

Listening to the Needs of the Stranger

John 1:14; I Kings 8:28, 41-43

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Many years ago, I learned a way to vote where people can vote on a scale of 0 to 5. It's called fist to five and here is how it works.

Suppose we were voting on whether you believed global warming is a hoax or a scientific reality. If you were sure it's a hoax you would give it a fist. If you were sure it is a scientific reality, you would give it a five. If you were in the middle, you might give it a two or a three.

Get the idea?

This morning as we continue in our second sermon about imagining our future together as a church, I want you to give some thought to the neighborhood where you live. Give some thought to the address of this church, 246 Washington Street, Jefferson, Georgia. Now, I want to ask you a few simple, non-threatening, non-political questions, and I want you to vote using our fist-to-five method.

Remember, a fist means you strongly disagree. A five means you strongly agree.

First question, "I mostly hang out and do things with old friends or people I already know."

A fist is means you strongly disagree. Five fingers means you strongly agree. You can vote anywhere in between.

Second question, "I like to invite new friends over to our house or do something to expand my friend base."

Third question, "I mostly think about how things are going to affect me."

Fourth question, "I try to place myself in other people's shoes and see things from their perspective."

Thank you for your honesty.

Now let me tell you a parable.

I remember the day that Tina, my wife, moved to Louisville, my hometown. She was in the 9th grade, about 15 years old. You couldn't move into our town of less than 600 people and it not be news.

Tina's father retired from the Air Force and he purchased a house in our town, two houses up the street from where Tina's mother and my mother graduated from high school, which is now owned by the city and used for class reunions. They were in the same graduating class.

As Tina and I started dating, I heard all about their lives in the Air Force. I was treated to slide shows of all the places they traveled.

Through the years I learned that the move back to their home county and her mother's hometown was bittersweet. While they looked forward to retirement and being close to family, what they missed was the community of friends they left behind in the military.

As a rule, military families are good at creating community. They understand what it is like to have furniture in storage, to have to enroll children in school again and again, to find a new place to buy groceries, to locate a new mechanic, a veterinarian, the post office, and the hospital.

They know what it is like to have to look for a house and a church. They know what it is like to arrive in a town or a city and have no friends.

So these families learn to reach out to each other. With the military comes a common bond.

Military families speak a common language that serves as a springboard to friendship.

While that's not enough to make all military families bond, it does help initiate conversation, and keep people from feeling lonely and isolated, as a rule.

Every move that Tina's family had made until they moved to Louisville, there had been military families who understood the difficulties of adjusting to a new place.

They reached out and welcomed them into the community with open arms. They helped the transition by inviting them to ball games and church and Girl Scouts.

Tina's parents did the same to other families that moved in once they had been in a place just a short while.

When they arrived in Louisville, they did not have those military families to receive them. Tina's mother had family there. People in Louisville are very friendly. But they soon discovered that people had friendships that had been built over decades. They were comfortable, established, happy, and content.

Most of the residents in town had been there so long they had forgotten what it was like to be new, to need friends, to need community, to be invited and included in other people's lives. If they had ever moved, they couldn't remember what it felt to be new. They didn't allow themselves to remember walking in those shoes.

The Air Force community was different. Everybody walked in those shoes. Because of that, establishing community with newcomers was as natural a part of their culture as it was for all the stores in Louisville to close on Thursday afternoons.

Now hold on that story while I shift to a Bible reference.

If we were to do a fist to five and I were to ask you if you believed in the Great Commission, I'd be shocked if I saw any fists.

The Great Commission is the commandment by Jesus given to the disciples before he ascended into heaven.

18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20 NRSV)

However, it's impossible for us to make disciples, if we first do not make any friends. We cannot make friends if we do not communicate to people that we care about them and their needs. If we are waiting for them to invite us to come to their neighborhood before we communicate that we care about them, that's not likely to happen.

Justin told me a story a while back about people at an airport that were protesting about the deportation of refugees back to their home country. As they were protesting, they were approached by a person that asked them about their solidarity with the refugees.

The person said, "You know that if these people remain in the United States they must have a sponsor. That means someone must assist them with housing. Someone must be willing to take them in. Are you prepared to take them into your community? If these refugees were to be able to stay, which ones of you would give them a place to stay in your homes?"

Their response was, "No, we are not wanting to get that involved. We just don't want to see them deported."

A lot of us are like that when it comes to the Great Commission. We believe in making disciples, we just don't want to make friends with any strangers, with people we don't know.

Are we willing to open our lives to people we don't know? Are we willing to call a stranger and welcome the family to the neighborhood? Are we willing to put ourselves in the shoes of first-time parents, of a family that's just moved here from the city, of grandparents who have left decades in one place to be near their grandchildren, of children and teenagers who are looking for new friends?

When Solomon built the temple of God, he posed this question, "Can it be that God will actually move into our neighborhood?" (1 Kings 8:27 The Message)

As great and magnificent as the temple was, Solomon knew it could not contain God's glory. He said, "Why the cosmos itself isn't large enough to give you breathing room, let alone this Temple I've built." (I Kings 8:28 The Message).

Nonetheless, Solomon believed God heard his prayers. So Solomon prayed for his people, when they disobeyed, when they were abused, when the enemy had the upper hand, when they needed forgiveness, and when disasters came.

Then interestingly, Solomon also prayed for the foreigner.

"Don't forget the foreigner who is not a member of your people Israel but has come from a far country because of your reputation. People are going to be attracted here by your great reputation, your wonder-working power, who come to pray at this Temple. Listen from your home in heaven. Honor the prayers of the foreigner so that people all over the world will know who you are and what you're like and will live in reverent obedience before you, just as your own people Israel do; so they'll know that you personally make this Temple that I've built what it is." (41-43)

This is a much different picture of the temple than you often get. This is a place where both Jews and Gentiles were worshipping God.

This is a welcoming community of faith. Isn't that a message we need in today's polarized world?

However, over a period of hundreds and hundreds of years, this welcoming spirit to the stranger changed.

In 587 B.C., the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. Many of these Jews were carried off to Babylon and lived an exiled life where they were forced to take jobs of servitude to survive. It was during this time that the Jews discovered that God was with them in the Exile. That meant that God didn't live in the temple. God was not restricted to that space. Jews learned to worship in a smaller space called the synagogue.

When the Exile ended, worshipping God in a synagogue remained the norm. However, outreach to the stranger during this time dissipated. Now the stranger was looked upon with a greater suspicion and even contempt.

When the new temple was built by King Herod in Jerusalem, Gentiles were forbidden to even come into the temple courts.

In fact, the Apostle Paul was arrested and accused of bringing a Gentile inside the temple grounds. A process of trials began and he eventually made an appeal to Caesar, a right he had as a Roman citizen. He ended up a prisoner in Rome, where scholars believe he died.

Paul gave his life to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. He believed that the Gospel was meant for everyone. He wanted everyone to experience the love and grace of Jesus.

Paul understood the challenges of people living in Christian community. We have letters he wrote to the churches he established and some of them experienced conflict and struggles with theology and giving in to temptation.

However, because grace had been extended to him, Paul was always encouraging his churches to continue to extend grace to each other.

As we write the future story of our church, what kind of church do you want us to be? As more and more people move into our neighborhood, do you think we can live out the Great Commission and not just say we believe it?

Can we open our lives to new people? Can we make space for new friends? Can we allow ourselves to experience some new ministry for the sake of discipling and baptizing people into the faith?

Is it possible to change the culture so the buzz about our church is that we go out of our way to minister to strangers, helping create community and providing for their needs, so that they discover community among us?

Remember, the goal isn't to meet and try to conform people to be like us. Our goal is to constantly be on a journey to be more like Jesus. As we meet people, we want to invite them to join us on that journey.

There are too many churches that are possessive about their space, like the Jews were possessive about their temple. Too many Sunday schools are closed groups. It's too difficult for people to break in, so they move on.

After being a member of a denominational church in a small town for a while, one man commented that he'd discovered what people in his town thought of his church.

The other person asked, "What do they think?"

The man replied, "They don't think about it at all."

How many of the 10,000 Jeffersonians would that apply to about us? They don't think about this church at all. How many people in Jefferson have no idea where we are located or that we even exist?

However, it's not about us. It's really about Jesus. How many people have no idea or never think about Jesus?

How might we write our future story and see that change?

As you pray about our church, I want you to pray about the needs of those who need community and need the grace and compassion of Jesus.

Ask God to show us what it will take to make us an Air Force church. Don't you want to take off to new heights? Don't you want to be a church where every new person that comes here feels loved, accepted, and cared for as soon as they set foot on campus? How about people we meet? Before a person ever attends a worship service, they should know they are going to be welcomed and loved here.

Isaiah said that those who "hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." Isaiah 40:31.

Let this verse inspire us as we renew ourselves to reach our neighbors for Jesus.

As you pray, let's ask God to help us to let go of selfish agendas and listen to Him.

God wants to send us to others. He also wants us to receive those he sends to us with open arms so we can fulfill his instructions to us to "go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. So we can be a small town church or an Air Force church. In your heart, I am asking you, fist to five- which do you want to be?

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