

Love... Where You Live
Week One
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*****Just about the time this pandemic began in earnest, our back neighbors planned to have their fence replaced** – and of course, that impacted our fence as well, so we ended up replacing ours when they replaced theirs. And there was this domino effect, because when the two of us chose to change, that meant our neighbors to the side were compelled to replace all of theirs – which reminded us of a couple of things: **First, our lives are interdependent and interconnected. Second, the neighborhood looked very different for the couple of days when the fences were down.** It actually became a picture of what's happened in this entire ordeal:

The past two weeks, something incredible happened in our cul-de-sac. Maybe you've seen evidence of the same thing. The barriers between neighbors have come down. To clarify, we have very kind neighbors to begin with. We wave at one another when we pass on the road and we participate in each other's kids' fundraising offers. But we all lead busy lives, and that's pretty much as far as the relationships go.

Three weeks ago, Lana wrote a brief note to our neighbors, inviting them to connect in a group text message in case anyone had any needs. She also mentioned that perhaps we could gather some time while everyone was home for some **“socially distanced” conversation at the end of our driveways.** By that afternoon, everyone on our street had responded positively. By the following morning, one of our neighbors suggested that the weather was nice and we might just visit that very evening. So in one day, all the families who were in town were on lawn chairs in the cul-de-sac well past sundown sharing concerns about the current situation, stories about life in quarantine, and insights into their backgrounds. **In other words, what hadn't happened in TWO YEARS happened in two days. The barriers were gone!**

A few nights ago, we were back at the curb – a few feet apart – for a concert. That's right: it turns out that several of the neighbor kids play instruments, so we set up a mic and an electric piano and were glorious entertained with recital music under the cool, blue skies of this week.

We're going to talk about something for a couple of weeks that is always important, but seems especially significant during this unique season of shelter-in-place orders, illness concerns, and economic uncertainty.

Turn to Matt 22:34-40

We've named this next two weeks, "Love... Where You Live" because it's really the most basic – and perhaps most impactful – way to demonstrate the love of Jesus to others. The events and restrictions of the past two weeks have limited our travel to almost every mission field on earth except the one we overlook the most: the ones right where we live. There are probably some people listening today who are already thinking, "Man, with everything going on right now I was hoping to go deeper! I want some profound theological truth that will blow my mind!" Well, how about we focus on something that was such a profound theological truth that Jesus identified it as the second greatest commandment?!

I also want to be clear, as I'm guessing some of our neighbors are WATCHING with us today: I'm not proposing that we have some sneaky, backdoor presentation to people, but really, genuinely discover what it means to be a good neighbor. It really doesn't matter what your background is. You can benefit from this concept!

*³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. ³⁵ And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: ³⁶ "Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.**" ³⁸ This is the greatest and most important command. ³⁹ The second is like it: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."*

(A little review for some here, but important one...) We've been given two powerful commands as Christians.

- First, the "Great Commission"... "Go and make disciples..."
- Second, the "Great Commandment"... "Love God, and love People!"

Every person can help bring neighbors closer by understanding the biblical principles of neighboring.

"Love your NEIGHBOR."

1. The Proximity Principle

This is really important, because if we were having a conversation right now, some of you would tell me something like, "Pastor, I know God called me to love my neighbor. But I think of my 'neighbors' as my co-workers, my kids'

classmates at school, our church family – not necessarily the people who happen to live next door.”

But the word used in Matt 22 and Luke 10 for neighbor is telling:

πλησίον *plēsíon*: from the root word for near, near to. In other words, a neighbor is someone close by. **Here’s the big idea of that word: The word neighbor means “actual neighbor.” God has sovereignly placed you among your neighbors.**

Remember in Luke’s account of the same conversation, one of those listening asked Jesus to specify who qualified as a “neighbor.” Jesus’ response is where we get one of the most famous parables: the Good Samaritan.

Central to the idea of the Good Samaritan is that people were trying to get around caring for neighbors by redefining who their neighbors were: by focusing on current agendas and networks rather than dealing with the needs RIGHT IN FRONT OF THEM even if there was no previous relationship! The heart of the answer is that there is no one – no matter how different from you – who exempts you from the call to love your neighbor.

Obviously, Jesus had in mind for us to love more people than those who live next door to us, but wouldn’t that AT LEAST include those next door? Here’s what you need to understand: the people around you were placed near you for a reason.

We’ve made neighboring less than it really is. It means God has placed you next to people to love them!

I fear that, out of a desire to make everyone our neighbors, we’ve made *no one* our neighbors. The truth is, you can see everyone as your neighbor and love them and honor God through it, but doesn’t it seem especially backward, given what the Scripture says about the importance of our placement, that we’d ignore our literal neighbors?

It turns out that the World is also discovering that what Jesus said is a really good idea.

***Malcolm Gladwell**, in his book *Outliers*, told the story of the village of Roseto, PA, a town made up entirely of citizens who came from the village of Roseto Valfortore in Italy. Intrigued by the extremely low incidence of disease in Roseto, including no coronary artery disease in anyone younger than 55,

medical researchers in the 1960s dedicated themselves to studying this phenomenon.

They found their diets weren't any better, but their connections to their neighbors were profound, and so they actually lived longer.

But this isn't some new discovery – it's God's idea!

Acts 17: 24-27. Paul is speaking to philosophers in Athens ²⁴*The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. ²⁵Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. ²⁷He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*

Did you catch that? You were placed in your neighborhood for a reason. And so were your neighbors.

The Church today has more literature, media, programs, and training for reaching others than any time in our history, but the Church in America in most areas is declining. Could it be as simple as we've forgotten the most foundational part of the process, that Jesus said start with our neighbors?

Just imagine of God's people caught a vision for the most basic command Jesus gave us?

Let's look at the verb: God calls you to "LOVE your neighbor..."

2. The Kindness Principle

What does it mean to love our neighbors? Sometimes we overlook the *practical* idea of loving. What if the command said, "Like your neighbor"? What would you do to express *like*? That might be an easier way to think about this, and that kindness can be a ramp to loving them. **Here's the bottom line: God is calling us to invest in our neighbors, sacrifice for our neighbors when necessary, and ultimately, to show the kindness of God to our neighbors.**

With this in mind, I have observed a great irony in the church: many Christians

tend to jump the Great Commandment (to love God and people) in order to get to the Great Commission (to make disciples). They don't want to invest the energy to share kindness, but sometimes are surprised when people who are still strangers aren't interested in our message of hope. We have to do *both* to be effective.

*****I'm told it's the season to plant a vegetable garden.** Two ways to do that: Plant seeds, or go down to the store and buy some plants all ready to go (seedlings). What do they do differently? Nothing – but for the seeds, you have to wait. **Here's the point: There are no seedlings in the Kingdom. You have to start with the seed and trust when you can't see the progress. Or as Jesus put it, you have to love your neighbor.**

And I don't mean meeting your neighbors just so you can make a presentation or invite them to church. **It means getting to know the people around us because they're worth getting to know!** It means listening as much as talking. It meant letting the Holy Spirit do the work in the midst of your relationship. And that takes God's timing. We have to be willing to wait.

How, then, are we to love these neighbors? Jesus tells us: "Love your neighbor as YOURSELF."

Hone in on that word, "Yourself." I think of how very much we *do* love ourselves, of how much of our activity centers around the care and comfort of self. Then we should try to imagine what it would be like if we showered that love on our neighbors. Then we should do it.

Folks, I love that Kingsland is so intentional about meeting the deepest needs of people all over the world. But we cannot call ourselves "missional" if we simultaneously ignore the needs of or neglect to be kind to those nearest us in everyday life.

The people around you matter immensely to God.

Have you ever thought about how these two commands are connected – love God and love people? We love God with everything within us because God first loved us.

If you look closely at the story of the Good Samaritan, you'll see Jesus in the role of the Samaritan: a stranger who had no obligation whatsoever to help someone who could have been considered an enemy. Yet He stepped outside of His own rights, entered into our pain, and gave His own life for us. That's the heart of the Gospel! Some of you need to begin there. You see, when we say

people matter immensely to God we're saying YOU matter immensely to God. Jesus gave His life for YOU.

- Listen: I wonder whether someone today is ready to place your trust in Jesus Christ...
- For ALL of us, I wonder whether we're ready to get intentional about this command to love our neighbors.

I want to encourage you to join me these next few weeks in this opportunity. Let's show kindness to our neighbors! I don't know if the barriers have ever been lower! Here's what the challenge involves:

- Reach out to your neighbors and get connected. Look for "CDC-friendly" ways to connect in the coming days.

If we want to love someone, it's REALLY helpful to know their first name. **"The difference between 'hey bro' and 'hey Joe' is immense!"**

- I want you to pray for your neighbors – many of whom are facing some really unsettling days. We have a prayer guide for you to use for the next few weeks on the resource page at EmpoweredHomes.org.

That's it! Can you do it?

*****Here's one example that was captured a few months ago (as you'll see, it was pre-social distancing!) in Austin. Just one lady who made the decision to love where she lived.**

(Show video of "Homemade Tacos")

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=55&v=VtIE6tcMls&feature=emb_logo

I can't make very good tacos, but I can love where I live!

As you get started, I want you to take one simple, symbolic step: I want you to take those chairs you've been using on your back porch and move them to the front yard. Do it in a way where the neighborhood association won't send you an ugly letter, but do it. And as you sit there in the evening, just watch how God uses the time!

Will you take the challenge?

Here's what gets real fun about this. There are about a dozen churches around Katy and West Houston who have said they were going to join us in this project. In those churches, there are over 10,000 members. That's about 3000 households – and if each of us just shared the love of God to 4 neighbors, that's 12,000 households, or 40000 people who will be blessed in this season! 12,000 homes would have access to the love of Jesus - with something that costs no money or resources. It's just a matter of taking Jesus at His word.