

Why Church? Moving Back to the Neighborhood

It's always difficult when we have a **negative** experience or perception of something that someone else **loves**. It is kind of like when someone gives a restaurant recommendation for a vacation or special date night, we trust them so we decide to go. Yet, instead of that magical moment we expected we just get "blah." The food wasn't as good as they made it sound; the atmosphere wasn't quite what we expected and we find ourselves disappointed and dissatisfied. Even worse, we run into the person who gave us the recommendation and they ask us about experience, we do our best to soften the blow, but we communicate our disappointment as nicely as we can. Despite our best efforts we can tell that our referrer is disappointed with our review and the situation becomes awkward because someone ultimately finds themselves in the middle, torn between loyalties. I sometimes wonder if this same situation can happen with our local church.

I'll admit it; my main fear around inviting people to church is this very thing. I am scared they will find it purposeless and that they will be disappointed with their experience, their experience with something I love. I'll find myself stuck in the middle trying to understand how the **Church**, which has had a huge impact on my life, is for some people **purposeless**. They don't see the potential it has to change their life. They don't see the support it provides, they don't see the love it provides, and they don't see the benefit in it. Long story short, I struggle to see how the church is not meaningful for all people and I'm scared that perceived lack of meaning will devour any chance of the gospel impacting that person's life.

You have probably had the same thought as well. Church is a **meaningful** for you and you struggle to **understand** why it is not meaningful for some around you. If we take into account all that Pastor Richard discussed last week in our intro to this series; it makes it even harder to understand how people can find church to be a fruitless experience. The essence of his message was that the Church is group of people united in our identity, sense of belonging, and purpose. We find our identity as followers of Jesus when we recognize Jesus' true identity. Through Jesus, we recognize that God does not define us by what we do, but by who we are becoming. After recognizing our identity as a follower of Jesus, we recognize that we belong to the church, the movement of which Jesus is the foundation. When we belong to Jesus, we also belong to his church. Finally, the church provides purpose. That purpose being to provide a tangible expression of God's family here on earth.

How can a place that is all about **identity, belonging, and purpose** be meaningless to people? Maybe it's because the church has forgotten who and what we were supposed to be.

A Neighborhood Movement

Let's start our look at scripture today with a history lesson. Christians attribute the start of the church to the history recorded in the book of **Acts**. However, in order to gain a proper understanding of what exactly the church is we must trace its roots back to **Jesus**. Long before the stories of Paul, Peter, Pentecost and the early church Jesus started to travel engage followers and start a movement. We often imagine that Jesus had his twelve guys and that was it. They traveled together as a small caravan

stopping in towns to share the message of the Kingdom and then moved on. However biblical sources tell us that Jesus had hundreds of followers during his years of ministry on earth. In essence Jesus actually started his first “church” like movement. **Therefore, if Jesus gives the Church its identity, belonging, and purpose it only makes sense that we should see how he started his “Church Movement.”** Our passage today comes out of the Gospel of Luke and it shows Jesus giving instructions to his followers on how to minister to communities during an upcoming trip ending in Jerusalem.

'After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go. '

- **Luke 10:1 (ESV)**

In this passage we don't see Jesus telling his followers to **invite** people to a gathering, we see him preparing them **to go into neighborhoods**. Jesus instructions were not for his followers to go find unbelievers and invite them to a gathering where they could hear someone instruct them on how to become a believer. He instructs them to go and to start that process for themselves in local villages and neighborhoods. He doesn't even instruct them to go into towns and villages and start a worship experience, he instructs them to go into towns and live life with whomever they can, however they can. Jesus' followers weren't focused on creating places for people **to gather**, they were focused helping people **see and believe** the truth. They did this through **blessing neighborhoods, being present in neighborhoods, and ministering in neighborhoods**. We see Jesus instruct his followers to go and enter the towns along the way to Jerusalem, he also instructs them to not waste time by stopping to greet every person they meet along the way. When they arrive at their destination they are to find a local family to stay with. They offer a blessing to that family and they begin to live life with that family, eating and sharing experiences with them. Eventually as a relationship was built, they were to go out into a neighborhood so that they could heal people and preach the message of the kingdom. They were starting a movement of people, a movement of believers in the message of Jesus. They were starting the church.

What this passage ultimately does, is it reemphasizes the idea that the Church was never intended to be **a place**, it was meant to be a movement to inspire the establishment of **Gods Kingdom** in the lives of his people; it was a **neighborhood movement**. This fact is not only supported by scripture, but by the history of the church itself. Numerous movements within the church have started when the institution of the church failed to fulfill the mission of the movement that Jesus started. Along with Methodism, the Society of Friends or Quakers comes from one of these moments in history. Their founder has a particular quote that speaks to our reality today:

"The Lord showed me, so that I did see clearly, that he did not dwell in these temples which men had commanded and set up, but in people's hearts . . . his people were his temple, and he dwelt in them."

- **George Fox, Founder of The Society of Friends**

The movement Jesus started has always rested with his followers, never with a place or an institution. The influence of the church has never rested with a particular event, worship service, or even its leader. It has always rested with the movements ability to connect with the community.

Being Present in the Neighborhood

Now is the part where some of you are looking for the door. It starting to get uncomfortable, and your starting to glance at your neighbor and wonder, “What is the pitch? What is he going to tell us that God is asking us to do.” You might even be thinking, “This is why I don’t invite my friends to church.” Well, here is the good news; if you are here today and you are part of “the church movement” than your follow up is easy. The other part of the good news is that if you’re not part of the “church movement” than you job for today is pretty much done.

For those of you who are part of the movement, What if I told you that doing **one simple thing** could help your neighbors around you and those in this neighborhood around understand the impact that Church can have on their life? What if you didn’t even have to say anything? **You can help people understand how church can impact there life, by doing one simple thing: Listening.** Listening opens the door for **blessing** the neighborhood. Listening opens the door for **being present** in the neighborhood. **Listening opens the door for ministry in the neighborhood.** Blessing the neighborhood means creating space for God to work, being present in the neighborhood means knowing what going on your neighborhood and in the lives of your neighbors, ministering in your neighborhood means being active about serving and meeting the needs of people in your neighborhood. It is these things that create small opportunities to share about how your faith has impacted your life. When we are present in our neighborhood, we are actively fulfilling the mission of the Church. We are being a tangible example of all that Jesus was and is.

When was the last time you stopped and listened? If someone listened to you, would that make a difference? What if you could give someone the same church experience you have come to love and value? How can you listen to your neighbor? How can we listen to our neighborhood?

How might you impact your family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and other random strangers if you simply took the time to listen.

Restarting the Neighborhood Church

What if we restarted the Neighborhood Church Movement? Do the people in your neighborhood know you care about them? Do the people in this neighborhood know that our church cares about them? What would the impact of presence be on your neighborhood? What would the impact of our churches presence be on this neighborhood? What if when people spoke of FUMC- Bakersfield, they were talking about a movement of people and not just a place at the corner of Stockdale and Montcalire in Bakersfield? How might our church look different if we were transforming neighborhoods near and far with our ability to be present, bless, and serve local communities?

People might just start to experience church the same way you do. The church would become more than a place, it would become a **neighborhood based movement** with the power to **transform** the world, all in the name of Jesus Christ.