

Christ Community Covenant Church
The Power of Availability
Pastor Scott Parr – July 10, 2016

A word about the events of this last week:

This has been a tragic week full of injustice. And as Christians, we don't have to take sides, but we have to care about injustice and not stand for injustice. We have to care about our brothers and sisters in Christ and their burdens. I have friends in law enforcement and I care for their safety. I have African American brothers in Christ who have been mistreated and who are scared every day for the safety of their kids. Let us pray for justice all around, and let us pray for the families of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Officers Brent Thompson, Michael Krol, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Smith, Lorne Ahrens.

Psalm of Lament – Psalm 90

A note from Gary Walters (President of the Evangelical Covenant Church):

We grieve and lament the disheartening events of this past week. A fallen and hurting world has fallen further and hurts more deeply.

All life is sacred as each one of us is made in the image and likeness of God. We all share in the God-given gift of life itself. We are distressed and grieve the deaths of Philando Castile of the Twin Cities and Alton Sterling of Baton Rouge. We are distressed and grieve the deaths of Dallas police officers Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Lorne Ahrens, and Michael Smith. Too many citizens are dying in questionably escalated circumstances; too many officers are dying in the line of duty. It is a toxic and polarizing situation.

And so first, I implore us to prayer. In your own life, in our church services, and in joining together with other churches in your area, intercede specifically for each family of those who lost loved ones. Pray for the healing of the wounded. Pray for those who weep—whether they weep for the dangers of being a young black man in these disorienting times, or weep for the dangers of being a police officer in these frayed times. Cry out to God in lament for deep cultural fissures and resentments. Pray for our churches in the Twin Cities, Louisiana, and Dallas as they seek to be salt and light. And remember the hope of Christ.

But don't stop at prayer. Resolve to contribute to peacemaking. Remember Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Children of God. Friends, peacemaking is supposed to be a family trait of the family of God.

And how does one take halting steps in that endeavor? We cannot even begin without three things: pursuing engagement (which overcomes isolation), seeking understanding (which overcomes untested assumptions), and according respect (which overcomes dismissiveness). There is more to peacemaking, but there is not less, regardless of where on a polarized spectrum you begin and the convictions you may hold. So expand your relational circles. Be engaged in the social realities of others. Ask for the eyes to see how as a society we fail each other. Such begins peacemaking.

Let us pray.

We're continuing our series about Loving our Literal Neighbors – last week we talked about the power of hospitality. How are you doing on learning your neighbors' names?

This week, I'll start with a story. A few years ago, Becki and I were living in an apartment in California. Isaac was 2 and Asher was a baby. I took them for a walk to the park in the stroller on a chilly winter day. Well in the winter in California, it rains. And people there who have only lived in southern California are

wimpy and complain about the cold in Northern California, but come on – live in Colorado and we don't even have it that bad. But still, we were just in our light jackets and it started to rain. We needed to get home. As we got near home and it was getting really cold and rainy, I realized two things. I forgot my keys. I had locked them inside. And, I had locked my phone inside too. This was shaping up to be one of the worst days ever. I'm stuck outside in the rain with two little boys and nowhere to go. But then I remembered. I have the best neighbors ever. My neighbors JD, Brad, and Ryan had let everyone know in our apartment complex that they wanted their place to be an open door, an open table, a place of community and connection. They had said time and again to stop in any time, doors always open. And so I knew they were available. Their door was open and I made myself at home for three hours until Becki got home from work.

What made JD, Brad, and Ryan the best neighbors ever? They had made it clear over and over and over again that they wanted people to come over, they wanted to share, they wanted their home to bless others. And they said it and demonstrated it so often that I really believed them. And I can't tell you how much our lives were better because of our neighbors. Sometimes it was as simple as needing one more egg for a recipe, and I knew that I could walk over and grab one out of their fridge. Sometimes it was much more significant like getting locked out in the rain. I even went over one time when I just felt like my spirit was burdened and I needed prayer – and they received me with open arms.

What made them the best neighbors ever? They made this clear: "we're AVAILABLE, and we want to help you flourish."

This was going to be a talk about Generosity, but on further reflection, it's really about Availability – being generous with your time and availability.

Generous with your availability – "I'm available and I want to help you flourish."

We believe myths that we have no time and aren't available...

But if we're to love our neighbors like Jesus said was in the top 2 most important things to do on earth, we have to be available.

Why? Because Availability Builds relationships.

Availability Builds Relationships:

We see this in the story of Mary & Martha - Luke 10:38-42 – Relationships are more important than hurry.

Mary chose the better thing – to be available for relationship with Jesus.

Because availability builds relationships. And relationships are most important to Jesus.

I am task oriented and so I can be consumed with doing stuff for Jesus, like Martha. If you're like me you need to be reminded that relationships are first.

The same principle applies to loving our neighbor – **how can we make ourselves available for relationship with them? What task might you need to set aside for a while to spend time with your neighbors?**

You say, "I don't have any time, with my busy job and all I have to do to keep up with family and friends and the home and the yard!"

Yes, we're really busy. But God taught the ancient Israelites a secret to living with availability for others. God built a habit into their ways to LEAVE ROOM IN YOUR LIFE FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS.

Leave Room in Your Life for the Good of Others. *Leviticus 23:22* “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.”

So if you have a field of wheat, and it's time to harvest, you leave the edges. And if you miss a sheaf, don't go back.

Imagine if your life was a wheat farmer, and year after year, out of obedience to God's law, you left the edges of your fields unharvested. And kids ask, “Why do you do that?” “Because God commands us to leave some for the poor and for strangers.”

So it's built into the fabric of your life, your job, your economy, that you leave room in your busy life for the good of others.

Maybe you don't have a wheat field. But what does it look like to leave some time in your life for the good of your neighbors? Perhaps it's...

Sabbath – stoop sitting, playing outside, taking a walk

How about before you close the garage door or the front door, you take a look around, see who is out, and ask them one meaningful question.

The Marlatt's said they...

- Shoveled snow without being asked for the neighbors who live to either side of us
- Given a sympathy card and food gift cards to the neighbors who lost their dad last year
- Thanked those who have picked up newspapers and fliers with gifts from our travels
- Sit on our front porch to be available if others should want to walk up and chat. “Have been very available to the woman who lives alone for conversation and emotional support.”

The Aggus' said...” To make a connection requires both presence and attention. Neighborliness is rubbing against each other in daily life, sharing leaf raking, taking food when they're sick, vacation absences, talking over the back fence, shoveling their walk, always being understood as being 'available' no matter how busy you are...All of this "do unto others-ness" leads to deeper conversations “ (

Why does God care about this so much? Why doesn't God say, “Stranger danger! Stay away from strangers and only talk to safe people?”

In the movie “Forrest Gump”:

Dorothy Harris: Are you coming along?

Young Forrest Gump: Mama said not to be taking rides from strangers.

Dorothy Harris: This is the bus to school.

Young Forrest Gump: I'm Forrest, Forrest Gump.

Dorothy Harris: I'm Dorothy Harris.

Young Forrest Gump: Well, now we ain't strangers anymore.

We teach kids all the time to stay away from strangers. I have to laugh inside a little when I read this one Winnie the Pooh book to my kids that's about strangers, and it's like, “Don't talk to strangers, don't look at strangers, don't open the door to strangers, don't smell strangers, don't look at the puppy of a stranger!”

And yes, some of that is good for kids. But for you adults, God really seems to care about strangers.

Why? Because everyone is a stranger at some point, and we all know it's a terrible and disadvantaged place to be.

- Exodus 20:21 – Don't mistreat foreigners, for you were once foreigners

Here is a super important passage of scripture and notice the emphasis on strangers:

Matthew 25:35 - "I was a stranger and you invited me in."

xenos: foreign, a foreigner, guest

Original Word: ξένος, η, ον

Short Definition: new, novel, a foreigner

Definition: alien, new, novel; noun: a guest, stranger, foreigner.

Why does God care so much about welcoming strangers? Because everyone is a stranger at some point, and we all know it's a terrible and disadvantaged place to be.

I've heard this scripture a million times and always noticed the part about giving food and clothes, but really he's also saying – turn strangers into friends. I always pictured this dangerous drifter coming in out of the rain and being really scared. But Jesus is saying – if someone is new to the area, you don't know them, they're a little different, they're not on the inside – when you befriend them, you are welcoming me.

"Now we ain't strangers anymore."

And that's what God is calling you to.

So REMEMBER...

Story of one family in our congregation:

- Prayed for specific things like Chinese neighbor and flat driveway
- Had really tough neighbors; neighborhood felt oppressed
- Turning point:
 - The moral – build relationships and let God use you.
 - Remember this attitude and over-communicate it to neighbors:
"I have time for you and I want you to flourish"
 - How I'll leave edges in my life for neighbors:
 - Build relationships with neighbors and let God guide you from there.

Lord's Supper

The Lord Jesus Christ invites you to this table – come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Come to me and have the bread of life; come to me and you will never be thirsty.

We understand this table to be a table for true believers in Jesus Christ. If you've never claimed that Jesus is your Savior and Lord, maybe today is the day to do it. Maybe today, in receiving the bread and cup, you are showing that you truly believe in Jesus and receive his forgiveness in your life. If you're still not ready to put your trust in Jesus, we invite you to pass on the bread and cup and use this time as a chance to pray and consider what God has done for us.

Let's take a moment right now to prepare our hearts for the Lord's table in this prayer of confession.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, and having blessed it, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take, eat, this is my body, given for you."

And in the same matter, after supper, he took the cup and said "this cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins."

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show forth the Lord's death until he comes again.

(Pray – Thank you Lord, for these gifts, you traded your very life for ours...)

As you are served, I invite you to hold the bread and cup until I indicate when we'll take them together.

"The body of Christ and the blood of Christ, broken and shed for you."

Prayer: Loving God, we thank you that you have fed us with the bread of life, united us with Christ, and given us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in your eternal kingdom. Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”