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# 1

## BE A NEIGHBOR

*"Love your neighbor as yourself."  
(Mark 12:31)*

I awakened from a dead sleep. My wife and I had just returned from a quick trip to northern India. We had not traveled there for tourism but for the dedication of a new school library, which our church had funded. It was a brutal trip. After spending twenty-one hours in the air and struggling to adjust to the twelve-and-a-half-hour time difference, my wife, Bev, and I were worn out. Our bodies were out of sync. Our normal rhythms of sleeping and eating were greatly off-kilter.

But thoughts of the trip, surprisingly, were not what roused me from my slumber. It was a dream!

One might reasonably expect that I had been dreaming about cows. After all, they are everywhere in India because cows are considered sacred in that predominantly Hindu country. You find them standing on busy roads, blocking traffic, or wandering in and out of shops. And it is quite a strange experience for a Westerner!

Or one might expect my dream to be filled with monkeys, for they are ubiquitous; there are even temples dedicated to them.

However, none of these exotic scenes were on my mind. Nor had they been in my dreams. I awakened with one inescapable thought: be a neighbor.

I took it as a word from God. Or perhaps better stated, an *admonishment* from the Lord, for like so many other busy Americans, Bev and I are lousy neighbors. It's shameful, really. For almost twenty years we've lived in the same house, on the same street, in the same eight-home cul-de-sac. Yet, we know hardly any of our neighbors by name.

It's a common problem, I suppose. We say hello occasionally when we run into each other at the cluster of mailboxes. And we always wave while passing in our cars. But seldom do we speak or engage in actual conversation. It's not that we are unfriendly; we are just busy, caught up in our own schedules, our own responsibilities, our own lives.

Sadly, this is the story of too many of us. So, when I woke up that morning with the words "be a neighbor" burning in my mind, I wondered if that message might apply not just to me but to others as well. Perhaps my own experience is a reflection of the wider American culture, which has forgotten the joy of living in community.

Once upon a time neighbors actually knew each other. They were connected. Where I grew up in West Texas, neighbors would form a bond as they sat outside on their wide front porches, constructed to provide relief from the heat of summer. Nowadays, air conditioning makes our living rooms comfortable and our front porches merely decorative.

The advance of technology also has contributed to our isolation. Even developments like garage-door openers and televisions cause us to become more withdrawn into our own homes. Instead of walking up the pathway to our front doors and stopping for a brief chat with neighbors, we pull into our driveways, punch our remote-control devices, drive straight into our garages, and walk directly into our homes without even a chance of saying hello to someone.

Advances in technology affect the ways we entertain ourselves as well. Instead of gathering to play cards or dominoes with neighbors and friends, as once was common, we remain behind closed doors, glued to our television screens. Movie theaters have felt this trend toward isolation, too, as more people choose to stay home and stream their favorite films. Not that “going to the movies” ever equated to real community. Nonetheless, it was a shared experience.

Then came the internet, further disrupting our reliance on one another. In the old days one neighbor might borrow from another neighbor with hardly a thought. With a rap on the door Sue might say, “Hi, Sally. I wonder if you might lend me a cup of sugar?” Sally would gladly agree. And this small exchange would sometimes lead to deeper conversations.

Nowadays, we don’t need to go next door to ask for sugar. At the touch of a button on our computer keyboard, we can order it and have it delivered to our front door.

Television, the internet, smartphones: all these technological advances provide substitute relationship opportunities, decreasing our need to connect in person. These modern miracles of communication

have drawn even our nuclear families apart. Kids find entertainment in their own rooms, apart from others in the family. And parents often sit in the same room lost in their separate internet worlds. These devices that we say connect us seem to be doing the opposite.

“Americans are richer, more informed and [more] ‘connected’ than ever—and unhappier, more isolated and less fulfilled.”<sup>1</sup> So observes Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska. “‘There is a growing consensus’ that loneliness—not obesity, cancer or heart disease—is the nation’s ‘number one health crisis.’” He further says that “‘persistent loneliness’ reduces average longevity more than twice as much as does heavy drinking and more than three times as much as obesity, which often is a consequence of loneliness.” He points to research that suggests that loneliness is as dangerous to physical health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day<sup>2</sup> and can exacerbate cognitive decline, such as that caused by Alzheimer’s disease. “We’re literally dying of despair,” Sasse says, of the failure “to fill the hole millions of Americans feel in their lives.”<sup>3</sup>

So where does the church fit into this decline in community? After all, we are called to extend Christian hospitality by what Jesus called the second greatest commandment: “Love your neighbor.” But are we doing that well? Or have we forgotten, along with so much of Western society, how to love our neighbors?

Acclaimed Christian author C. S. Lewis writes: “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses”<sup>4</sup> and “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of

the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”<sup>5</sup>

Lewis presents an important point for us to consider. First, we must act. Just as God reached out to us in love and grace through Jesus Christ while we were yet sinners, we are to reach out to our neighbors while they are strangers and not yet friends. As the prophet Isaiah says, “Do not hold back” (54:2). Wise words for those of us who might hesitate to invite a stranger—even the stranger next door—into our lives. However, we are called to act. We are called to open the front door.

More than two thousand years ago, a weary young couple desperately knocked on doors of a tiny, bustling community named Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph had arrived there at what turned out to be a terribly inconvenient time. They had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a hundred-mile trip, perhaps on the back of a donkey, and Mary was expecting her first child. Under these circumstances, most of us would not want to make the journey. But Caesar Augustus had decreed that “a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. . . . And everyone went to their own town to register” (Mark 2:1, 3).

Surely by the time Joseph and Mary reached Bethlehem, they must have felt worn out. After all, the journey would not have been simple under any circumstances. No automobiles or trains or modern-day roads, of course. No fast-food restaurants along the way; and certainly, no Holiday Inn or Motel 6 with a reservation waiting. Each night was full of adventure and worry. A camp to be made, a fire to be built and lighted without the aid of matches, and the threat of

robbers and thieves lurking in the distance, just waiting for a chance to move in and steal their meager belongings.

What time of day or night Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, we don't know. But we can be sure they were exhausted. Surrounded by other pilgrims in town for the census, the city over capacity, and no reservation in hand, Joseph and Mary must have felt hopeless. Thank goodness someone took them in. We don't know who that was; most often we label that person as a "him" and as an "innkeeper."

Interestingly, no innkeeper is mentioned in Scripture. We infer that one exists because many times when we've heard the Christmas story, we are told that "there was no room in the inn" for Mary and Joseph. Naturally, if there is an inn, we presume there must be an innkeeper. So an innkeeper has become a prominent part of how we tell the Christmas story. And from this telling of the story, we have defined the various characters clearly in our minds. We picture King Herod as the villain—and of course he was, for he was attempting to murder baby Jesus. We see the magi as heroes, traveling a far distance to worship this newborn king. We certainly view the shepherds favorably. After all, the angels beckoned them to the manger. But the imagined innkeeper is typically cast in a negative light, as though he were a grumpy, stonyhearted capitalist who turned his back on the Holy Family in their moment of crisis. In Christmas pageants at churches around the country, a person playing the innkeeper angrily mutters, "There is no room in the inn!"

During this season of the year, carols will fill our sanctuaries. Even some retail stores still play traditional Christmas music. Mary, Joseph,

and baby Jesus are the focus of most of the songs, of course. But the shepherds and angels are not far behind. Numerous carols speak of them: “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks,” “It Came upon the Midnight Clear,” “Angels We Have Heard on High”—the list is long. The magi are not forgotten; they are recalled in “We Three Kings” and other carols. Even the star and animals are celebrated in some Christmas songs. But who sings about the innkeeper?

Brett Blair observed, “We envision him as a crotchety old man with a nightcap on his head, sticking his head out a second-story window and tersely shouting, ‘Take the stable and leave me alone.’”<sup>6</sup>

I wonder if this is a fair depiction. Was the innkeeper truly insensitive, not willing to be bothered by the problems of others? Or was he—assuming it was a he—doing the best he could to provide accommodations in a nearly impossible situation? Interestingly, not all translations of the Bible speak of an inn. In the *Complete Jewish Bible* translation of Luke 2:7 we read, “And she gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him in cloth and laid him down in a feeding trough, because there was no space for them in the living-quarters.” *No space for them in the living-quarters*. This provides us an intriguing insight into what may have transpired when Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem.

According to the *Jewish New Testament Commentary*,

A small, poor village like Bethlehem would not have had an inn. Rather, in most homes, the animals were kept downstairs, while the upper part of the house consisted of a work-room where the

children slept, a separate bedroom for the parents, and a guest room (the last two only if the owner was rich enough to afford them). In a pinch, the space for animals underneath the living quarters would have afforded guests some privacy.<sup>7</sup>

We can speculate that this animal space under the living quarters may have been a basement-like cave, carved out of the rock foundation of the house. It would have provided the livestock protection from the elements. Perhaps a kindhearted homeowner whose home was already full to the brim with guests took pity on this poor, exhausted couple and offered the only place left: the stable under the house. Perhaps it was the homeowner's wife who saw Mary and understood that she was near her time.

What actually transpired is not clear. Luke does not provide details. It's left to our imagination. And for whatever reason, many of us have come to believe that there was an innkeeper and that he was not a good guy. Don't we human beings love to find someone to scorn? We enjoy booing the villain and cheering the hero. Certainly, we carry on that tradition today in our sporting events. So in the popular imagination this supposed innkeeper of Bethlehem became a scoundrel, worthy of our boos and judgment.

Perhaps it is time to consider the innkeeper in a different light. Rather than depicting this person as one who turned away a poor, desperate couple, perhaps we should see him or her as someone who took them in, who made room for them. Such an innkeeper would be an example to us of how to be a good neighbor. We can follow the lead

of this Bethlehem homeowner by extending love and warmth to the strangers in our communities, beginning in our own neighborhoods, perhaps with the people next door.

In fact, one of the first things we can learn from the story of Jesus's birth is the importance of welcoming people into our homes and lives, even when it is inconvenient or difficult. If our living rooms are messy and the kids are acting up and the dog won't stop barking...all the better. Perfection should never be an impediment to relationship, and frankly it is comforting to realize that no one really has it all together (though our social-media accounts might make it look that way). The simple truth is that we should never underestimate the power of a welcoming smile or an outstretched hand—even if all we have to offer is a warm, quiet place for someone in need or a sense of community to someone feeling alone.

And these days, more and more people are in need of community. According to the US Census Bureau, about 32 million Americans moved in 2018. That equates to about 10 percent of the population.<sup>8</sup> Families move for a variety of reasons: some because of corporate relocations, others to seek better opportunities, still others in search of cheaper housing, or because of family issues or divorce. Tens of thousands move across state lines. Often these families find themselves far from home. In strange places. Unfamiliar surroundings. Away from the comfort of family and friends. Facing Christmas on their own.

Admittedly, from time to time, many of us want to be alone—for some self time, centering, and recharging our batteries. But almost no

one chooses to live a lifetime of loneliness. No one wants to feel left out. No one wants to be forgotten—especially not at Christmas. That is when almost everyone wants to feel part of a community.

Bev and I experienced this need in our first years of marriage. We moved from Wilmore, Kentucky, where we both attended Asbury College, to a small town near Dallas, Texas. Bev taught eighth grade. I was a seminarian at Southern Methodist University. Each weekday I commuted into the city. When we moved into the small county-seat town of Waxahachie, we did not know a soul there.

Although I had grown up in West Texas, my hometown was far away from Dallas. For me, Waxahachie was a different world. And for my wife it was even farther from home and family and familiar surroundings. She was from the Buckeye State and, before college, had lived her entire life in Columbus, Ohio.

Waxahachie was a small, close-knit community of less than forty thousand people. Most folks had lived there all their lives. They knew not only one another but also one another's extended families. Frankly, it was the kind of place where it would be easy to feel alone and left out. After all, the friendship groups were already set, and people were not seeking to add more people to their circles.

Thankfully for us, that was not the case. And that's because of The United Methodist Church. We joined and became active members, and the people welcomed us with open arms. Often after the 11 a.m. worship service, a family would invite us to their home for Sunday dinner, usually with extended family. Instead of feeling like strangers, we felt love and warmth. We felt welcomed.

# MAKE ROOM IN YOUR HEART FOR GOD AND NEIGHBOR THIS CHRISTMAS.

Ed Robb's *Making Room* is a call to deeper, neighborly communities. And so very well timed! The recent coronavirus pandemic forced us into isolation. It left many of us longing for community connections. Dr. Robb has discerned a rich gift awaiting those willing to give themselves to being better neighbors.

— **Ted A. Campbell**, Professor of Church History, Perkins School of Theology

At a time of great social unrest and increasing polarization of society over issues of race and injustice, and at a time of “social distancing” due to the pandemic we are enduring, comes a much-needed Christian appeal by Ed Robb to rethink community, fellowship, indeed the very meaning of church. . . . Highly recommended.

— **Ben Witherington, III**, Amos Professor of NT for Doctoral Studies,  
Asbury Theological Seminary

Ed Robb establishes a fresh expectation for recovering incarnational hospitality in this study. Advent is the right season to remind us that to make room is evidence of the Holy Spirit's piercing the darkness with the light of Jesus.

— **The Rev. Dr. Joy J. Moore**, Associate Professor of Biblical Preaching,  
Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota

This book is the Advent book you want for 2020. Ed Robb is a pastor, a lover of Jesus, and man who understands the current culture in North America.

— **Tom Albin**, Director of Spiritual Formation and Congregational Life,  
The Upper Room Ministries

*Making Room* is a helpful guide for those who want to take the next step of turning good intentions into concrete actions.

— **Dr. Esther Chung-Kim**, Associate Professor of Religious Studies,  
Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, California

## ALSO AVAILABLE: LEADER GUIDE

**Dr. Ed Robb** is Senior Pastor at The Woodlands UMC in Houston, Texas. Serving the church for more than forty years, his vision and leadership have led the church to become one of the fastest growing churches in Methodism, with over 14,000 members. He is the author of *The Wonder of Christmas*, *Under Wraps*, and *Mountaintop Moments*. He and his wife, Beverley, have three adult children.

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