

4 years ago, while serving another church just up the road in Orange County, I traveled to Rwanda with two church members. We were evaluating if we should support a program called ZOE; a ministry focused on Rwandan orphans. A key component of the ZOE program is bringing together between 80 and 100 orphans into a community – a ‘family’ network – where the orphans support and encourage each other in a 3-year empowerment program. (ZOE stands for ‘Zimbabwe Orphan Empowerment’ because the program started in Zimbabwe before expanding to Rwanda.)

Prior to ZOE, these orphans -- some as young as 4 and 5 – had to compete with each other for whatever scarce resources they could get in order to survive from day to day! This isolated the orphans from each other, but also in their villages, they were isolated because they were considered a nuisance. We met hundreds of orphans on our trip, those who’d graduated, and those who were just starting the ZOE program. Time and again, we’d hear the children say, “Before ZOE, I was alone and I didn’t think God cared about me. After ZOE came, I no longer felt alone.”

Our church ended up sponsoring a group of 147 orphans for 3 years. (When we made this commitment, I told several colleagues in ministry how our children’s ministry program had grown by 147 children overnight!) Those orphans have graduated the program and the church is sponsoring a new group in Rwanda.

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I am thinking about this within the context of our current sermon series, “Would You Be a Neighbor?” This is our last Sunday in this 3-week series, and I want to close the series by exploring the subject of motivations. Why is it that we, as Christians, should make a special effort to be good neighbors to everyone, but especially to our closest neighbors?

If you are new to St. Paul’s this morning, or if you haven’t been here the past couple of Sundays, we’ve been considering what might happen if each of us made a sustained effort to live out Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors, especially the ones who happen to live

right next door to us! 2 weeks ago, I encouraged each of us to begin focusing on the 8 neighbors in closest proximity to where we live. By next Thanksgiving I’d hope the majority of us not only know the names of our 8 closest neighbors, but that we’ve found creative ways to deepen our relationship with them. (I wrote about one example in yesterday’s e-newsletter.) But again, why? Why would we do this?

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In *The Art of Neighboring*, the book that is the impetus of this series, the authors stress the importance of letting go of ulterior motives; for example, becoming great neighbors as an evangelization or church growth strategy! They write: “the truth is that many Christians have been taught [] that they should do nice things solely for an opportunity to have a spiritual conversation. But Jesus never called us to use a bait-and-switch-approach, where we become friends with people only to share spiritual truths with them. [No.] We are called to love people — period. We are called to love our neighbors unconditionally, without expecting anything in return. The Great Commandment says, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ [Jesus] ends there with no other expectations given. Thus, good neighboring is an end in itself.”

This reminded me of some research from a decade ago, where just 15 percent of those outside of the church believe that Christians are interested in having genuine, non-manipulative relationships, with non-Christians. Conducted by the Barna Group, a Christian-based organization, researchers found that non-Christians believe Christians almost always have an ulterior motive: “Rather than being genuinely interested in people for their friendship, [Christians] often come across like spiritual headhunters.” (You can read more about this in the book, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters*.)

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So, emphatically, our motivation for loving or serving our neighbors (or anyone!) should not include an agenda to ‘get them saved’ or to get them to attend St. Paul’s (even if we know that would be a great decision on their parts!)

One reason my prior church decided to sponsor a group of Rwandan orphans through ZOE, was because there were ‘no strings attached.’ There was no requirement that the orphans become Christians in order to receive our help. A discipleship track was part of the 3-year ZOE program, but it was not compulsory. In the same way, we don’t love our closest neighbors to get them to church or to convert them. We love our neighbors because we have been converted and we follow Jesus’ teachings.

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Let me offer up what I hope are three good reasons we practice, and develop our capacity, for being good neighbors.

First, and perhaps most obviously, loving our neighbors is a way we can both express and deepen our friendship with Jesus. In v. 14 of our reading, Jesus says, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” As we’ve seen, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all make it clear that Jesus considered loving God and loving our neighbor to be the most important commandment. So, as we do what Jesus has commanded us, we are living into our friendship with Jesus.

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Second, and even though salvation does not depend on good works, there is something salvific that takes place when we make the effort to love our neighbors. And that should motivate us! As you probably know, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, insisted that Christians are saved by God’s grace alone, and not by any works on our part. Nonetheless Martin Luther also made this point, that while “God does not need our good works, our neighbor does.”

This is what it means to “bear fruit, fruit that will last.” When we follow Jesus’ command to love, we can trust that this will result in lasting fruit, even if we ourselves don’t see that fruit as it comes to *fruition*.

Friends, when we ourselves become vitally aware that we are residing within the jurisdiction of God’s Kingdom, we can trust that the people we interact with – whoever they are -- will experience something of God Kingdom when

they are in our vicinity. Our task is simply to be a good neighbor, trusting the Holy Spirit will do its work! St. Francis of Assisi is credited with saying, “Preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words.”

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A third motivation for us to carry out Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors is that we, as Christians should be on the forefront overcoming the isolation that is a mark our modern society. Time and again, as I read stories of people who take their own lives, or people who take the lives of others in mass shootings, there is a theme of isolation and desperation. So it turns out that like those Rwandan orphans, one of our greatest challenges is our sense of isolation – that we are disconnected and alone.

In their 2009 book, *The Lonely American*, the authors begin by noting, “Americans in the twenty-first century devote more technology to staying connected than any society in history, yet somehow the devices fail us: Studies show that we feel increasingly alone.” In my ministry experience, working with both adults and teenagers, this has the ring of truth.

After exploring the research in depth, the authors of *The Lonely American* conclude their book this recommendation: “Turn off your computers, [and] go knock on your neighbor's door. You may not be greeted as a hero, but you might make at least one person feel a little less alone. And that's got to be a step in the right direction.”

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So, would you be a neighbor? When Jesus is asked to pick one commandment that is more important than any of the others, he shares a commandment that would change the world for the better, if only every person who claims to be a Christian would actually do it. Amen.