

As we gather out here, on this beautiful morning, I want us to take this opportunity to appreciate this different perspective. Usually when we gather, we are inside the sanctuary. Today, we are allowed to let our eyes wander and take in part of the neighborhood in which our ministry is based. Here we can take in a few of our neighbors. If we look around, we see that some of our neighbors reside here. Some of our neighbors do their banking here, or buy beverages here, or eat Thai food or Barbeque or tavern fare here. Our local law enforcement, fire department, and city officials are located across the street. Just beyond city hall, is a park where people can picnic, play tennis, swim, play on the playground, or meet in the community center. And lots and lots of people travel here and there on Mayfield Road. There's a lot that goes on in our neighborhood.

Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." When we take the time to consider our neighborhood, what does it mean to follow Jesus' command, and to love our neighbors? Ultimately, when you boil down everything, that's the base value of being a Christian, I think, discovering the most impactful ways we can discern to love our neighbors. And based on what we hear in scripture, Jesus really meant that.

A couple of weeks ago, Jeff Herberth shared a video with me of a Christian pastor who was calling upon his congregation to buy him a jet (his fourth) so he can "carry the gospel around the world without having to stop to refuel." "If Jesus were alive today," he surmised, "he wouldn't be riding on a donkey.

He'd be flying in a jet!" I had prepared to tell this story as I shared my confusion over what a "Christian" is in our culture today...but I'll save that for another time. Instead, I want to make the point that...well in a whole number of ways this pastor is misguided...but in particular he completely misunderstands Jesus. Jesus' donkey-riding is actually part of his wisdom. Jesus knew humility. Jesus knew humility helped build relationships. He also knew that the pace of donkey-riding, or even, walking was the way to get to know people and about their lives.

So much of Jesus' ministry is on the roads and in the streets - moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, community to community. It is with this pace, and with that openness, and with that vulnerability, that Jesus was able to touch people's lives. This is what it means to be God incarnate. God as human. God with humanity. God showing that God understands the depths of our lives. When Jesus said, the "kin-dom of God is at hand," this is what he meant. God right here.

People couldn't comprehend it - nor wrap their minds around the idea. Well, and that's the point. The people who were using their minds to comprehend Jesus were struggling. All they saw was a Galilean man who claimed to be God's Son - and, well, they knew that was preposterous. For those whose **hearts** Jesus met - they knew. Ask the blind beggar, the woman who couldn't stop her menstrual flow. Ask the woman at the well, or the one who was going to be stoned because she was charged with adultery. Ask the fishermen who

left their livelihoods behind to follow him; ask the thief on the cross. These all realized with their hearts that in Jesus, God was with them.

This is first and foremost what Jesus wanted those who followed him to understand. Anyone can stand in the wilderness (or on a street corner) and preach the fire of the prophets. Some will listen and be drawn in. But the most valuable thing that anyone can do to exhibit the kin-dom of God is to be with the people - to listen, to hear, to attend, to cry, to touch, to laugh, to advocate, to heal. Jesus' disciples had a heck of a time understanding this lesson. There are so many times when they tried to protect Jesus from people, and he had to remind them to allow people to draw near. "If we protect ourselves from the hungers of the world," he seemed to be telling them, "then God has no chance of feeding their souls."

Once he felt they were gaining a grip on what it truly means for the kin-dom of God to be at hand, then Jesus initiated Phase 2:

Jesus called the Twelve together and he gave them power and authority over all demons and to heal sicknesses. 2 He sent them out to proclaim God's kingdom and to heal the sick. ...They departed and went through the villages proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

Here Jesus taught them a major lesson: you have the power to impact people lives, and to let them know that God is in fact with them...even today. Take a moment to think about this - now I don't have autobiographical information on each of the Twelve disciples. But, I do know that they were no

cookie-cutter mini-Jesuses. These were, sticking to just the named Twelve, men of a variety of gifts and abilities...each of them as human as you and I. Please let that sink in. Jesus entrusted the message of the kin-dom - scratch that - Jesus entrusted the **presence of the kin-dom** with people as human as you and I. And they were able to do it. **God's incarnation was not just contained in Jesus the Christ, it was made present in those willing to share God's love with others.** And guess what? It is still the case today! **Jesus sent because it was the only way to make sure that God's message of hope and love was embodied within the community.**

Here's what our Book of Order says about the God's mission to the world:

F-1.01 GOD'S MISSION

The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God's kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation.

The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ.

Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission.

To “participate in God’s mission” requires us to **actively** be engaged with our community. Look at how Jesus handled those who were attracted to his mission: he taught them, he showed them that the kin-dom of God was present with them, and he sent them out to do the same.

We, too, are Jesus-sent. Unfortunately, we Presbyterians are very comfortable within the confines of what happens in this place and with our people. We are not so comfortable thinking about how to glorify God “*out here*.” And yet if we are going to live truly into Jesus’ mission for us (and as a by-product have longevity as a congregation) we must be engaged out here. How else will any one know *our flavor of Christianity* if we aren't letting others know, if we aren't participating in the life of the community as Lyndhurst Community Presbyterian Church? Allowing people to know we are Christian by our love - actively?

To that quest, we are borrowing an exercise shared with us by our lead presbyter, the Rev. Sharon Core...{consult the community exegesis sheet}

We are Jesus-sent, and it is time for us to get just as comfortable sharing why that matters to us with our community as we are sharing it with one another.

Listening to the Neighborhood
A Community Exegesis
(in pairs)

QUESTIONS TO ASK OF THE SPACES

1. As you stand at your starting place, what do you see as you look in each direction?
2. What do you hear or sense? What activity do you notice?
3. As you walk about the area, what do you notice about the front yards or entries to houses or businesses?
4. What do you notice about the people? What age, race, gender are they?
5. How many properties are for sale? What indicators of transience do you observe?
6. Describe the public spaces in the area. What do you notice? Are they inviting? Who is there?
7. Where are the places of life, hope, beauty or community in this neighborhood?
8. What evidence of struggle, despair, neglect and alienation do you see?

Along the way (1) talk to someone about the neighborhood, (2) drink something at a local hangout, (3) bring back a relic, a symbol that captures your experience of the community
Introduce yourself and hand each person a church business card.

QUESTIONS TO ASK OF THE PEOPLE

1. How long have you been in this neighborhood? How has it changed over time?
2. What is missing from this neighborhood?
3. What has been added that has improved life in this neighborhood?
4. What would make life in this community easier? More fulfilling? More sustainable?
5. What makes you despair?
6. What gives you hope?
7. What breaks the heart of this community?
8. What fills it with joy?

Be sure to thank the people you talk with for their time.