor is someone who is near you. In light of the rest of the passage, we can’t automatically conclude Jesus is referring to the people with whom you share a property line, fence, or wall.

Jesus broadens our understanding of near-ness and neighborliness with the parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable is the answer to the question. The hearers lived in an age where they would be able of care for those in their immediate surroundings. Most likely they were already doing that with communal living, sharing of big meals with big families,

childcare falling to ‘the village’ and even medical care being provided by those who had the experience and skills to help. That concept was already built into the culture. The Good Samaritan expands their understanding to mean something much more challenging – something that would offend their religious sensibilities. This parable would break down much of the societal barriers that were holding them captive and therefore keeping the love of God from spreading. Love and care for ANYONE you encounter, not just the people in your little community. Likewise, this teaching should offend our sensibilities because our culture is not naturally set up to care for our neighbors.

The rhythms of our lives are set up to care for the people within our nuclear family, maybe other blood relatives that live nearby, and then maybe the people who are necessary – school teachers, co-workers, etc. This parable continues to break us free from societal norms by pointing us toward the folks who are most near us - our neighbors.

Motivation matters

Notice that the Good Samaritan did not attempt to convert the man in need. He didn’t ask him to sit through a Bible study prior to rendering him aid and basic necessities. We do not serve people simply for the purpose of making disciples. Our motivation for loving our neighbor is a response to God’s love for us.

We don’t love others to convert them. We love others because we have been converted. We can be sure that they are coming to know Jesus more because they are in close contact with Jesus followers. We can trust God’s ability to reach the hearts of those we love, while we simply show up and serve.


How to be a neighbor

Instead of answering, “who is my neighbor?” Jesus tells us how to *be* a neighbor. He’s directing our attention not to who needs Christ’s love (that’s a given, it’s everyone). Look to the concluding sentences of the story, vs 36-37. Who was a neighbor to the man in need? He puts the emphasis on the only thing we’re in control of in this world- our own choices and behavior. We are in control of how we spend our time, our resources, where we focus our attention. The parable of the Good Samaritan does generally teach us who we can consider a neighbor, but the actual point is HOW to be a neighbor.

Practical Activity: The Neighboring Grid

Let the 9-square grid below help you begin to get to know your neighbors. Your home is represented by the center square. The surrounding 8 squares represent the home/families that immediately surround you. These squares aren’t necessarily representative of homes because not everyone’s physical neighborhood is structured in this way, but you get the idea. Allow this to guide you and change it as it makes sense for you.

- a. Names** of everyone who lives in the house (consider the pets too).
- b. Relevant Information:** Think of these as basic facts/background information- works in the healthcare industry, grew up in Dallas, is a veteran, had a dad in WWII, likes to cycle, loves American Idol, is from Iran, stage of life, etc.
- c. In-depth Information:** What motivates them in life? What do they fear? What would they say about religion/God? Any information that is more in-depth- thoughts, beliefs, motivations, goals, dreams, etc.

a.	a.	a.
b.	b.	b.
c.	c.	c..
a.		a.
b.		b.
c..		c.
a.	a.	a.
b.	b.	b.
c.	c..	c.

Gleaning from the Good Samaritan: How to BE a neighbor

“³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him...”

Step 1: Don't cross the street or pass by

- **Be a 'yes' person.** Say yes to the small opportunities. Say yes, to the invitations. Say yes, to hosting a gathering in your yard. Say yes to exchanging contact information. Say yes when someone asks for help. Say, yes to the Holy Spirit when you feel the nudge to ask your neighbor how they're doing. Say yes, to organizing a meal train. Say yes.

- **Be interrupt-able.** The Samaritan was on his way to something. He did not plan to add a whole day (or more) to his travel schedule. This is an extreme example that may not come our way ever. But we have small opportunities to be interrupted. Commit to letting your neighbors be a Holy interruption for you. (This requires you to live a lifestyle that has a time margin built into it.)

“...and when he saw him, **he was moved with pity.**”

Step 2: Be moved

- The word pity (also translated as compassion) in Greek is *splagnitzomai* meaning to be deeply moved as within the bowels. This word is used in the Prodigal Son when the father sees his son far off and runs to embrace him. This word is used when Jesus heals or pastors a harried crowd. Jesus is moved with compassion and it's out of this place that his deep love flows. Let yourself be moved with compassion. And when you don't have the energy to muster up compassion ask God to give it to you. God's compassion can flow through you.

“³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them”

Step 3: Extravagantly provide (not just material)

- Jesus names oil and wine because these are expensive and luxurious items. To pour one's most expensive possessions out on a complete stranger is offensive to the hearers of this parable and may be to us. Our neighbors need our top shelf resources- our time, our cooking, our attention, etc.

“...brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him.”

Step 4: Boundaries- Work within your limits. You're not the only one who can help. When you hit your limits take them to someone who can care for them.

- Love of neighbor is not something we do without wisdom. Healthy boundaries are an important need in order to lead a healthy life. Many books have been written on boundaries and most of us will spend our lives working on them. Knowing what you have to offer and what you don't is important. A lack of boundaries is reflective of spiritual sickness. Jesus is their Savior, not us. Boundaries around your schedule, your work, the pace at which you move through life, the relationships you cultivate. Boundaries are important. They require intentionality, self-awareness, honesty with yourself and the ability to say no when needed.

“...and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.”

Step 5: Invest in a long-term relationship.

- The Samaritan plans on coming back. He's going to follow up with the inn keeper and make sure the man in need gets well. Neighbors may come and go, but we can still plan on extending God's love to them not just during one-time events. In fact, deep transformation actually comes from relationships that have grown to a place of mutual friendship and connection.

What's Holding You Back?

Having set our sights upon putting the Greatest Commandment at the center of our daily activities we must make a plan on how this can happen. First take an honest assessment of what is holding you back. In this section we will venture into some of the speed bumps or barriers that are keeping us from moving toward our neighbors.

Fear of the Other- Sometimes it can seem like there are more reasons to not love our neighbor than there are positives. It's certainly easy to find reasons to keep to yourself. Just open your browser to the news and without our knowing we will have more evidence to stay away from people we don't know. Sadly, we are being conditioned to be afraid of each other without our knowing. We can push through this barrier simply by spending more time around the people in our immediate surroundings. Venture outside of that area once it gets comfortable for you. This is a way we move forward in our faith in the face of fear or discomfort.

I'm not cut out for this- For those who are more introverted the Greatest Commandment can sound like a nightmare. Small talk seems to be a gifting of others. Not all care is conversation and listening. It can be mowing their lawn during a particularly tough season. It can be putting their trash cans back up the driveway. It can be baking or cooking. The good news is that we were all wired differently and have ways we can uniquely care for others.

Safety- Sadly, we are being conditioned to fear for our safety. A concern for safety should always be honored. However, there are ways we can use wisdom to remain safe while also loving our neighbor. The easiest way to do this is to make your neighboring activities more public.- Front yard gatherings, public parks and spaces, curate your front porch to be a space for impromptu conversations and chats. We can also assess our concerns and analyze them. Perhaps this person looks a certain way or acts like "those kinds of people." Again, we need to honor our intuition, but we can also care for our neighbors alongside of others.

Time- Many of us are simply too busy to add yet another thing to our calendar. Time is one of the most valuable and finite resources we have. How we choose to spend our time will greatly impact our ability to live out the Greatest Commandment.

This may be the most difficult barrier to push through. Goals we've set for our career, kid's education, etc long ago in process. A demanding job is not necessarily something we can just do away with instantly. There are other people depending on us. We can find many very valid reasons to not shift our schedules so redirecting our whole lives around the Greatest Commandment will take time and a gradual process. Some seasons are busier than others. Changes need not happen overnight. We can ever so slightly begin to shift and move things around and eliminate as is realistic.

The truth is that we do have time, we just choose not to spend it on certain things. We can assess our values and make a more concerted effort to spend our time on what we value- people!

Proximity- Loving one's neighbor requires us to be in the same space as our neighbor. Of course, during COVID we've had to get more creative, but many have jumped at pushing past this barrier. Many of us have innocently retreated further and further into our own lives. Both responses are OK! However, if we are going to move forward in our faith and live in a countercultural way we can move our lives out to where our neighbors can see us.

Emotional- Getting to know new people is at best slightly uncomfortable at worst, painfully awkward. The good news is that no one has ever died from feeling awkward! We can push through our feelings of discomfort and step outside of our comfort zone.

Being with, caring for, talking to other people can be a drain on our energy. It's important to live our lives in a way that doesn't already have us exhausted. Our energy is a limited resource we get each day, and we get to be intentional about where we spend it. This often requires us to say 'no' to the good in order to say 'yes' to the Greatest Commandment.

Small group practical exercise: pushing through barriers

As a small group, spend time brainstorming ideas for possible solutions to the barriers below. There are no wrong answers! Have fun with this. Often times the most outlandish ideas can lead to the best one. You may also consider adding to the Barrier column if during this exercise a new barrier is identified.

	Barrier	Possible Alternative
Fear	-They don't look like 'my' kind of people.	
	-They could be dangerous or at the very least mean.	
	-They could vote/ or believe ____.	
	-Their kids will be a bad influence on mine.	
	-They keep to themselves; I'm not going to bother them.	
Time	Packed Schedule/ Busy	
	I'd rather spend what little time I have with my family.	
	Our lives are already full of friends and family.	
	We're focused on a goal/project in this season.	
	I'm too tired by the end of the day to chat in the driveway.	

Proximity	We hang out mostly inside or in the back yard.	
	I work out in my home gym (proximity) or if I'm at the gym I just get in and get out (time) intentionally not interacting with others.	
	I travel/commute for work so I'm not home most of the time.	

Emotional	Getting to know strangers is awkward.	
	We've been neighbors for too long and haven't introduced ourselves. It seems weird to do so now.	
	I'm just not a 'people person.' I may be allergic to small talk.	
	What if they want to talk every time I see them after that?	
	We already don't like each other due to a prior issue.	

Getting started

Deciding where to start can be such a daunting task that it too becomes a barrier. The easiest thing to do is just start! Pick one thing to do this week. It doesn't need to be a big thing. Remember the little things matter. You know what will be doable for you so go for it!

Suggested starting points:

9-Square Grid: If you struggled to fill out the 9 square grid from the earlier section you can make that a goal. Print out that page and keep it somewhere you can continue to fill it out. To help keep you motivated you might even consider making it a competition among those who live in your house. Who can fill theirs out first? If you live alone perhaps putting a time limit on gathering the information will keep you on track. For example, have it filled out fully by Thanksgiving, etc.

Wave, smile, greet: Remember the story about how a simple wave can be a game-changer? The small things add up. Being approachable, warm and carrying yourself in an open way will take you far in loving your neighbors. This may even cause them to approach you a time or two.

Share: I'll never forget when our neighbors brought over some homemade Christmas candy the morning of Christmas Eve. It was a quiet day for us and we were missing our out-of-town family. A random knock at our door and a brief exchange made all the difference. When Mardi Gras rolled around, we reciprocated with making a colorful paper chain to hang on their door with a nice note. Now our 3-year-old asks to stop and talk with them when he we pass by. Even he is finding connection and community! Share your food, your holidays, your space, your life.

Invite: This one might seem a bit more of an investment, however it need not be a huge block party every time. Coming home from work and about to unwind on the back porch? Holler at your neighbor to join. Walking over to the park? Knock on your neighbor's door and see if they want to come too. Even the invitations that get turned down will sow seeds in your relationship. They'll hear the message loud and clear, "Hey! We want to hang out and get to know you!"

Get outside: These COVID days have caused us to get outside more, which is great! Extra chairs in the front lawn have popped up all over. Live in an apartment complex? Position yourself in the outdoor pool/patio areas. When we place ourselves in accessible spaces we become just that- accessible. Kristen Schell in her book, *The Turquoise Table* writes about her adventures with hanging out in her front yard. She even places a Turquoise picnic table out there and her family often dines there. Hanging out and chatting with neighbors is good, but sharing a meal together is even better. You don't need to set up a whole dining room on your lawn, but spending time out front will allow more interaction and opportunity.

Host: A dinner party or gathering hosted within your home is nice, but it can often feel like a big commitment to others. These types of events are usually better suited for well-established relationships. If you're already there with your neighbors, then go for it! But sometimes the preparation for these events can be barriers to connection. Remember the main thing is to be with your neighbor, to hear their story, their dreams, their joys, etc. Don't let planning, cleaning, cooking, get in the way of your connecting.

Some friends of ours have a fire pit that they always kept in the back yard. One summer night they decided to put it at the end of their driveway. As they were sitting around it their neighbors who were walking their dogs or getting their nightly jog in stopped to chat. This led to invitations to sit and stay, have a few drinks together. For them this shifted the culture of their street. Not only were they caring for their neighbors and involved in their lives, but the neighbors were caring for their neighbors! The culture of the Greatest Commandment spread like wildfire.