



Into the Neighborhood Spending Time Like Jesus

Pastor Ted Cunningham

We're starting a series called *Into the Neighborhood*. I'm just going to tell you... You've had these moments where you didn't want to be bothered with people. Would you just raise your hand? "I need a moment to myself." Just raise your hands right now. Especially when you come home from work.

I love the drive home after work, right? Whatever you're in the mood to listen to. Sometimes it's *The Dance* by Garth Brooks. I'm just unwinding. You hear me talk about this a lot with marriage that I want my home to be an En Gedi. An En Gedi is a lush desert oasis. A great word picture from the Old Testament in the Song of Solomon. The world throws plenty at us and we're dealing with people all day. When we come home, it's that place to find rest and rejuvenation, to relax and be replenished.

A couple of weeks ago, I pulled into the driveway and at the end of the driveway, I stop all the time and get the mail. For how many of you getting the mail is still one of those last little joys in life. I get the mail and it's surrounded by all of Amy's Amazon boxes. I get the mail and I know we've had all sorts of new people move into our neighborhood, all from California, Portland, and Seattle.

I hear the truck coming behind me slowing down. I'm just going to tell you what my inner voice was saying. This was my inner voice. You've been there too. I'm like *Please don't stop, please don't stop, please don't stop*. And he stops. I'm like, "Ugh... I should probably say hi to my new neighbor. "Hey!" And I love great conversation, but I was tired and kind of done. I had just worked all day on a message on how to treat your neighbors. And it was exhausting. I don't know if you appreciate how to care for neighborhoods. I'm sitting there going, I just wrote about this, but I don't want practice it. I invited him and if he's here today, I hope you feel welcome as part of this service.

But isn't it something? I don't know what makes you feel uncomfortable, but I want you to think about that for just a moment. Amy and I were talking about it this week, that uncomfortable feeling we had. I don't think there is anything wrong with using that term uncomfortable. That uncomfortable feeling you have if you've ever landed in a foreign country. We've landed in Tanzania, we've landed in Haiti, we've landed in France. Why is it uncomfortable immediately? Well, it's uncomfortable at first because you don't know the language. I'm uncomfortable when I land in Tanzania because I don't know the language, but then Bob Dobson picks me up and drives. He knows the language, he knows the culture, he knows the customs, so I'm going to be able to get along. And when we get stopped by the police six times on the way back to his house, he's going to know what to do.

Because we get uncomfortable with people that don't talk like us, people that don't look like us, people that don't fit our culture or our customs. We can be uncomfortable with people who don't vote like us. Can I get an amen on that one? We can get uncomfortable with people who don't share our values or our worldview.

You've been uncomfortable around people who have a mental health crisis. I have a friend who leads the American Association of Christian Counselors. He says, "We don't have a mental health crisis right now, we have a mental health disaster in our country." The reason we get uncomfortable when we get around someone with a mental illness or mental health issues is because we don't know what to do. We don't feel equipped. If you have a family member or a friend who is going through a divorce, we tend to get uncomfortable because we don't know what to say.

That's why this series... It comes to us from John 1: 14. The message paraphrase says it this way: ***The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.*** We're going to study the life of Jesus for the next couple of months and watch how he dwelt among men because this maybe what your translation says, ***...became flesh and made his dwelling among us.*** That means God became man and came into humanity. Jesus uniquely and thoroughly identified with us. That's what we want to learn. We want to, as one of our elders said today and I love it, make sure we know our orthodoxy, but this is really a series about orthopraxy. That we would move into the neighborhood and not just say we believe the good news but live the good news and share the good news with those who we may not be comfortable around.

We tend to avoid people who make us comfortable. When we see them coming, we go the other way. You see this in the life of Jesus, and we are going to see it for the next several weeks. The pharisees would often remind Jesus, "Hey, you shouldn't be comfortable around those people right there." Even the disciples did the same thing with the children, "You shouldn't... Nope, they're second-class citizens. You shouldn't be comfortable around these people."

In John 4, we read the story of the woman at the well and we're going to cover a whole Sunday on this. But I kept coming back to it as I was studying for this series. There's one line that struck me. Not only did the pharisees and the disciples constantly want to remind Jesus who he should and should not be with and who he should or should not be amongst, the people he tried to minister to told him the same thing. You get this from the woman at the well. The Samaritan said this to him after Jesus asked for a drink of water. ***9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. You shouldn't be doing this." How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans).***

Jesus was constantly being told the people he shouldn't be with, the people he shouldn't be identifying with and investing in and ministering to. Here is the bottom line. This is going to go throughout the entire series and it's going to be the main point of the entire series. **Jesus went out of his way to spend time with the people we go out of our way to avoid.** I heard a pastor, years ago, say, "Jesus crosses the street to meet with people that you and I cross the street to get away from." That we would get good at going into the neighborhood. And today, we're going to look at four people that we've become

uncomfortable with. We're going to ease back into this first one because really this first point is for a lot of folks that are watching. This is our church at home main point.

Jesus spent a lot of time with crowds. Jesus gathered enormous crowds. Why? Because he was the good news. People brought their friends to see Jesus because they wanted Jesus to heal them. So, he gathered enormous crowds, but this has become an evil word over the last 12 months. I heard it yesterday. Three things. It was a public service announcement out of Springfield. Wear a mask, wash your hands, and avoid crowds.

It's been bugging me the way the crowds have been treated because we've been meeting since May and I want to say, Woodland Hills Family Church, you've done a great job at keeping people safe through this pandemic. But now things are changing. As we talk about crowds, we want to help our friends who are getting vaccinated find their way back in because it's been a year away from crowds. We all have a role to play in this.

Let's look at Mathew 9. **35 Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom...** It's always been part of our strategy here at this church. We gather crowds on Sunday. Last Easter was brutal, I'm going to be really honest with you. We didn't meet last Easter. There were ten of us in here. Ten of us spread out in 750 seats like a Joe Biden Campaign Rally. But then last week, we had 2,500 people. We went from ten to 2,500. I don't know if we're one of the fastest growing churches in America... No, we're not. We're not one of the fastest growing churches. I'm assuming every church is the fastest grown church in America right now. But there was excitement on campus. People were coming to hear the good news, the resurrection of Jesus and the power of the resurrection available to all of us.

Not only did Jesus spend time in large crowds and attract large crowds, but I'm here to tell you... Isn't it something that 2,000 years later Jesus is still gathering enormous crowds, people who want to come and celebrate and hear the good news? **...and healing every disease and sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds...** This is what I want for all of us, and we have to spend some time with it today. **...he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."**

Now, it looks like, in Branson, on Tuesday, more than likely, unless something changes, all of the restrictions will be lifted. Here's what I like about restrictions being lifted. It allows everybody to make decisions. You're still going to go into stores that have signs that say, "Please wear a mask." But the restrictions being lifted changes a lot for our church. We want to let everybody at home know what that's going to look like so you can ease back into the crowd.

We've been doing this for a year. We have honored all decisions – to vaccinate, to not vaccinate, you wear a mask, you don't wear a mask. We've been honoring all decisions. And the restrictions being lifted just allows everybody to make their own decision. So, you're going to make your own decision. If it lifts Tuesday or it doesn't and it goes to next month. But whenever it lifts, the Sunday after it lifts, we're going to put all the signs on campus in the COVID closet. Can you believe we have a COVID closet?

Can you believe we even have to have a closet with the word COVID on it? But we're going to save it. You're like, "We'll never need it again; live by faith." We're going to use wisdom as well. But we're putting everything in the COVID closet.

Here's what it's going to look like. The 8:30 am service at Woodland Hills is still going to be socially distant. We're going to have all these straps here in the Castle and everything is going to be distanced for the people who still want some space and they don't feel their vaccine has kicked in yet.

At the 10:00 service, all these straps are coming up at 10:00 and 11:30; there will be no social distancing. Again, you get to make decisions. This is what I love. I told Amy the other day, "If one more adult tells me to wash my hands, I'm going to stab them in the neck with a fork." I'm so tired... I'm 47 years old. I don't need one more person telling me to wash my hands. I've been washing my hands since I was a small child. And I know some of you haven't and I hope you've learned this new hygiene tip. There's nothing to knock on, but I haven't had the flu in my life, and I think it's because I wash my hands. Wash your darn hands. We're done saying that. I'm not going to have a sign in the bathroom that's like "Okay, I'll step up on my stool and wash my hands." NO! Just be an adult. I'm sorry, you're making me get worked up. It's Treasure Lake. I blame all of you. A bunch of RVers.

All that to say **we honor all decisions, but not all attitudes**. Some of you have to work on your attitude a little bit. You're like, "Us!?" "You!?"

Here's the bottom line. Because we're going to do this at 8:30 and then 10:00 and 11:30 will not be, you still get to make decisions. You can come to the 8:30. We're going to try our best to accommodate all decisions for a while, but we don't know how long we can do that. So, if you're really nervous about crowds, get the vaccine. You're like, "I don't want the vaccine and I want a socially distanced service." I don't know how long we're going to be able to accommodate all, but you can come. I love what y'all have done with this campus and this staff and volunteers. You have places everywhere for people to spread out. We want you to get back to the crowd and we want you to get back to inviting your friends and family to the crowd.

Amy was like, "What are you going to do with the attitudes?" I said, "We need to empower the moms." You just need a good couple of moms in every service to deal with the attitudes. What did your mom say when you had an attitude growing up? "Knock it off! Or I'll knock you into the middle of next week." I don't know what Wednesday was always about, but mom was always knocking me to Wednesday. My mom would say, "You knock it off. Knock the attitude off or I'm knocking you to kingdom come." That was my favorite. "I'm knocking you to when Jesus returns and establishes his earthly kingdom." So, I want to encourage every mom in here next week to bring this [picture with mom holding a spatula in church]. Let me tell you something. That right there is a good mom. She brought a spatula to church. Raise your hand if you've ever been spanked by a kitchen utensil. Look around. That's a good mom.

How many of you remember Rene Schepler from last summer? He's one of my favorite pastors and speakers. He's from California. He'll be joining us again in a couple of months. He heard me do comedy

last year and he came up to me and goes, “Man, I want you to come to California and do your comedy, but you can’t do any of those spanking jokes.”

I said, “Rene, if any state right now needs spanking jokes, it’s California. Maybe if you started whipping people again, they wouldn’t all be moving to Branson.” Can I get an amen on that one? Then we’ll work our way up the coast. We’ll Hit Oregon and Washington...” How many still flinch when you walk into a kitchen? I do. That mom’s ready. So, bring your spatulas next week. And if you get any attitude, just whap ‘em a good one.

Here’s why it’s important. It’s not just about you moving into the neighborhood and moving into the crowd, it’s about inviting friends and family. That’s always been part of our heart here at Woodland Hills. We want to see people come and gather and hear the good news, as the good news is proclaimed of the kingdom.

In Matthew 15, we read: **30 Great crowds came to him...** They didn’t come just for their own, they came **...bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. 31 The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.** We’ve got to get back to a place where we are comfortable in a crowd.

There’s a second person that we need to move into the neighborhood with. **Jesus spend time with the sick.** I shared this last weekend in the Easter message, but Sight and Sound does a phenomenal job with this word picture and this story, this narrative of Jesus moving in and just, again, how the disciples were like, “No, we don’t do that. We don’t go near those people.”

We read this in Matthew 8: **When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. 2 A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”**

3 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. 4 Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don’t tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”

Just so you know, all throughout this series... We are introducing it today with the crowd, with the sick, with the sinner, with the child. We are going to spend time each week and watch how Jesus ministered to and how he moved into the neighborhood and identified with and spent time with each one of these.

The bottom line is this. I know we’ve been caring for the sick a lot of different ways. You’ve heard us say this. There are a lot of ways to love your neighbor. A lot of people last year... I was frustrated when I would hear pastors say, even on national news, “We don’t need to meet.” No, we need to meet. I wish they would have said we need to meet, we just can’t meet right now. So, there were a lot of things you did... and I’m just going to say this. There are a lot of things you did to care for people that no one had to tell you to do.

We shut down. No government official told us to shut down that Sunday. Many of you shut down businesses and your theaters before being told to because you were told this was the safe thing. You were caring for people at that point. Remember, we are called to care for the sick, not fear them. If I can encourage you. What does that look like? There are a couple of ways. I'm trying to make sure this is super practical. For some... If the mandate is lifted on Tuesday, I'm still going to carry a mask. I still believe I'll be wearing it a lot.

There are going to be people... I do this when I meet with a couple. I walk in with it and I ask them if they would like me to wear a mask. Just be kind. I don't even think with a lot of people you need to ask. As you approach them, you can tell they would prefer you have one on. And you know what? I'm okay with that because following Jesus means way more to me than my rights for freedom. Following Jesus matters a lot more to me than protecting my personal freedoms and rights. And there will be stores I want to go in that still have a sign that says you still have to wear a mask. And I want food. I'll wear it in. This is where it gets a little ridiculous. I was at Indian Clay Oven, four feet from the door. We finished eating... I wish I would have videoed it. I put the mask up to my face walked four feet and took it off. There you go. I just protected the City of Branson.

I want to encourage you. Ministering to the sick and caring for people... I know some of you are like, "We're doing a mask burning party," but some of you are going to need it around town still and when you travel. I'm still traveling so I have to keep it because I still go on airplanes and I'm probably going to have to wear the mask on an airplane until 2027.

There's another way that I've been intrigued by. I think we need to get back to learning how to say this right here after someone sneezes – "God bless you." Make your first reaction when you hear a sneeze in public be "God bless you!" Wherever you hear it. Have you ever done that? Somebody sneezes and you just say, "God bless you!" But now someone sneezes and we all look as to say, "Is your face mask covering your nose and mouth?" Let's get back to common kindness and courtesy as we care for people. We're not called to fear people. As followers of Jesus, we're moving into the neighborhood to minister to people. And to care for people.

Jesus spent time in crowds, he spent time with the sick, and **Jesus spent time with sinners**. Do you have someone in your life that regularly uses the "F" word? If you don't, I'm going to argue you probably aren't spending much time with sinners. I'm just saying. Do you have someone that uses foul language. "Yeah, and I can't stand to be around them." Then this ones for you that you would learn what it means... But it's very important because sometimes we twist the scripture.

We know that Jesus is a friend of sinners and he ate with sinners, but this is what we read in Matthew 9: **10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house...** We're going to have a whole week on this as well. **...many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this...** So, here we go again. This is another example of "shouldn't be doing this. This goes against our cultural norms and the way we do things." **...they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"**

12 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Be really careful here because a lot of people have twisted this. I want to show you the drift that we get into away from this. But 100% whole truth from this text is this: Jesus ate with sinners. That is true 100%. But we tend to twist it and here's the drift and here's where we end up. I watch people do this online often. We say things like, **"Jesus loved a good party."** Is that what you get from that text? Jesus loved to party? It doesn't stop there; it moves into **"Jesus was more interested in showing love than taking sides."** You hear pastors say that. They'll say it often. "Let's make sure the community knows what we're for, not what we're against." No, we're supposed to do both. We're supposed to be clear on this and not ambiguous in any sort of way. Because then it ends up going to this: **"Jesus always sided with religious outsiders."**

Pastor Kevin DeYoung talks about this whole progression like this. *"It's a whole truth being used for a half truth in the service of a lie."* And this is what we do. Jesus ate with sinners turns into Jesus partied with sinners. No. Pastor DeYoung goes on to say this. *"Jesus was a friend of sinners, not because he winked at sin, ignored sin, or enjoyed lighthearted revelry with those engaged in immorality. Jesus was a friend of sinners in that he came to save sinners and was very pleased to welcome sinners who were open to the gospel, sorry for their sin, and on their way to putting their faith in him."*

This is a passion of ours at this church that you would spend time with people far from God.

Daniel Forester puts it this way. *"Jesus hung out with outcasts because he was creating a model of how to build his church, one lost sheep at a time. Jesus did not operate within the parameters dictated by his culture."* Everybody was constantly pushing the cultural norms on Jesus and Jesus said, "No. Watch, this is how it works."

And that's why we're doing this whole series so we can see how it works, take very practical steps from Jesus, and go into the neighborhood with him as we work with those who are sick, as we work with those who are lost, as we work with the children, and every neighborhood has children,

"He sought the crippled and diseased-ridden, and any whom society had deemed unworthy, disreputable, and morally wrong in their lifestyle choices. They were the ones who were lost, lonely, and in pain, and willing to admit it. He even surrounded himself with ragtag group of sinners to be his inner circle. (the disciples and even within that Jim, Pete, and John)

I have three friends. They will never be named. We have a text thread that means much. It is an important group of friends in my life, it truly is. They are a rough group. Does anybody know what I'm talking about. The text thread is actually called Rough Fishermen Group. It was coined that way because there were some things going on in this text thread... Somebody said, "It's getting a little rough. Remember preacher is on here." One friend caught me recently that when I want to post something online, but I don't think it's something a pastor should post, I send it to him, hoping he'll do it. And he caught me. He said, "You're living vicariously through my post." I go, "I am. Is that wrong? That is

wrong. That's the flesh and I repent, so I'm not going to do that as often." They were always trying to clean it up. I said, "I just want to remind you guys of Jim, Pete, and John – James, Peter and John. You guys are Jim, Pete, and John. I love spending time with your because you're that rough fisherman that Jesus hung out with." Like ten seconds later, one of the guys in the group named the group Rough Fishermen Group.

I have to ask you. Do you have a rough fishermen group? I've met with people that go, "They use too much foul language." It's time for you to bring your nose down a little bit and move into the neighborhood. Why? **We have to stop expecting lost people to act like saved people.** This is key. For the lost among us today in this crowd, we welcome you, we're glad you're here. We hope that the gospel of Jesus has been proclaimed to you whenever you started coming here, you've heard that good news of Jesus, and how he died and rose again, and you are soon going to place faith in Him. We long for that and that's why I love what Joe White always said, "I smell marijuana when I come into this place; that's such a joy to my soul." It's not because he wants to get high, but because he knows that this is a church and you have a desire and passion to bring your lost friends to this place, to bring those who need Jesus.

So, we have to stop expecting lost people to act like saved people, but **we should always expect saved people to not act like lost people.** Be a friend of sinners, but don't wink at it. Don't join into it. Minister, move into the neighborhood.

The last person we are uncomfortable with... I hear this often. **Jesus spent time with children.** I don't know if you have a friend like this. I have two friends. I said in the first service that I had one friend and then somebody reminded me. They said, "Were you mean so and so?" I go, "No, but that is another person that when our families have been together, as we've been raising our kids, and this individual is approaching us, he never starts by addressing Amy and me. He never comes straight to us, and he often... I have one friend that we've had dinner with and I'm going to say we talked maybe two or three sentences, but the whole meal was this guy engaging my children. I love that picture because when children approach, he gets down on one knee, on their level, and he engages them. That's the picture we have of Jesus.

In Mark 10: 13-16, people were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. So, they didn't just bring the sick, they brought their kids, and in that day, second class citizens. The disciples... here we are again. The disciples had to remind Jesus, "No, you shouldn't be doing this."

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. Now this whole text has been put on beautiful painted artwork. You've seen it in Christians book stores. It is a terrible representation of this text right here because you always have Jesus sitting on a rock under a tree, holding a child with a smile on his face. Do you get that from this? I want the picture of Jesus with a child on his lap, blessing the child. I want Jim, Pete, and John back behind him, and I want Jesus looking at them with a scowl on his face. Jesus saw this and he was indignant. He was angry with them for holding the children back. **He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a**

little child will never enter it.” 16 And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Children have always been a big deal at this church and always will be. Last year, you gave well over \$100,000.00 to meet the physical needs of students just in our area. You gave almost that same amount to meet the physical needs of children in Haiti. You support Bob and Dee Dodson who have seen hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands, of kids come to know the Lord in the last year through their Highlands Camp there in Tanzania. We are a church that will always care for kids and prioritize kids.

I remember when Carson was like two or three, a couple in our church invited us to lunch at IHOP. This was probably 12 to 13 years ago. It just so happened in the booth that Carson ended up sitting by the guy. I could tell the guy did not want to sit by a two- or three-year-old. It was Carson, then the guy, and then his wife. I'll never forget that as soon as he sat down, he kind of angled himself away from Carson. Now that's welcoming right there. When the food came, he used his arm as a divider to keep Carson's mess and food away from him.

Now, I know children can sometimes make a mess. That has always stuck with me. Guess what? Children are messy. Serving children in our ministry at times... I hear the stories. We were talking about it last night. Especially last week at Easter, working with a lot of children can be chaotic. It can drive people crazy. But guess what? It's a worthy calling. Some of you are not comfortable with kid; it's not your thing. Well, maybe this is who Jesus is calling you to in this series to cross the street to bless. I know in a room this size and maybe even at 8:30 there's that person in here that's like, "The kids in the neighborhood just annoy me." Well, as you move into the neighborhood, that annoyance is going to turn into a ministry. And instead of complaining about the way they run around the neighborhood, you see it as a good thing.

So, that's the question as we end. Who will you go out of your way to spend time with this week? Do you know someone who is still... Maybe they've been sick, and I know we have family members that months and months after having COVID are still dealing with it. Who do you need to do a custom Door Dash for that you just need to go drop some food and ring the doorbell? For those watching, I do, I just posted it to say high to all of you, but I hope to see you one day soon in the crowd. Who will you go out of your way for to ease back into it? For those of you who live in a little bit of a bubble and you don't have lost friends that you spend time with that you would not expect them to act like saved people but engage and spend time with them and care for them and minister to them.

Others who have been looking for a place of ministry in this church, I am here to tell you that our children at this church need you, and they need your influence, and they need your care. I can't say it often enough, but that you would consider going out of your way. You're like, "Well, we prefer the 11:30." Well maybe going out of your way is coming and serving at 10:00. You're like, "Well, we like to get to brunch." Well... I'm going to stop my comments there. We're talking about going out of your way as you move into the neighborhood.

Father, it is in the name of Jesus that we thank you for this time, and as Branson moves into a new phase, that we would honor one another, that we would esteem each other as highly valuable, that we would care for one another, forgiven one another, bear with one another, as we move into the summer months. We're just grateful for how the numbers all across the country are way down since winter. We ask that you continue to work in each individual and each family and each state and across our nation and across the world, and that this COVID-19 would go away.

We pray for each and every family as they think through their neighborhood. If they don't have neighbors nearby, that they would consider who it is that they can go and be the hands and feet of Jesus to. That they can serve, that they can love, that they can care for. Just teach us in this series. Open our hearts and minds to the way Jesus ministered to people. The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood and for that, we are grateful.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus that today would be the day of their salvation, that they would confess with their mouth and believe in their heart. That they would confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead that they would be saved.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, and everyone agreed and said... Amen