**Knowing My Neighbor**

**September 6**

*Matthew 22:34-40*

*“Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’”*

Do you know your neighbors? I grew up in a small neighborhood… there weren’t too many people on my street. The houses that were on my street weren’t very close together. My grandparents lived right next to me on one side. On the other side lived an older lady, who had grandkids we would play with in the Summer, and across the street from us lived the Fornoffs, who had 2 kids that were way older than me and my brothers, but they had a dog named Duncan that we were asked to feed and take care of when they went on vacation. So, I definitely had interaction with my neighbors. I wouldn’t say I knew them all very well (other than my grandparents), or talked with them about church or faith, but I knew who they were.

But, as I grow older and learn more about my faith, I have come to this realization that I didn’t really ***know*** my neighbors. Knowing who they are is different than *knowing* them. I knew my neighbor’s grandchildren Robby and Justin, and I knew we liked to throw football and play tag and climb trees when they visited grandma’s house, but I didn’t really know anything else about them – where they lived, where they went to school… I didn’t even know who their parents were. So, as a result, when we all got older and busier, we kind of fell out of touch. I knew who they were, but I don’t think I *knew* them. Therefore, I don’t feel like I really loved them.

We’ve talked about that distinction in youth group before – usually when it comes to knowing about God and actually *knowing* God. When you know *about* God, you know the Bible stories, you know His law, you have this “head knowledge” of Him that can only go so far. But when you *know* God and His thoughts and desires, through prayer and meditation and spiritual discipline, you grow in your love for Him. As you grow in love for Him, you get to know Him more, and you kind of have this never-ending “cycle” of knowing God more and loving Him more.

The thing is, that love is supposed to extend to our neighbors. In fact, Jesus claimed that loving our neighbors was so important that He told followers that it was *just as important* as loving God. In His mind, if you don’t love the people who live closest to you, how can you expect others to recognize that love or be attracted to that faith?

So again, think about who your neighbors are. They most likely are not your closest friends. They most likely are not entirely family. They most likely go to different churches, have different jobs, and have different beliefs than you and your family do. It’s possible that they might even speak a different language than you do! But they surround us every day. Especially now, and over the last few months, when we’ve been confined to our own homes, you’ve been closer to your neighbors more often than to anyone else. So, what stops us from loving our neighbors? What stops us from knowing them?

One of my favorite Christian authors is Bob Goff. He writes in very simple, straightforward ways that make you think. In his book, *Everybody, Always,* he talks about what it means to love your neighbors, and where hesitation can come in. He says: “What often keeps us from loving our neighbors is fear of what will happen if we do.” I don’t know for *sure* if that’s true for you, but I can guess that’s where a lot of hesitation comes with interacting with other people. We’re scared of what may happen. We’re scared of what they might think of us. We’re even scared of what’s going to be expected of us as Christians – the challenges that might arise if we actually reach out and try to connect with someone who may be super different from us, or rude to us, or if they present a problem to us that we can’t handle.

But Jesus has the power to give us the courage that is required to live the life He talked about. Stepping out in faith to try and know someone will result in a confidence to keep trying to love others. Jesus called us to love others, and coincidentally, God placed us in a world where we are surrounded by other people. Bob Goff says, “nobody expects you to love flawlessly, but you can love fearlessly.”

That’s not easy. We shared a devotion online a few weeks ago (and you’ve likely heard me say before if you’ve been in youth group) that Christianity is simple, but it’s not easy. But it’s not *supposed* to be easy. Easy things don’t last. Things that last take work, effort, practice, and patience. That’s where grace comes in. God offers grace freely so you can offer love freely. If you fail, just try again.

This month, both online and when we meet in person, we’re going to be continuing discussions on what it means to be a neighbor, and to have neighbors. Throughout these conversations, we hope you are reminded of the neighbors that surround you at home. We’ll be talking about that command Jesus gave to love our neighbors as ourselves. Our prayer is that even though it’s a commandment you are familiar with, maybe with the events of the last few months, and the expected events of future months, we will understand this a little bit differently, and follow through a little bit differently as well.

*Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

1. Do you know your neighbors? What kind of interaction do you have with your neighbors?
2. Would you say you love your neighbors? What would it take for you to say you love your neighbors? How can you get to know them better?
3. Why do you think Jesus claimed it is so important for us to love our neighbors? Of course, when He says ‘love your neighbor,’ He is not only talking about the people who live closest to us. But why is it so important that we start with the people that live close to us?
4. Would you agree that fear keeps us from loving other people? What kind of fears would prevent you from getting to know someone better?
5. We often mention that God created us to need relationships and connections – to need other people. We all have friends, family, and connections that we are grateful for and will gladly invest in. So, why is it necessary for us to extend that love to neighbors, and aim to connect with them too?
6. What’s one thing you can do this week to try and connect with your neighbors?