

First Sunday of Lent  
*Taking Jesus Seriously: The Sacred Practice of Neighboring*  
Mark 12:30-31, and more

Some people hear God talking to them. I don't. I respect other people's experience, and I always lean in a little when I hear someone say with confidence, out loud, what God told them—because I'd really like to know what that voice sounds like. But for me, getting a sense of what God wants me to do next is more like the rising of floodwaters. It's a little bit at a time: water around my ankles, maybe even my knees, before I look down and say, 'Hey, what's going on here?' And it's usually not until I'm in it up to my shoulders and the current is carrying me downstream that I'm inclined to look back and think, 'Huh! I wonder if this is God telling me something.'

So that's what's been happening for me. And I want to tell you this morning what it is I've been hearing.

Last year, one of our first year Changemaker Fellows, Angela McConnell, chose loneliness as her changemaker project. Everywhere Angela went and talked about loneliness, she discovered that people were immediately drawn into that topic with her. Even more than she had sensed at the beginning, everyone seemed to know what loneliness feels like. Like it's a pervasive, almost infectious, dis-ease of our time, this place. So much, that Angela made loneliness the theme of a full year of arts exhibitions and interactive experiences at the Montalvo Arts Center, which she directs.

Then, about a year ago, as we were in the middle of discussions about whether to merge with Trinity Church, and Pastor Sam was just forming a vision for a new ministry there, she began to notice that loneliness surfaced again and again in her conversations with new people she was meeting in MountainView. Over and over, she heard people say things like, "I'm busy all the time, and there are always people around, but I just can't seem to make deep connections in this place...and I miss that." And out of those conversations grew Front Porch, the new dinner church ministry Sam leads at our campus in downtown Mountain View. Front Porch is all about 'the sacred act of neighboring.'

Then, last fall, I heard *New York Times* columnist David Brooks speak about his own experience of loneliness, and the new project he's working on with the Aspen Institute, called *Weaving the Social Fabric*—which is all about encouraging people to know their neighbors and to carve out time and space for relationships. Everywhere around us, he reminded the audience I was in, people are hungry for what the Christian story offers: the truth that happiness—flourishing—comes not from your achievements, but from your connection to others. That stretching our hearts and our habits wider, knowing and including more people, is the exercise that makes us more human.

And then, I had coffee with Chris Jordan, the Los Altos City Manager, and we had this great conversation about lots of things. And I asked him, 'What if the church turned its attention toward making great neighborhoods in Los Altos and Mountain View? Would that be a good

thing for the city?’ and he stopped and he got very quiet, and he said, “That’s exactly what we need to be working on.”

It began to feel like the water was up to my neck, and I began to ask, ‘What are you doing here, God?’ I did some research, and it turns out that all over the world, people of faith are sensing God moving in this same direction: out of church, into our neighborhoods.

And in fact, it seems like God has been saying this louder and longer than I knew. Because there’s already a global movement called the *Parish Collective*, whose mission is “to support followers of Jesus who are collaborating together to become a life giving presence in their neighborhoods.” And there’s an ecumenical movement in Colorado called *The Denver Neighboring Movement*. There’s a book called *The Abundant Community*, where I read this quote by a woman who said, “I live in a ‘poverty of wealth.’ I do not know my neighbors. Everyone has lawn care, professionals to put up their holiday lights. I learn about my neighbors from the cleaning lady and the handyman.” And it broke my heart, because it sounded to me like something that someone in this place might say.

So I began to have conversations with some of you. I asked, “What if we all spread out and just asked our neighbors to come over for dinner?” And again and again I heard answers that sounded something like this: *We used to have great relationships with our neighbors when the kids were little. We saw each other all the time. But now that our children are grown, and new people have moved into the neighborhood, we hardly know anyone. There’s a family down the street—I think it’s a family—from some other country, but I’m not sure which one, or what language they speak. There’s someone else who must work all the time, because all I ever see is the garage door go up and down. That’s the only way I even know there’s someone alive there.*

I say this without blame. I don’t know my neighbors either.

In December we had a discussion in Conversational Church (11:15 every Sunday) about who in our community doesn’t know they are loved. Our United Methodist Conference had asked every church to talk about that at the end of last year. The idea was to see how inclusive we really feel called to be. Who our church has a heart for, and how willing we are to see and extend ourselves toward people who might need something the church can offer. Around that room at Conversational Church, almost every participant said that right alongside their compassion for people who struggle with housing around here, they were conscious that in this community there are many people who are alone, isolated. Alone in their big houses, or alone in their small apartments. People who are lonely because they’re old and not as able as they used to be, or because they’re young and stressed, or because they’re far away from family, or because they work so much they don’t have time for friendships.

Every week as we begin Conversational Church, we pray, “Let us hear You in one another’s voices.” In that conversation, like many, I heard God talking to me. Maybe to us.

And then I watched you respond to our Advent Generosity campaign in December. I saw the way you were willing to stretch further than this church had ever stretched before, to make a difference in the communities where we live. I heard the sound of your hearts opening as you

our neighbors in Salinas talked about how they are working at recovering from addiction and moving past incarceration. I saw how delighted you were to make the dignity of a shower available to people who live on the street. I know how ready you are for Compassion Week to grow and grow until the impulse to be in service to one another is the defining mark of our cities.

And now I am convinced that we are in the rush of a mighty current of God's movement among us. Here's the direction I think that current is carrying us: toward being the Church in our neighborhoods. Toward knowing, even more than we do already, that the work of being the Church is not about what happens here in this sanctuary, or even on this campus. It's about what happens in the places where we eat and sleep and play and go to school and work. It's about being part of God's work of mending the fabric of our neighborhoods. It's about us *being* the broken bread and poured-out wine that are served at the same wide-open table we are invited to today. It's about being the visible presence of the hospitality of God—not just here, but everywhere.

“Love your neighbor,” Jesus said. He didn't just say it once. He said it in a dozen different ways. And the tradition he came from, the stories that were holy Scripture to him, and the words that are holy Scripture to us, say it in a dozen more ways. You heard just a few of them read this morning.

Love your neighbor. That means everyone; but if we hear Jesus' commandment as an abstraction, then we don't have to do anything. We can call ourselves neighbors to everybody and remain right here in our pews, at a safe and undisturbed distance.

I am inviting you, as a spiritual practice this Lent, to love your *particular* neighbors. To imagine the possibility that when Jesus said ‘Love your neighbor,’ he meant your *actual* neighbor. The one who lives right next door to you, or down the street, or around the corner.

We begin today a campaign called *200 Tables*. My hope is that sometime this spring, we—our whole congregation—will have stretched ourselves to host at least two hundred dinners in our homes, shared with our *actual* neighbors. This is not really about annual block parties. It's about gathering people to sit around a table together, sharing food and conversation about things that matter, about knowing each other's lives.

You may already have wonderful, full-fledged friendships with the people who live near you, and you may already invite them over to dinner often. I would bet most of us do not. And I can almost guarantee you that there is someone—a child, an adult, someone—who lives very close to you and who is lonely, just waiting for someone to be interested in their life.

I know I'm asking you to do something hard. It's a little bit scary to think about knocking on the door of someone you don't know and asking them to come to your house for dinner—especially if it's your *church* that suggested the idea. So we've published a little book, called the *200 Tables Guide Book*, to help you do this. It's got all kinds of ideas and suggestions in it to make this easier. You can pick one up as you leave this morning. At the School of Christian Living, every Wednesday evening, we'll have a speaker and discussion about what it is we're trying to do, this *sacred practice of neighboring*.

Come along and listen. I think God is talking to us.

You can request a copy of the *200 Tables Guide Book* by emailing [200Tables@laumc.org](mailto:200Tables@laumc.org)

### Scripture readings

Mark 12:28-31

A legal expert came to Jesus and asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?”

Jesus replied, “The most important one is Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all

your strength. The second is this, You will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.”

Leviticus 19:18

You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.

Romans 13:10

Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

Galatians 5:14

All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Hebrews 13:1-2

Keep loving each other like family. Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it.