

Being Called to Love My Actual Neighbours

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Preacher: Rev. Suzy Kirkham

[0 : 0 0] We're starting this brand new sermon series called The Art of Neighbouring by using this book. And we're starting it as we come into spring and hopefully we're coming out of lockdown, which should mean that we can spend a lot more time outside and see a lot more of our neighbours locally.

And during this whole sermon series, we're going to be asking ourselves, what does it look like to love our neighbours? The ones we live beside, the ones we work alongside, maybe physically or virtually, and what it means to love the people here in Clevedon, where God's placed us.

To start off, we think about the famous verse from Matthew 22, where Jesus gives us that command to love our neighbours as ourselves. A couple of years ago, I was really fortunate to help to facilitate something called a poverty and community hearing, which gathered a lot of people together for one afternoon.

There was a lot of religious and faith leaders there, charity leaders, school leaders, that kind of thing, all together. And also some people there that shared testimonies of their lives and how the hardships that they'd faced during their lives, the effect that it had on them and the things that had been helpful to them during that time, and also the things that had not been so helpful.

And one of the things that was highlighted, which was really interesting, was the fact that a lot of them said that although in the past there had been some excellent events and groups and things started by getting grants from councils and the government and things, they'd maybe run for two or three years, but gradually the money had fizzled out, and so those groups had stopped, and so those people then had been left in the lurch.

[1 : 5 0] And one of the council leaders said something really interesting, and he said he thought that one of the best ways to make life a lot better for people was for people to have and live amongst good neighbours, people that cared about the area they lived in and cared about the people also that were there.

This was really challenging for everybody that was there, but especially for those church leaders who, like many church leaders, are really good at putting on events and programmes, but actually might spend their time doing that and actually overlook that basic call to love your neighbour.

So in this series, we're going to start unpacking this question, what does it mean to love our neighbours, and who are our neighbours, and what is that call in Matthew 22 to love our neighbours as ourselves, how can we put that into practice here in Clevedon?

That passage is again one of the most famous passages probably in the Bible, and again the context of it is the Jewish leaders that are there at the time trying to put Jesus through the ring and catch him out, as they often did.

They wanted to expose him because the things he said about himself and his authority, they didn't like, they thought he was a heretic and he was a fraud, and they wanted to trip him up. And so when they ask him, teacher, what is the most commandment in the law?

[3 : 1 0] That's not a hypothetical question for them. They had over 600 laws that they used to have to keep. And when he answers them back, he quotes from the Old Testament passage Deuteronomy 5, which they would have known, and he says to them, it says, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength.

That is the first and the greatest commandment. And in saying that, they're quite happy with that one. But then he adds to them a bonus answer, which they're not that keen on, because he says, the second commandment is that you must love your neighbour as yourself.

From the commentaries I've read, it's not a hierarchical thing. They're loving your God first, and then second to that, loving your neighbour. They're not split. It's actually, they're both held together.

And actually to love the Lord is to love your neighbour. And in order to love your neighbours properly, you need to love God, and you need to have his help to do that. There's lots you could say about these commands, but this morning I just want to look at two aspects of how we can actually apply them to our lives.

And the first thing is, I find it really striking that when Jesus summarises the Old Testament and what it means to be a believer, he summarises it with the word love. And it seems to me, and sadly in this culture, we as Christians are often looked upon, those people who don't do this, and they don't do that, and they're opposed to this, and they're opposed to that, and everybody knows what we're against, but actually they don't know what we're for.

[4 : 3 9] Now we do have some really important rules, but it really saddens me that often the takeaway by non-Christians about us and our lives is not that love underpins it. If we're not grounded in love, what's the point of being a Christian?

And the best analogy I can think of is looking at a marriage. We probably have all been to lots of weddings. I've been to many as a guest, and I might think about it slightly differently when I'm actually able to officiate at them.

But one of the best things that I love when I'm at a wedding is to see the young couple there making their vows to each other. And I often think back to myself, my husband's wedding, which is many moons ago now, and I think those vows they're making, they don't really have a clue what they mean when they're saying them.

You know, it means, as well as the good times, when things are really grim, that actually we still surrender to each other. We still give each other to each other.

And they're the vows that those ceremony means. But why are they making those vows? They're making them because they love each other. When they're healthy and when they're sick, they're promising to stay together when they've got money, when they're not.

[5 : 5 4] They wouldn't make those vows if they didn't love each other. And that too is the essence of our Christian faith. A father who comes to his bride, the church, and he gives himself in covenant and faithfulness.

And as a church, we respond by giving our whole lives to him as an offering. Our minds, our desires, and everything we have. And the second thing is the way that Jesus really annoys the Pharisee as he leaves that kind of openness to the Pharisees about loving their neighbours that they really can't agree with.

This passage, love your neighbour as yourself, is also told in the passage that was read to us this morning in Luke 10, verses 25 to 37, when the Pharisee basically said, hang on a minute, who is my neighbour?

And let me just clarify this. Let me just get this clarified. And Jesus said, love your neighbour as yourself. And that does mean loving the neighbour who looks like you, lives near you, talks like you, has the same opinions as you.

But also it means loving the neighbour who is not like you, the one who doesn't like your Christian faith, the one who cooks very different food to you, the one who might smell a bit, the one that might have mental illness, or the one that's really annoying because they're always gossiping, fill in the blanks as you need to.

[7 : 14] But those are the neighbours that we're called to love. And of course, the Pharisees, when they heard him speak like this, this really touched a nerve with them because they were embedded in Jewish society.

All their friends and family and neighbours would have been Jews. They would have all grown up with similar backgrounds and understanding of the scripture. And they really didn't like the other. They really hated the Romans.

And they wanted the answer to be loving my neighbours, like loving people like me. But actually Jesus was saying to them, you know those Romans over there, you're called to love them too as yourself. You, like me, have probably heard and read the Good Samaritan passage many times and heard it preached about throughout our lives.

And we can often think, okay, who's my neighbour? He is the one who lives across the road, but actually it's people that live in the other parts of the world, immigrants, refugees, people that are not like me, different cultures, ethnicities, etc.

They are also my neighbour. And don't get me wrong, these people are our neighbours. But we can often think like that, but avoid the more trickier question about what about my actual neighbours?

[8 : 24] You know, the ones that live right beside me, right next door, or right above me, or below me, or across the road from me. What about those neighbours? And I want to ask ourselves a simple question.

What if what Jesus is saying actually includes our physical geographical neighbours? And if that is it, it might be a bit uncomfortable because actually many church surveys have been done, it says in this book, that said that actually many people don't know their neighbours hardly at all.

I'm wondering whether the only bright spark of COVID might be that actually in this country, we may now know our neighbours better than we did maybe a year ago. And this week, after the service, or maybe in your small groups, it'd be really good to actually start filling in this grid that you would have been sent out by email, or you could just draw yourself one.

We're putting yourself and your family, whatever, right in the centre and the details about you. And then throughout the series, populating the rest of these boxes, which are the houses that are right beside you or across the road from you.

Populating that with information, people's names, some names you might know them, maybe you don't, and maybe using this time to actually find out more information about those closest people to you.

[9 : 45] So you might know their names, you might know something about them, like their hobbies or something like that and what they like doing. And then maybe actually if you also know some deeper stuff about them, if you've got a better relationship, and that'd be really interesting to find out those people that you do know and those people that you don't.

In the book, The Art of Neighbouring, it says that they did that particular exercise with lots of people in lots of churches and they found that a lot of people didn't know their neighbours, including church leaders who may only know one or two people on their street because they're so busy out doing other stuff.

People may have lived on their own street for maybe 10 or 20 years and they don't know anything much about their neighbours apart from maybe just saying hello to them in the morning or waving to them as they put the bins out.

But wouldn't it be great if we could extend ourselves and our hospitality to our neighbours that through this they realise that we are that person, the person that has the loving ear, the caring ear, the loving neighbour, the non-judgeable presence who can pray for them in their back garden and who they can talk to them about real stuff that's going on with their lives.

That's neighbouring. And it seems to me, and maybe talk about this in your small group, that we need to maybe think differently about our homes and our streets and our neighbourhoods.

[11 : 16] And hopefully this whole sermon series will help us to do that. A while ago there was a glut of sort of home improvement lifestyle programmes and I don't know about you but I got quite into them.

Things like Location, Location, Location or Grand Designs or Escape to the Country. But I found that although I liked them I had to actually stop watching them because they weren't great for my mental health or my mood because I would turn the programme off with a beautiful staged home and everything being perfect and then look down at my carpet and think, well that's hideous and I then look at my house and think, well this is a right mess, you know, why can't my house look more like the ones on TV?

But those shows are made by and large, not always, but they tend to reduce the place that you live in to the square footage, the curb appeal, the price and the resale value.

And this can lead us into telling ourselves a story about the places that we live that has nothing to do with being a disciple of Jesus. And what I want to say to you today is to think about what it is and what it could be like if actually God in his sovereign and amazing grace has placed you where you live.

And the reason that you're where you are, even if it's only for a few years, is to be a beacon of love, of life and grace for Christ in that place. Do you think this could be a real possibility?

[12 : 42] that the neighbours you have are the ones that God wants you to have. And if you were to say, oh please, you know, put me in a place where I can share your good news, he'd say, you know what, you're there.

And that living in your house, you're not living there because your house is beautiful or it's worth lots of money or it's got a great curb appeal or a fantastic school catchment area but because Jesus wants us to be the neighbours and ambassadors for him to that people and to that place and you are the perfect person to do that job.

When you get to know people better, their stories will inevitably, you know, involve difficult things like hardship and conflict and isolation.

But our homes and our gardens at the moment can be safe spaces that we can invite those neighbours into to come and share a meal with us, to come and chat where we can love them properly and that is the new narrative that we need to live in.

And that's the new narrative that we can walk in step by step, maybe by moving from just a stranger to an acquaintance and then from an acquaintance to a friendship.

[13 : 59] And maybe the first step for you is just having that sort of awkward conversation like I've seen you walking your dog or putting your bins out every day for the past 10 years and I don't know who you are. I'm so-and-so and it's really great to meet you and be your neighbour.

And then the second step is looking for opportunities and praying that God will show you things that you can do in your local area and the people that you can actually make a difference with. And what I'm saying is not just that you're going to pull your bootstraps up and do this all in your own strength and start really loving and caring for that really irritable neighbour that you've got down the street which I'm sure we all have got one of them.

To engage with that neighbour we can only do that by having God's love to help us because that love doesn't come from us, it comes from him and his power comes from him as well.

because God loves us the same as he loves them, the God who breaks through our sin and comes into our life and gives us the gospel of Jesus Christ that we don't deserve either, who comes in and empowers us with his spirit to help us to do the things that we can't naturally do on our own.

This is the power and the love that's going to help us to love our neighbour step by step, day by day. Amen. Amen.