

Art of Neighboring
Sermon: Growing as a God-orienting Neighbor
Col. 4:2-6
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Today we are concluding our short series focusing on Rediscovering the Art of Neighboring. Jesus affirmed that what God desires could be summed up in two great commands... to '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 "Love your neighbor as yourself...." "Do this and you will live." God says this is what we are to reorient our lives around. And it is the second we have been seeking to engage this month. Love your neighbor as yourself.

I want to begin on a personal note. My parents shared their kindness, my father especially, with hospitality towards others...neighbors borrowing stuff...coffee pot always on...inviting kids over from college. When my father passed away in April of 1979...neighbors helped in various ways...twenty-five kids from college came to sing at his funeral.

And as we conclude this short series, I want to hear the words of Scripture... the words of one who knew he may be at the end of his earthly life. The Apostle Paul... imprisoned and now writing to those in the city of Colossae... what is commonly called the Book of Colossians. Paul brings us into a life filled with mission. These are the words of one who knew he may be at the end of his earthly life... so he wants to convey what matters most. He wants to help every life discover and develop what matters most.

Paul sees his life bearing a mission... but he has no savior complex... he has gotten over any sense that he is the hero of the story... and we need to get over that too. He sees his life not as an answer to what others needs... but as a bridge... a bridge to hope.

- Important... because any assumption that those who claim to receive this life of Christ are superior will deflate everyone... because we know it's just not true.
- Paul held no such pretense... referring to himself as the 'chief of sinners' ...one who was simply met in God's timing and plan. But he does see his life as having great meaning...for it's surrounded by an opportunity to share the hope he has found. He realizes that his life is a relational bridge in the grand drama that we are living in... a bridge which can manifest and make clear the mysteries of Christ.

So as we consider what it means to love our neighbor...it begins with knowing them...and that is what we have set out to do this month. But naturally, a love for our neighbor includes caring about their souls...their relationship with God. We should naturally consider: How do we bring spiritual value into our relationships with neighbors? How can we be God-Orienting Neighbors?

Huge questions... and I want to share just a few key principles...

1. Always keep God the ultimate motive, but never an ulterior motive.

Some may wonder...Is the whole call to know and love our neighbor really just about "converting" them? This is where the difference between Ultimate vs Ulterior is important.

Ulterior means something is intentionally kept concealed. An ulterior motive is usually manipulative. It's when we do or say one thing out in the open but intend or mean another thing in private.

Ultimate means the farthest point of a journey. An ultimate goal is an eventual point or a longed-for destination. Examples are when a person begins college hoping to become a physician one day or when a kid starts playing basketball with dreams of one day playing in the NBA.

There's a big difference. The "agenda" we need to drop is the well-meaning tendency to be friends with people for the sole purpose of converting them to our faith. It's tempting to offer friendship with strings attached.

We are called to love people— period. Whether those people ever take any steps toward God is beside the point. We are called to love our neighbors unconditionally, without expecting anything in return. The Great Commandment says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The commandment ends there, with no other expectations given. Good neighboring is an end in itself.

We want to be clear. We believe that Jesus answers the ultimate questions of life and has the ultimate answers for our cities and neighborhoods. Our hope, dream, and desire is that everyone will have a meaningful relationship with Jesus. So sharing the story of Jesus and his impact on our lives is the right motive, but it cannot be an ulterior motive in developing relationships. We don't love our neighbors to convert them; we love our neighbors because we are converted. Loving will lead to what is loving. It does not need to be defined by a particular goal or outcome.

2. Just be your genuine self

The biggest issue that challenges being witnesses of God... is that we feel more like a salesman ...and often we act like it.

Share good news of what we have discovered ...yes.... sell God...no.

What are some of the dynamics that the salesmen / saleswomen paradigm brings?
(Draw out some from audience)

- Obligatory.... A product we have to sell... to fulfill a job description... or a quota.
- Uses people to fulfill a need or burden we have
- Pressured – 'Closing the deal'
- More packaged than personal
- Disingenuous... we feel we have to say more than we actually know and therefore more than what is personal and natural.

If any of this burdens us... we may do well to ask: When did Christ send his followers out to share anything other than what they had discovered? He always told people to go and share what he has done for them...that is...their actual experience...nothing more...and nothing less.

1 Peter 3:15 - But in your hearts set apart 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 (NIV) What should we share? Hope. Whose hope? The hope within YOU. Not a pamphlet ...prepared speech or set of arguments. "Sharing the hope that is WITHIN YOU."

Your life is a story....and sharing our stories invites people to consider what you have discovered

Everyone orients their lives around something...some ideas or value. It's not any different to share that I am seeking to reorient my life around the life of Jesus Christ.

Stop selling a product... share a Person. Some of us may think our lives are too much of a mess. They probably are. But if God is at work... we can still love people. When someone is remodeling their home... they are still a neighbor. When God is remodeling your life...you are still a neighbor.

We need to change our role...and discover how to find the freedom to be genuine ...natural. We need to become those who offer spiritual companionship, conversation, and challenge. Paul speaks of our "conversation" with people...one that must be gracious and respectful.

3. Expect different responses...and focus accordingly.

Paul says make the most of opportunities. You don't control opportunities...you respond accordingly. And that includes the receptivity of neighbors. Realize that some will be more responsive....

4. Be as patient as God.

Neighboring is not an event...it's a way of being in the place we live. Our bodies change slowly ...family grows over time...and developing our life with neighbors comes with time. Don't let short term mentality get you. Use whatever time you have.

Growing as a God-Orienting neighbor does involve being intentional.

Most of us who realize we haven't gotten to know our neighbors like we could have...never decided NOT to....we simply haven't been intentional. Our need to be patient...but also intentional... embracing neighboring as a verb...not a stagnant noun.

5. Let all our neighboring be an extension of our prayer.

We need to start by recognizing that people come to know God because of God.

So, while we do play a part, we are ambassadors and messengers, God is the one who saves, and since this is true... the truest love for our neighbor will flow from God...and with God...and therefore flow in prayer.

Have you truly wondered what you're here for...