

Love Can Reach Neighbors

Late last summer I began a series of messages on the theme of loving your neighbor and your neighborhood. We started with “The Great Commandment.” Jesus said, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment,”* Deuteronomy 6:5. Then he said, *“And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’”* quoting from Leviticus 19:18.

You might recall that I extended a challenge for God: to join me by getting to know your neighbors – the names of each person in each household on your street or in your section of the apartment complex. So how are you doing with that challenge? True confession here: I’m limping along with my project to connect with neighbors. I still leave our house and driveway early in the morning and come home after dark; and many of my neighbors are the same. That’s why I look for those small opportunities to connect. I made this chart of the houses on my street and I use it help me keep track. Every time I meet someone new, and get names of those in the household, I write them down on my chart to help me remember. I’ve also made it a point to chat with the kids when they’re out playing – just trying to develop connections, be a good neighbor.

Recently our next-door neighbors retired and sold their house. We were sorry to see them go. A young couple moved in and we hardly saw them and knew nothing about them. Then one evening, as it was getting dark and we had just pulled into our driveway, they came over and introduced themselves. Since then both ‘Ofa and I have had good interactions with “Al.” He asked about things like lawn care, trash pickup, and such. We hope to develop a good relationship with them. I’m still looking for opportunities to develop a relationship with the young family across the street and another one a few doors down. It takes time... genuine relationships really take more time than posting something on social media or clicking “like.”

Healing and Neighboring Arts

Two weeks ago I spoke about how the love of God that we know in Jesus Christ can heal all our brokenness: physical, mental, and spiritual. I spoke of the “Healing arts” - an apt phrase because healing truly is an art as well as a science and a bit of a mystery, at that. So what does that have to do with our neighbors? Let me suggest, that like healing, good neighboring is an art. Both healing and neighboring involve a process that combines divine power – God’s love for us and His power to heal – with our thoughtful and skilled efforts. Just

as we pray for healing for someone, while also applying the best medical care we can, so we can also pray for our neighbors (and ourselves) as we go about making a chart and initiating conversation. I've also asked you to be praying for our congregation and one of those prayers is for you and me and all our members to develop relationships with the neighbors who live around each of us.

Since we're dealing with humans and with God, in both healing brokenness (whether spiritual, mental, or physical) and in good neighboring, there is no one program that will make it all better. Since we're dealing with humans and with God, it's about relationships more than programs. Think about this: God wants to heal all our brokenness and in Jesus Christ He has done that. God also wants to heal the brokenness in the lives of your neighbors, my neighbors, our church's neighbors. And God may well want to use us to open the door for that healing.

Loving Our Neighborhood

Another prayer for our church has been a prayer for God to give us opportunity to be good neighbors and make connections with the people living right around this campus. Last year we held a "trunk or treat" Halloween event, inviting families to an evening of food and fun. Then at Christmas we invited our neighbors again for festive activities for children. We've also passed out door hangers for several years inviting our neighbors to Christmas and Easter worship services. This was possible because of you.

Yesterday we again reached out to our church's neighborhood. We hosted maybe 2-250 of our neighbors from right around the church, (we had planned and hoped for 1,000) offering them free haircuts, free family photos, a free lunch, a kids zone with bounce houses, face painting, various games – all designed to bring our neighbors here for a good family time. Each family or person received a free sack of groceries as they departed, but more importantly, and here's the real reason for all the effort for this event: each person and family was offered prayer, and an opportunity to be introduced to faith in Christ. That was really the purpose of this event: to share the love of God that we know in Jesus Christ; a love that cares for your physical needs and even more so for your spiritual needs. Two weeks ago, at our "healing service," I hope that you got the message that there is a spiritual brokenness in us all that needs healing. And this spiritual brokenness so often precedes and underlies our physical brokenness. Yesterday, in a small way we tried to meet some of the brokenness in our neighbor's lives. The most important need is their spiritual poverty and that's why we want to introduce them to Jesus.

For those who received prayer and left us some contact information we will do follow-up. This is a must! The mission statement of FUMC is "To bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ..." and that's what we're attempting to do here ... that's why God has put us here. Yesterday was not an

end in itself. We're not done with our neighborhood. There are still many people who do not know Jesus as their Savior. We're here to help make His introduction.

Thank The Servants of God

Yesterday morning I shared with our volunteers that the day isn't about us, it isn't about you or me or even our congregations. Yesterday was all about God and what our mighty God is doing among us and through us, and what our great God can do in the lives of our neighbors. God is good and can bring goodness into our lives. All who showed up yesterday as volunteers came to be servants of Christ and to obey all his commandments. And if you missed yesterday but wanted to be here do not lose heart – there will be more opportunities. Look for your own opportunities to love a neighbor.

Let's praise God for our partner congregations yesterday: 1st Assembly of God, Westside Church of Christ, St. Philip the Apostle Catholic Church, VisionPlus Church. They all pitched in to make LYN event possible. Praise God!

I want to also thank the people of this congregation who were the engine that kept this train moving for the past month: all who contributed to our Easter offering – the biggest we've ever had - our Leadership Team, our Church Council, Trustees, Staff Parish Relations, our safety and security team, plus the many faithful FUMC people who came yesterday to help us keep it all together and keep it going ... and then the clean up! 120 people from FUMC volunteered yesterday – that's incredible! We all got to be servants of Christ. Let's also give a big thanks to our leaders who planned and organized our service areas yesterday: Julie E. & Sam from our preschool at the Kids Zone, Leslie & Julie V. for photographs, Sharon Wainwright & Marti Engals for hospitality and check-in, Jim & Luz Adams for groceries, Andrew Irvin for prayer connections & follow-up, Casey Grogan for security, Ray Bowles for set up & parking, Janice French for restroom service, Darrel Arnold for photo record of the day, Westside CC for haircuts, 1st Assembly for the lunch, Beren for lining up the CSUB nursing students to do health screenings. What a day! Thank you all.

Bread of Life

Tell me again Pastor why we went to such effort yesterday for many people we don't even know? *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life,"* John 3:16. Jesus came for everybody. This one simple Bible verse explains clearly God's purpose and intent, and it is the message we have to share with our neighborhood. God *"... wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth,"* 1 Timothy 2:4.

God has given his very own son to pay the price of our sins and to begin the process of restoring a broken, sin-filled humanity to wholeness and health. Our

gifts and services yesterday were simply a manifestation of God's goodness to broken people. Just as with Jesus' feeding and healing, our offerings to our neighborhood are signs of the kingdom of God.

John 6 tells of Jesus feeding the five thousand. The next day many sought Jesus and he knew why: *"... you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled..."* Yes, we do attract a crowd here with free food and other stuff, but our purpose is not just to fill hungry stomachs. Our true purpose here is to fill hungry souls with the bread of life. Jesus told the crowd, *"... it is my Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven."* And when the people asked him about this bread Jesus said to them, *"I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst."* John 6:35. That is why all our efforts yesterday were geared to keeping our "guests" here as long as possible so that they might watch and meet our ambassadors for Christ ... and who are they? Every one of our volunteers yesterday, from every church, was an ambassador for Christ. We hope and pray that our guests experienced the love of Christ in each encounter and witnessed his love in all our interactions. Our ultimate aim for the day was to usher every guest through our "Prayer Hall," where we could offer them personal prayer for their needs and, if possible, share the good news of Jesus Christ with them. That was the real purpose of the whole event.

Not everyone wanted prayer nor did everyone who was prayed for want to continue a relationship with us. Some people came just for the free stuff and that's all they really cared about. Do not be discouraged when so few respond to invitations to connect with Jesus and maybe with us. That is the way it always is. Think of yourself, how long did it take you to get serious about knowing God, I mean to really know that Jesus is your bread of life? And how many times did someone share Jesus with you (one on one, or you heard a preacher, or you went to Sunday School) before you got it? How many years did you attend church before you truly had a transforming experience of Jesus Christ in your life and you developed a hunger to read the Bible and to know Him in all His fullness? How long was it before you realized that church is not about the institution or the programs but about knowing Jesus Christ?

Kingdom Seeds

Jesus told a parable of a sower who cast his seeds out as he walked (Mark 4: 2-9). Some fell beside the road and the birds got it; some seed fell on rocky ground, sprouted but couldn't take root because there was no soil; other seed fell among thorns and weeds which choked it; and some seed fell on good soil and grew well and produced a crop thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was sown!

What we did here yesterday was plant seeds of the kingdom of God. We know that likely only a few will take root in good soil and produce fruit. But we did something else yesterday: we prepared the soil so that the next time the seed of the gospel is sown it may have a chance. And as we follow-up with a few who responded to our invitation to know Christ we will still be preparing the soil, so to speak. Our follow-up with look for connection yesterday will continue to show them the love of Christ and be open to opportunities to share faith with them. Love can reach our neighbors! Pray, pray, pray.

Most of us want to see results for our efforts immediately. We want to put in our effort on an event on Saturday and see 20 or more new people in church on Sunday. You will be disappointed in such a notion. Ask anyone who is in sales (and has been for some time), they know that for every ten sales pitches you might get one “yes.” Jesus knew this! Many of the seeds he cast never produced anything, but the ones that did produce, covered the globe and changed the world! Pray, pray, pray.

It could be years before we see much result in our neighborhood. But think of the power of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, that is in our church to be a life-giving influence around here. Then think how much more power and influence that is when combined with our neighbor churches. We are God’s power unleashed to spread God’s love and grace in our city.

In spite of all the digital communication we have, people still value (even crave) personal connections. We have a personal connection with an awesome and gracious God – by His power we can live awesomely, graciously! By His power we can share it with our neighborhood! Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

“For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” Galatians 5:14.