

This week we come to the conclusion of our series on the Art of Neighboring-- around the office I've been calling it "the end of neighboring." And, of course, this will not be the end of our journey of loving our neighbors and our neighborhood. For most of us, this is not the beginning of that journey either, but I have heard from some of you who have shared wonderful stories of what has happened the last few weeks when you stepped out your front door and reached out to those around you. Yvonne Canida shared that she knew some new neighbors had moved in earlier this summer to the house two doors down, but she had not seen or connected with them at all. She dropped a note in their mailbox to say hello, to share her contact information, and let them know who she was. And because she reached out, she found out that she actually had more new neighbors than she knew about, as they had just welcomed newborn twin boys to their family. A connection was made, and now there is something to build on.

Others of you have knocked on doors and had neighbors over for dinner, you've baked bread and cookies for those around you, you've gathered with other Westbury Church folks in your area to make connections there and to brainstorm about how to serve your neighbors--you've opened your doors, and in doing so, you've opened doors for God to work through relationships and connections. Friends, the first week of September we talked about how having a metaphorical love for metaphoric neighbors only brings about metaphoric transformation in people's lives and in the neighborhood. Thanks be to God, we are stepping out of the metaphor and joining God in being really, truly present in this place where we live.

A couple of you talked about being a little hesitant about stepping into relationship with your neighbors. Pastor Taylor, we want to do this, but we're a little nervous, because last time we did this, we got into a bit of a mess. We connected with our neighbors, we got together for dinner a few times, but the more we got to know these folks, the more we realized that there were addiction issues and relationship problems that were hard to understand, and at times they became a little bit frightening. We were never sure what to do. One day, we saw the guy and asked how things were going, and we found out that his girlfriend had packed up their entire apartment, including all of his stuff, and driven away in a uhaul. We were really at a loss for how to be a good neighbor to him.

So, as some of you know, it turns out that neighboring relationships, like all relationships, are messy. And they don't come with a manual.

It seems that Jesus found the same thing was true when he called disciples. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus invited Levi to follow him--to join his inner circle. Jesus invited Levi to get involved in his life, in the life of God, and so when that happened, the tables turned the other way, too. Not only does Levi get involved with Jesus, but Jesus gets involved with Levi. He goes to a party at Levi's house--a party that no self-respecting teacher or man of God should be seen at, according to the scribes and Pharisees. He sits at a table and shares food with those who were not vetted to sit with the teacher--those who were widely known as "those guys," who were looked upon with suspicion, and for good reason! When Jesus stepped into Levi's life--he stepped into all of it--the unfortunate job, the connections with Rome, the friends and co-workers, all of it--the good, the bad, and the ugly.

When we neighbor we are faced with the uncomfortable reality that our lives have layers. While most of us present a pretty good front, when the first layer or two gets peeled back--when we actually get to see beyond the front doors of each other's lives, the picture is not as pristine. In our home, there is an easy way to explain this. I hang this picture of our family in our front hallway (show b&w family photo), but back in the kitchen, another picture hangs on the fridge, and this one is far truer to our real life (show Adventure photo). So, these photos were taken only about a month apart, but the truth is, we can go from family A to family B in a hot minute. (I'll take your laughter as a sign that we aren't the only ones)

Al and Ida Bathey have lived in their home here in Westbury for over 40 years. And in their time they have seen their share of neighbors come and go. They've been intentional about getting to know people, hosting National Night Out get togethers and other driveway gatherings to just briefly connect with those on the block. They have been there when life gets messy for everybody, when the floods and the hurricanes have come and brought the neighbors together. When life has gotten messy for their neighbors, several have called the Batheys. When their neighbor had a stroke and was unable to walk, she called the Batheys for help. Life got a little comically messy for the Batheys when the church had a live nativity scene in the 70s, and the Batheys volunteered to house-

-of all things--the goats, in their backyard. The goat sounds drew neighbors from all around to see what was happening at the Bathey home; and then things got really interesting when one of the church youth came to tell Ida that one of these goats must be expecting a baby, because there's a new little goat being born in the back yard. Life just isn't tidy. But it sure is interesting.

The truth is, life is messy, and often it's not just that quaint form of messy that still falls in the realm of socially acceptable. Our lives--the lives of each person in this room--come with challenges and with pain. Friends, you better believe that the same challenges and pain are true for your neighbor--I mean both the neighbor in the pew with you today, and the neighbor next door. Behind the doors of your neighbors' homes there is loneliness, fighting, addiction, and grief. There is marriage trouble, money trouble, kid trouble, there's depression...the list is long, friends. We know it's true about our own lives. At some point, we have to face the question--are we open to someone else's mess? Are we open to letting them in, even a little bit, to our mess?

As I look out at you today, I think I can safely say that none of us needs another surface relationship--I'm going to take a wild guess and say you probably didn't come here looking for people who will try to convince you that they are perfect and you have to be, too. You came here for real community, people to do life with, to share life's real joys and real sorrows. What we are all looking for is some sign of acceptance; not someone to stand over us in judgment, but someone to stand beside us in acceptance, and encouragement. Friends, your neighbors need that too.

Now, does this mean that we should bare all to everyone we meet? No. In all relationships, it is crucial to have good boundaries--it is absolutely vital to be able to draw and communicate where the line is. So if your neighbor is in need, then you'll have to decide and communicate with one another--with spouses, or partners, or roommates, or children--how can we help? How much can we help? how do we draw the line? You may have to get up the gumption to have some tough conversations. And in some situations, you may need to decide that your neighbor is simply too dangerous to engage with in person, and your neighboring will simply be done through prayer.

Dave Runyon presents a great distinction when he writes "There is a vital difference between responsibility *to* and responsibility *for* someone. We are responsible to love, to encourage, to bless, to pray and to help. But we are not responsible for outcomes, for consequences, for emotions, for reactions, for feelings, or for someone else's choices."

Your call is not to fix your neighbors, it's to love your neighbors. Your call is to live beside them--to keep on engaging them, not to write them off because they are troubled and they'll always be troubled, but to stay engaged, and to stay connected, accepting and loving them for who they are, and encouraging them as they walk through this life. Your call is to be a sign to your neighbors that Jesus did not come for the righteous, but for all of us sinners. A sign that Jesus longs to eat and drink with each of us, too, as he did with Levi and his friends, a sign that he is determined to be there, to walk beside us as God's grace unfolds in our lives, as messy as they might be. What a gift it could be for your neighbors to find that right next door to them, right across the hall, there is someone who accepts them as they are--someone who has so practiced the art of accepting others that you have come to believe, perhaps, that even you are accepted--with all your messy life.

Friends, Jesus jumped into Levi's messy life--but he asked something of Levi, too. Follow me. Follow me out your door--bring your mess with you, and follow me into the lives of others. Together, let's go see where we can find grace.

Summary: Jesus enters into the complicated life and relationships of Levi, the tax collector, when he invites him: "Follow me." Jesus also enters into our messy lives, and invites us to be open to the messy lives of those around us.