“LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF”
MATTHEW 22:39

How do you make loving others a priority in a fast-paced world? It’s easy to rush past people on our way to something, somewhere, or someone else. Maybe we feel like we don’t have the time, energy, or resources to love our neighbors. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus both tells us who our neighbor is and shows us what it means to love them. God loves our neighbors and has invited us to do the same. Learn how loving your neighbors is a blessing to you and them.

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Who’s My Neighbor?
Loving Our Neighbors as God Loves Us

Who is my neighbor? The answer to this may vary widely depending on the culture (and location) in which you live. For some, a neighbor is relegated to those with whom a property border is shared. For others, it may be anyone you come into contact with throughout any given day. Maybe you have 100 neighbors in your apartment complex, or
maybe your closest one is 25 miles away. Whatever the case, the question remains relevant: Who is my neighbor?

In response to this question, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that we are given not only a picture of who qualifies as a neighbor, but also how to connect with them. The needs of our neighbors may not always be as clear as those of the man in the story, but make no mistake, our neighbors have needs. In the following pages, Marlena Graves helps us think about our neighbors and how we can love them as we love ourselves.

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Blingsided! That’s how I felt when the Lord gently but firmly pointed out to me that I was blind to something profoundly important. I had loved and served those far away, yet I hadn’t even said hello to my actual neighbors—the ones who lived on either side of us and on the first floor of our apartment complex. In fact, I didn’t even know my next-door neighbors.

The essentials
During the five years my husband, Shawn, and I were in graduate school in Rochester, New York, we had co-directed our church’s junior and senior high youth
groups. Every year, at my insistence, we stuck with the same youth group theme: “Know Jesus; Follow Him.” After all, I reasoned, If knowing and following Jesus is most important, why change the theme from year to year? Shawn and I had lifted the theme straight from John 17:3, “Now this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth,” and from John 3:16, “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

In addition to these verses, we sought to teach the kids the essentials of discipleship through our words and through our lives. What are those discipleship essentials? Jesus tells us, “The entire law and all the demands of the prophets” (Matthew 22:40) are summed up in two commandments—to love God with everything we have, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (see Matthew 22:36–39). And from the parable of the good Samaritan we learn that a “neighbor” is anyone with whom we come into contact whose needs we can meet—which certainly includes our literal neighbors. Loving God and our neighbors is Christianity at its core. It’s the essentials, the basics.
The most meaningful experiences from our youth group’s attempts to live out this love of God and neighbors were our disaster relief efforts. Twice we embarked on trips with larger groups from our church to help repair and rebuild the homes of the rural poor who had lost everything to floods. We spent time in solitude and silence, prayer and work, and in fellowship as we served our neighbors side by side. We grew in love for God and for one another. Eleven- to eighteen-year-olds, those in their twenties, thirties, and above, and even those approaching their eighties, all put in long sweaty days of back-breaking work to love and serve neighbors who lived three hours away.

We enjoyed every minute of our youth group days. (Well, except for the time our bus broke down on the way home from the annual youth retreat.) Our days were full of studying, spending time with the kids, or planning for youth group meetings and trips. Shawn and I were away from home most of the day and often into the evening. After particularly long days and nights, we’d cross the threshold of our apartment and tumble into bed. Moments later, I was fast asleep. Washing my face, brushing my teeth, and changing my clothes could wait until the morning. Exhaustion had me reversing the order of personal hygiene.

Those long days and nights, as meaningful as they were, prevented me from encountering—much less getting to know—our neighbors around us. I passed
them like ships in the night, or the day, depending on our schedules.

During that time I felt the gentle nudge of the Lord about missing something—more properly, someone. Even as I encouraged the kids to love their neighbors, I didn’t know the first thing about my neighbors—the ones right next to me. I wouldn’t have recognized them as my neighbors if we happened upon each other at the grocery store or even at church. While I was busy loving our church neighbors, the poor in our larger community, those far away who were flood victims, and the hungry throughout the world, I unwittingly neglected our literal neighbors.

**Eyes to see**

You see, I was nearly completely blind to them. And in the kingdom of God, *seeing* is of utmost importance. Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:22–23, “Your eye is like a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is filled with light. But when your eye is unhealthy, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is!”
When Jesus explained to his disciples why he spoke in parables, he quoted Isaiah, who said, “The hearts of these people are hardened . . . and they have closed their eyes—so their eyes cannot see” (MATTHEW 13:15). Then Jesus encouraged them, “But blessed are your eyes, because they see” (V. 16).

Seeing our neighbors is the first step in loving them. I hadn’t intentionally avoided them or averted my eyes. But my blindness had led to a woeful failure of love. I simply didn’t notice my neighbors or stop to consider how God might already be at work in their lives. I didn’t look to be an ambassador of God’s grace. I was knee-deep in ministry to other people. And so these beautiful human beings made in the image of God faded into the thin walls of my apartment complex. They receded into the background of my life like unnoticed scenery. In failing to see them, I unknowingly and unintentionally dehumanized my neighbors. Lord, have mercy!

Thankfully God saw them and loved them. And he invited me to do the same.

That night when the Lord nudged me and alerted me to my failure of love, he opened my eyes to see and commit to loving my closest neighbors wherever I live.

It would be nice if I was alone in my blindness, if I was the only Christian who struggles to be a neighbor to those closest to me. But I’ve found my struggle to be one many followers of Christ wrestle with.
Let’s explore some ways in which we can love our literal neighbors. In doing so, I am assuming that most of us are gladly giving our time, energy, and resources to our regional and global neighbors as well as our local churches. However, I am also assuming that some are like me: loving all sorts of people, including people online, yet failing to show love to our closest neighbors (maybe even our family members), which naturally will demand much of us. And maybe some of us are somewhere in between.
Jesus knew his culture and the norms and peculiarities of living under Roman occupation. Whenever he taught his own people, he used parables and object lessons they were familiar with. Likewise, in order to love our closest neighbors and local community well, we have to be familiar with them. We have to participate in the experiences and details of local community life. We can’t live holed up in our homes or hidden behind picket fences. After all, our neighbors’ welfare and our own are intimately connected.
Even when Judah went into captivity in a land hostile to faith in the one true God, Jeremiah told the people, “Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare” (JEREMIAH 29:7).

Just Who Is Our Neighbor?

Currently I teach courses at a local seminary. One of the classes is called “Discipleship Ministries.” An early assignment I give my students is to “walk their local neighborhood.” If they live in a rural area, they drive around their local community. Their assignment is to figure out what they can learn about their neighborhood and its culture so that they and their churches can love their local neighbors. I ask questions like: “What kinds of people live there?” “What is the ethnic makeup?” “What kinds of businesses dot the landscape?” and “Who are the invisible people?”

People who often are “invisible” in a community are the homebound elderly, those who live in trailer parks, refugees, and immigrants. I find that some students have never walked or driven their neighborhood with such intentionality and admit that they don’t really know their neighbors or what their neighborhood is like because they usually drive past it. Others have relationships with their neighbors but are trying to figure out how to better love and serve them.
Closest Neighbors

We moved into our apartment complex on New Year’s Eve, in the dead of winter. Immediately I began praying for my neighbors, asking God to bless them and to draw them to himself. I knew it would take a while to build relationships. My desire was to be a blessing to them while knowing they would be a blessing to me, too—most of the time.

I decided to do what I ask my students to do: find out who are my neighbors. I limited my exploration to a half-mile radius. From our apartment manager Stacey I learned there are 215 units in this complex. I had yet to meet our upstairs neighbor, but I hear her climb the stairs at midnight when we are in bed. It jolts me awake. In the morning, we’re off to the races before she is. So far, on the weekends, it appears she is seldom around. I’m waiting for a chance to meet her and to apologize for whatever ruckus our three girls are causing.

The other day, I did meet one of our next-door neighbors. Her name is Debbie, and she introduced us to her white Chihuahua, Lucy. My guess is that Debbie is in her fifties. She told me and my five-year-old daughter that her two-year-old granddaughter would love our three girls. Now I hope to meet the neighbors on the other side of us—if indeed that apartment is occupied. I plan to have a cookout when warmer weather comes. I need to learn the lay of this new land and the culture here if I am to love my closest neighbors.
Part of familiarizing ourselves with our neighborhood is coming to terms with the reality that loving our neighbors is not always easy. For example, I have neighbors who allow their dogs to soil the little postage-stamp size of grass otherwise known as our front lawn. They don’t clean up after their dogs. I must confess that it is a major pet peeve of mine (no pun intended). In fact, as I was driving through town the other day, I saw a sign that read: “Your dog poops, you scoop.” Although the message is a little crass, it gets to the point. I’ve been wondering if I should put a similar sign in our front lawn. It would certainly communicate my sentiments. On the other hand, maybe I should just get out there and scoop it up myself—hoping that the offenders catch me in the act of cleaning up after their dog’s mess. Maybe they’d feel bad about it and change their ways.

But what if they don’t? It’ll take some work for me to figure out the most loving response—especially when my neighbors and their dogs have transgressed my sensibilities and standards for cleanliness. Part of loving our neighbors means loving them in the good, the bad, and the ugly. Love takes creativity, work, and wisdom. Often we can’t do it alone. At times we’ll
have to think through what it means to love, and seek out advice.

My Community
If I turn left out of our complex there is a neighborhood with houses in the $300,000-plus range. If I turn right, I approach State Route 795. Across 795 are homes and Woodland Elementary along with Woodland Park. The park has a fun playground and a jogging path. Sometimes I see people playing disk golf. If I turn right there’s the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Discovery Children’s Center, Jerl machine shop, and Lucky Farmers Garden Center. Continuing in that direction, I head toward the downtown section of Perrysburg, Ohio. If I turn left on 795, I pass big box stores like Target and Walmart along with a string of chain restaurants.

Right now, my heart is drawn to Woodland Elementary. Next fall, my middle daughter will start the first-grade there. In a few years, my youngest daughter will start kindergarten at Woodland. And although my oldest daughter will go to school a few miles away, Woodland is right across the street from our complex. It will be easy for me to get involved.

Our Communities
If we are going to love our local neighborhood well, we need to become familiar with the people and places in it. What are the community’s strengths? What are its weaknesses? What are its needs? Are there single
mothers we can love and support, or people exiting prison that we can serve by helping them re-enter society? Could we play a role in providing fair and affordable housing? What can we do to beautify our local community? Might we love our neighbors by running for the school board or tutoring students? It takes intentionality from us and our churches to figure out how to seek the welfare of our communities. It takes intentionality to show our face to our neighbors and be the face of Christ to them.
The first time we stepped into Andy and Juli’s home I knew they were different—a refreshing kind of different. Their way of living was well-integrated. They lived among people the way I thought Jesus would live if he were here now.

Andy and Juli live in an urban neighborhood among a diverse group of people. Andy can walk or bike to work, and Juli teaches piano and voice in their home. When she is not teaching, she is performing with vocal ensembles, accompanying others on the piano, or singing as a soloist. Both are rooted and invested in their local community. What makes them exceptional, at least in this day and age
in the United States, is that they love and serve their surrounding neighbors in meaningful ways.

While not all neighborhoods lend themselves to open-door access, my first clue about their neighborly love occurred when their next-door neighbor knocked on the door, let herself in, and asked to borrow a large metal stockpot. When she saw me in the kitchen, she greeted me with a warm, “Hello!” Juli then introduced the two of us. She told us she was having friends over and wanted to make soup for lots of people. “Go ahead and grab it,” Juli said. “You know where it’s at.” And indeed, the neighbor knew. She grabbed the stockpot from a cupboard in the kitchen island and headed out the door. After she left, Juli told me that it was a communal stockpot. The neighbors all chipped in to buy it. Juli and Andy agreed to keep it at their house. When one of the households finished with the stockpot, they simply washed it and returned it.

Andy and Juli’s neighbors know where they keep their spare car and house keys. Neighbors are free to enter the house if they need something when no one is home. And if they need to borrow the car and it’s available, they can do that too. These neighbors share the stockpot, lawn mower, snow blower, cars, and other items. The thought is that there is no reason for each of the households to buy large-ticket items that are infrequently used. Such a course of action is unwise and a waste of money. Moreover, they desire to be good stewards of the environment. They can all
chip in for the upkeep of these items, and then decide among themselves where to store them.

Not only do they share household items, these neighbors share life together. They eat in each other’s homes, on porches, or in backyards. Their children grow up together, are always at others’ houses, and are transported by whoever is available to help. Those with no children are like aunts and uncles to the neighbor kids. Shawn and I were eyewitnesses to these neighborly goings-on when we cared for the teenage kids for two weeks while Andy and Juli were away on a work trip. Over the years, these neighbors who live on either side of the family, and even several houses down, have become family. The thing is, very few of them are Christians. But they have observed the love Andy and Juli have shown them and have returned it. Whether or not they choose to follow Christ, they now have a better opinion of him because they have observed the light of his glory in their friends.

**Jesus, Our Example**

I once heard a speaker say, “It is one thing to go out for coffee, another thing to go out to eat, and something entirely different to invite someone into our homes. When we invite someone into our homes, we are inviting them into our lives.” I couldn’t agree more. I also understand that in some cultures it’s much easier to do that than in our own.

Jesus frequently spent time eating in people’s homes and hanging out with them. And all sorts of people
invited Jesus over to hang out, including societal outcasts. But sometimes people invited themselves over to Jesus’s place (wherever that happened to be at the time). For example, when two of John the Baptist’s disciples heard John say that Jesus was “The Lamb of God,” they started following Jesus because they wanted to know more about him. When Jesus noticed they were trailing close behind him, he turned around and asked, “What do you want?” (John 1:38). Their response is telling: “Rabbi,” they asked, “where are you staying?” (v. 38). Notice Jesus’s response. He didn’t invite them to grab a bite to eat at the local inn. No. When they asked where he was staying, he responded, “Come and see” (v. 39). The book of John then tells us, “It was about four o’clock in the afternoon when they went with him to the place where he was staying, and they remained with him the rest of the day” (v. 39). They wanted to hang out where Jesus was in order to learn more about him. They lingered with him.

Not only did people invite themselves over to Jesus’s place, sometimes Jesus invited himself over to their homes. Think of Zacchaeus. When Jesus saw him, the first thing he did was invite himself over. “‘Zacchaeus!’ he said. ‘Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today’” (Luke 19:5). If we are to take after Jesus, we learn that one of the primary ways to love our neighbors is by inviting them into our lives. We can do that by eating together in our homes and spending time with each other.

Eating and spending time together breaks down
barriers and helps usher in Christ’s kingdom. Why? Because getting to know each other allows us to humanize each other. We are reminded that each person has a rich emotional life, that we all struggle and share things in common. Loving our neighbors keeps us from negative knee-jerk reactions, or automatically attributing ill motives to them. It keeps us from demonizing them. For example, maybe we find out that the woman in the apartment next door is always yelling at her aging father because he is hard of hearing and not because she is rude and insensitive.

> When the religious leaders asked Jesus “When will the Kingdom of God come?” he told them, “The Kingdom of God can’t be detected by visible signs. You won’t be able to say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘It’s over there!’ For the Kingdom of God is already among you” (LUKE 17:20–21). Such a kingdom is spiritual and motivates us to live our lives as Jesus did.

Inviting people into our homes to share a meal is a gesture of intimacy. And yet in our society this simple welcome is often put off. There are several reasons. One is that we don’t know our neighbors well enough and feel awkward. Perhaps we’re shy and introverted. We may think we’re too busy, we consider our houses too messy, or we’re too tired to clean up. Still others of us balk at the idea of having others over because we don’t cook well, or at all. Finally, some of us feel inferior because we regard our homes as small compared to others. I have heard each of these objections many times, and I am sympathetic
to them. But we might consider taking steps to overcoming these fears.

**To Begin**

For starters, we can begin slowly and with intention. We can try to overcome our reservations and feelings of awkwardness. True, we might not be able to get over these feelings ourselves. Well then, we call for reinforcements—friends who are more highly skilled in this area, friends who can give us pep talks. After all, this is not about us.

We do what we can to catch a glimpse of our neighbor to say hello. If we live in a rural area where neighbors are few and far between, with acres of land separating us, getting to know our neighbors might require a little more gumption and creativity. For example, perhaps we could drop off some cookies or a gift certificate, or some little gift and then introduce ourselves. If that is too much, we can write them a little note letting them know who we are and where we live, and attach it to their front door. Eventually, we could go all out and invite them and others to a rural “neighborhood” cookout or picnic in pleasant weather. It’s all about loving our neighbors by living out the spirit of hospitality. If none of the suggestions above sound appealing, remember: soliciting the advice and help of local friends will help in developing a local flavor of neighborly love and hospitality.

Of course, we should be discerning about when to offer an invitation and to whom we offer it. I’m not
advocating putting ourselves in danger by inviting neighbors with whom we feel unsafe. Neither am I talking about overbearing dispositions and pushy efforts to force our neighbors into hanging out and sharing a meal. This all calls for wisdom.

When we moved into our most recent house, I intentionally looked for opportunities to interact with my neighbors. Our family started by eating dinner on our front porch. We lived on the main street of our small town, with constant foot traffic in front of our home. People waved as they walked by. Back then, I was pregnant with our third daughter and could barely walk. This became an opportunity to meet people when I was able to get out. Late one afternoon, I luged my fluid-filled self up our next-door neighbors’ front porch stairs in order to meet them. My baby bump quickly became a topic of conversation. I told them we had just moved in, that my husband taught at the local university down the street, and that I worked at a church downtown. I became intentional about developing a relationship with them and other neighbors.

Over the next three years, our relationship blossomed. They invited us to go boating at their cottage on the lake. Our families exchanged little Christmas presents and plowed or shoveled each other’s driveways. We made little meals for each other and hung out on our porches and our driveway and homes—sometimes eating and sometimes not. We welcomed them into our house, and they invited us in to their home. They cared for our daughters. Later
on, I found out that eating in each other’s homes was uncommon in that little town; neighbors were happy to eat out with each other, but they seldom ate in each other’s homes. That was reserved for family members.

**Making Room**

How many times do we say, even to our closest friends, “We really need to get together soon!” but it never happens because we never set a date and time? It has happened to me more than a few times! If we find ourselves too busy and overwhelmed to have others over, we might need to begin by making room in our schedules. Think of it as scheduling an opportunity to love others. A Saturday morning brunch or dinner, or maybe even a weekday lunch could work.

Isn’t it curious how it is possible for you and me to become too busy to love our neighbors, especially our closest ones? The norms of our society and our frenetic lives militate against Jesus’s command to love our neighbors (Mark 12:31). Love requires time, sacrifice, and energy. And chances to love seldom come at opportune times. If we don’t intentionally schedule time to love our neighbors, especially those in closest proximity to us, busyness will ensure that time gets away from us. We have to be very intentional about sharing life with our neighbors. Otherwise our days are sure to fill up, even if our schedules are much ado about nothing.

**The State of Our Homes**

Before our third daughter was born, I became close friends with several mothers. We were in and out of
each other’s homes constantly. We babysat for each other and ate meals together. Our homes were the very definition of messiness and clutter. After all, we had kids! If an unexpected guest were to enter any one of our homes during the day, and they did sometimes, the guest would see piles of clothes, zigzag through a maze of toys, and probably notice food left out on the table. Had we chosen to have our homes in pristine condition before others came over, we could not have forged such close bonds. We prioritized our friendships. Then we either helped each other clean up before we departed or cleaned up later by ourselves.

Maybe we have children who leave a trail of clothes, toys, or food in their wake. Or maybe we work so much that we’re too tired to clean up at the end of the day. We figure we’ll get to it when we have more energy. And of course we never do have more energy. It might be that we are older and getting around is more difficult. As a result, it is hard to keep our home in the condition we prefer to have it. It might be that we simply aren’t good housekeepers and would hire a cleaning service in an instant if we could afford it.

We forget that people are usually honored just to receive an invitation to visit. Most care far more about spending time with us than about the state of our home. That’s not to say we don’t make an effort to tidy up or that we invite people into a pigsty. Cleaning the bathrooms, keeping our homes in sanitary condition, cleaning up pet hair and dander,
and making sure our guests don’t trip over whatever is cluttering common walkways will go a long way toward making them feel welcome. But we shouldn’t have unrealistic expectations. We can’t wait until our homes are museum-like before we invite others over. Otherwise, it may not ever happen.

**Sharing a Meal Together**

“But I don’t cook anymore! It’s just me,” an elderly friend said to me as we sat beside each other at a church meeting. The meeting was about hospitality and welcoming people into our homes. After the meeting was over, I caught up with her and learned she believed she needed to have a three-course meal prepared if she was to have guests over. “Oh no, no,” I said. “You can have chips and hot dogs or even soup from a can with crackers. Or if your guest is a vegetarian, he or she might be willing to bring something over to share. It does not have to be fancy.”

Meals don’t have to be fancy. Simple can be best. A meal might be deli sandwiches with fruits and vegetables for sides and a drink. And the meals don’t even have to be made from scratch! What’s most important is that we are sharing a meal—and our lives. We offer what we have—like the little boy who offered his sack lunch of five barley loaves and two fish (John 6:1–14). The boy gave what he had and Jesus multiplied it to feed many. God will use the meager resources we have in terms of cooking skills, food, and anything else, to bless many if we will simply offer it all to him.
The Size of Our Abode

I have had people confide that they do not invite people over because they are embarrassed over the size of their homes. I also knew a Christian couple with five kids and extremely modest means who lived in a relatively small home. They regularly had their neighbors over for dinner. Somehow, they were able to squeeze one more person around the table or find another place for guests to enjoy a meal. On more than one occasion I wondered how they could feed so many people. I didn’t think there was enough food to go around. Yet somehow, they made it work. Or maybe, Jesus multiplied their offering like he did the little boy’s barley loaves and fish.

My friend Michael was homeless for some time while living in Orlando, Florida. He lived in a tent in a patch of woods at the intersection of Colonial and Forsythe. He and his homeless neighbors shared whatever food and supplies they had with one another. Every Saturday, the homeless community in his neck of the woods shared a meal when a Hispanic/Latino church brought them food. Those without a home gathered together over a shared meal.

Friends who have traversed the poorest parts of the world have shared how deeply moved they were by the hospitality of those who had next to nothing—who offered whatever meal they could scrape together in order to honor their guests. Sometimes it was simply a piece of prized fruit. What we call “home” comes in all shapes and sizes.
God doesn’t judge the way we do. First Samuel 16:7 tells us, “People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” Loving our neighbors has nothing to do with how much money we have or with how big our homes are. We don’t even need a home. A generous and hospitable spirit is what matters. What matters is our presence. Invite our neighbors into our space and eat a meal with them (as long as it is safe to do so). Include the poor, the disabled, the lame, the blind, and others who are different from us—the “tax collectors and sinners” who for some reason might not be able to return the invitation. That’s obeying Jesus by loving our neighbors (see Luke 14:13–14). When we do that, not only are we tearing down the walls that divide us, Jesus tells us that we will be richly rewarded at the resurrection of the righteous (v. 14).

Of course, not all of our neighbors will respond to our invitation, just like not everyone will respond to God’s invitation to the most lavish of feasts that will occur at the end of the age—as highlighted in the parable of the great banquet. In that parable, a man threw a huge party. He sent out tons of invitations but those initially invited made all sorts of excuses about why they couldn’t attend. He ended up inviting whoever would come—even people he didn’t know (Luke 14:15–24). We shouldn’t be discouraged if our invitations are declined. Some won’t be interested and others will be busy. That’s okay. By extending the invitation, we’re opening the door for others to share in what God has given us.
When I was pregnant with each of my daughters, I was on bed rest for much of the pregnancies, terribly ill, and barely able to walk. It was so bad with my third pregnancy that after we moved into our new home, some of our neighbors thought my husband was a single father because they never saw me with him and the girls. I could hardly take care of our girls or myself. The first six or seven months of my pregnancies took a huge toll on me, my husband,
and my family. Sickness and immobility kept me from moving, reading, thinking clearly, or doing much of anything. The most I could do was offer up quick and brief prayers throughout the day and gratefully receive the love and help of others. I didn’t “do” much in that season. I couldn’t.

Jesus teaches us to love our neighbors the best we can no matter what season we find ourselves in. And yet, love looks different throughout the changing seasons of our lives. As I reflect on other periods of my life, it’s quite obvious that I no longer have the same level of flexibility in my schedule that I did in my twenties, nor the same stamina.

For most of our twenties, my husband and I were childless, in graduate school, and had fewer constraints. Now I have to consider my family and work responsibilities as I seek to love my closest neighbors. That doesn’t mean I can’t show love to them. But, the way in which I love them will look different now than it did back then. For instance, I can no longer stay up late talking into the night.

I have friends who have chronic illnesses and battle the effects of aging. They wish they could do more to love their neighbors. But that’s hard when they have more bad days than good. Just recently, I have talked to several seniors who believe their lives are meaningless because they can no longer contribute in the same ways they used to when they were younger and healthier. As we age, our bodies and minds can betray us. Our spirits are
willing, but our bodies are weak (see Matthew 26:41). Saying a little prayer on someone else’s behalf, encouraging others through a letter or phone call, or even baking cookies, are ways in which we can love our neighbors.

We have neighbors, but it’s important to remember that we are neighbors too. Sometimes we may be the one in need of care and we should be open to it as much as we hope our neighbors are open to our care.

Two of my mentors were fond of repeating the phrase, “Do what you can, not what you can’t.” In this context, that means what while we never have the option of retiring from loving our neighbors, we are to love them according to the ability we have in the seasons we find ourselves. God is gracious; he knows what we can and cannot do.

Remember: It’s a Mutual Blessing

When it comes to showing hospitality and making room for our neighbors, author and professor Christine Pohl tells us that in Scripture “often hospitality is connected in some way to blessing and to God. . . . In the stories involving hospitality in the Old Testament, blessing is very frequently present. Strangers turn out to be angels, or guests bring good news, or they offer the promise of a longed-for child.” In addition, she notes that we “so often go into these interactions thinking that we’re the one who is providing the benefit, the help, the care
our guest needs. In fact, it is the guest who brings the blessing. My life has been changed through these kinds of interactions. You do really have a sense that you’re standing on holy ground when you’re interacting with strangers. It can be quite a remarkable thing.”

Fellowshipping with our closest neighbors most often turns out to be a mutual blessing. We can expect God to show up in the faces of our neighbors.
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