



September 1, 2019
Sermon Series: The Art of Neighboring

Motives Matter
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

Matthew 5:13-16 NRSV

¹³"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Our gospel for today is one from one of the best-known passages of Matthew's gospel: esus' Sermon on the Mount. The section right before it (the beatitudes) is usually read on All Saints' Sunday. You know how it goes: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted; blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* And then esus goes on with the verses we just heard. They speak to how we are to show up in the world, as beacons of hope and bearers of love.

I suspect Matthew stitched these two sections together because there's a connection between our blessedness and our responsibility. There's a connection between God's gracious inclusion and God's charge that we include. That's why as individuals and as a church we are called to be salt and light, people of faith in a world that does not always look faithful.

After all, what does salt do? It makes you thirsty. It makes you want water. And friends, as followers of esus, we know where to find that living water, right? When we are salt, we embody the grace and love of esus in such a way that those around us can't help but experience Christ's presence. They



may not know it, but they know there is something about us that makes them feel honored and valued. And that changes people.

And what does light do? It chases away shadows. And there are so many shadows. Fear and worry and self-doubt and violence and addiction and despair. They eat away at our souls in the middle of the night, whisper ‘you can’t’ or ‘it won’t’ or ‘too late’ or ‘not enough.’ When we are light, we reflect the hope we find in esus, the deep belief that God knows us and loves us, just as we are. We reflect the deep belief that God knows and loves our neighbors just as they are, too. And that changes people.

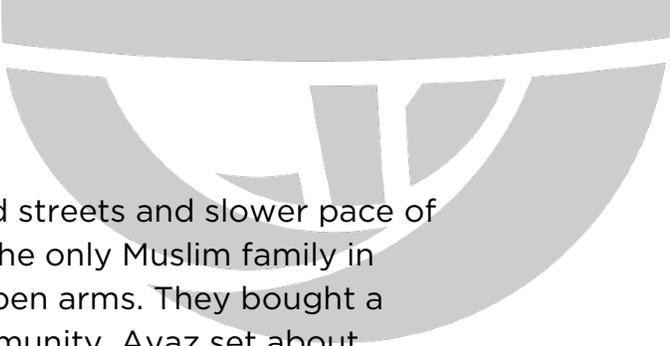
Over the past few weeks we’ve talked about knowing the basics about our neighbors — their names, their family makeup, their occupations. We’ve acknowledged that it takes time to go from stranger to acquaintance to friend. Changing people is an important next step in the art of neighboring. But let’s be clear: the point isn’t to change them. It’s to change us.

Does that surprise you? Maybe a bit. After all, as Christians we’re led to believe that we have what the world needs — a relationship with esus. We’re sent to make disciples. And while that may be true and well and good, we need to be careful. Because when it comes to neighboring, it’s likely that at least some of your neighbors have markedly different histories and perspectives than you do. They might not vote or worship or raise their kids or take care of their yard like you would. These things can become big stumbling blocks when it comes to cultivating a relationship. It’s easy to presume that we can charm or convince them into seeing that our way is the right way. It’s even easier to just *wish* people were like us and keep them at arm’s length if they aren’t.

But what happens when we try to overcome that instinct? When we deliberately set out to meet our neighbors where they are, without judgment or preconceived assumptions. Isn’t it here that God does God’s best work building bridges of understanding and peace? Isn’t it here that we grow a little in our own vision of God’s kingdom?

Here’s an example: Perhaps you have heard the story of Pastor Mandy France and Doctor Ayaz Virji. A few years ago Mandy was an intern pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in tiny Dawson, Minnesota. Ayaz was the town physician. He and his family had moved to Dawson from Harrisburg, PA, in





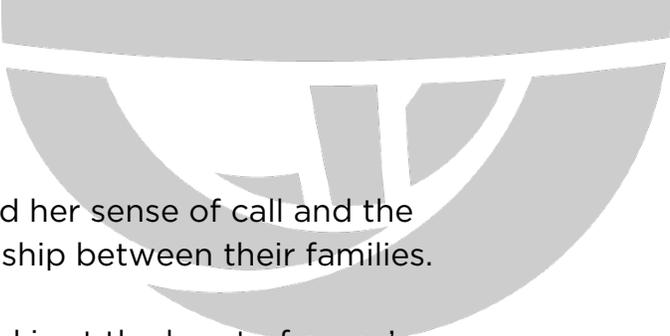
2014. They'd been drawn to the quaint tree-lined streets and slower pace of life and friendly people. And though they were the only Muslim family in town, Dawson seemed to welcome them with open arms. They bought a house and settled in to become part of the community. Ayaz set about treating patients. His wife opened a business. Their kids started school. When the local butcher found out the Virjis had to drive to Minneapolis to buy meat that had been prepared in accordance with Muslim practice, he offered to help. It turns out the cows came in facing Mecca anyway, he said. So the doctor wrote out a few Islamic prayers for the Lutheran butcher to say as the cow was being slaughtered. And neighbor began to take care of neighbor.

But after the 2016 election things began to change. Suspicion and misinformation about Muslims began to grow. Pastor Mandy began hearing comments in her Bible study. They weren't directed towards Dr. Virji, but she couldn't help but think of how he and his family were being affected. For her internship project she set up a series of workshops exploring Islam. It culminated with a presentation by Dr. Virji about what it was like to be a Muslim in their small town.

The goal was never to change anybody's mind, it was to give God space. Pastor Mandy says, "Interreligious dialogue isn't meant to convert someone to another religion, or even to agree with one another. It's to see a person as just that — a person."

The night of the presentation more than 450 people — more than a third of Dawson's total population — packed the high school auditorium to listen and learn. It went relatively well. There were some hard questions, but for the most part the tone was respectful. They agreed there might be some benefit in reaching out to others, so it became the first of a number of presentations they made in southwestern Minnesota that fall. Not all of them went well. In one community angry residents waving Bibles called the doctor the anti-Christ. The intern pastor's email was flooded with hateful messages telling her she was a disgrace to the church. They discussed security measures and even considered putting on body armor, just in case. But even these experiences led to growth, Pastor Mandy says. It helped her realize more what life was like for people seen as 'the other.' It gave her a renewed appreciation for the courage and compassion it takes to love even





in the face of anger and opposition. It has shaped her sense of call and the tenor of her ministry. And it forged a deep friendship between their families.

Friends, that call to be salt and light for the world is at the heart of Jesus' charge to love our neighbors. So where do you start? Here are a few ideas:

- Identify a neighbor or two who you know has a marked difference from you. It could be political inclination, ethnicity, religion. Maybe it's just that you're a raving Vikings fan and they're staunch Packers supporters. Whatever it is, start by spending a little time with your own presuppositions. Acknowledge that other people's viewpoints and experiences are just as valid as your own. Knowing your own inclinations can help you set them aside when you finally start that conversation.
- If the difference you've identified is something you want to understand a little more about before you enter into conversation, do your homework. LSS of MN, one of our primary mission partners, has a series of terrific study guides in their "My Neighbor Is ..." series. Seek to understand without judgment or defensiveness.
- No matter what: Be humble. Be kind. If that's all you can do, you've taken the most important step.

There's a connection between our blessedness and our responsibility, a connection between God's gracious inclusion and God's charge that we include. In order to love our neighbors we have to understand our neighbors. We have to see them as fellow children of God. We have to appreciate our differences.

But when we have nothing to lose by being compassionate. We have nothing to lose by treating our neighbors with dignity and trying to see the world from their point of view. And along the way, we might be surprised to see the change God can bring ... in us, and in the world. Amen.

