

Our Neighbors and Co-workers Week 3 The Assignment

By Jesse Sierks

Hello. Horizons. I know what you're thinking. Just about anyone up here. So imagine for a moment being asked to give the message. And after that initial excitement, maybe fear when you're up here, a little nervousness, I can't really see anybody. So you pray for guidance? Of course. But then who would you turn to? Who could you ask for help?

I am Jesse, and by myself I am not good enough to be up here talking to you. I'm not pious enough. I'm not nice enough. I'm awkward. But even though I'm not a preacher, I am comfortable here at horizons. So when asked, I said yes. That's also how I ended up on the vision team. Connecting with our neighbors to live God's love.

That's our vision statement. Jesus said to love your neighbor as yourself, and that inspired the vision team. Over the sermon series, we've learned about what it means to be a witness. It requires a loving relationship with God and to those in and outside the church. We were asked to invite friends and family. So if this is your first time here, I'd say welcome and please come again. Pastor Mandy will return.

Today we're going to continue the series by looking outside the church, specifically towards neighbors and coworkers. Our arm's length acquaintances. We begin in Luke chapter eight, verses 26 and 27. I believe it'll be shown on screen, but if you have a Bible or the Bible app, feel free to follow along. They sailed to the region of the scenes which is across the lake from Galilee.

When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon possessed man from the town. For a long time, this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs.

Biblical names are not easy for me. Jesus, I got the rest. I apologize for one of the great features of the Bible app. If you don't have it, is that it can also help you with pronunciation so you can listen to it or you can read it. Either way, you're getting into the word. So accounts. So the seeds, maybe a people and maybe a town or a region.

But it is Greek. It is not Jewish. For during this phase of his life, Jesus was intentionally avoiding major cities and Jewish areas because he was becoming famous. He had healed the leper. He allowed a paralyzed man to walk, found faith in a Roman soldier, and even raised the dead son of a widow. So a tomb in the middle of nowhere was the best place for his next miracle.

Spoilers for how this story ends. So, continuing in Luke with verse 28, when he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, what do you want with me? Jesus, son of the Most High God, I beg you, don't torture me. For Jesus had commanded the impure spirit to come out of the man.

Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot, and kept under guard, he had broken his chains, and had been driven by the demon into solitary places. Solitary places. Living in a tomb with dead people. This man was lonely. Loneliness can cause stress in our bodies. It releases cortisol. The stress hormone makes us anxious and makes us more prone to illness.

Loneliness attacks us physically and mentally. It does not make us easier to be around. Now, connections with other people combat loneliness. Connection. Connecting with people releases oxytocin. This lowers our stress, decreases pain, and even helps us grow new brain cells added up. People that are connected live longer, healthier lives and know what to do with my hands here.

Sorry, God knows this. That's why the Bible highlights connecting with people. There are many examples of this, but in my opinion, one of the best comes in Ecclesiastes chapter four, verses nine and ten. Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.

But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Two are better than one. We should connect so that we can help people and so that if we need help, we have someone to help us. First Corinthians, first Corinthians chapter 12 is another great example, starting at verse 12. Just as a body, though one has many parts, but all its many parts form one body.

So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one spirit so as to form one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free. We were, and we were all given the one spirit to drink. Even so, the body is not made up of one part, but of many. So help to bring together that first Corinthians verse home.

I'm going to paraphrase a story from the book my life group is reading right now. So when I play softball, I use my hand to catch my left hand. My eyes track the ball, my feet help me get under it. My arm will be positioned to my arm. So it's the whole body effort working together. So what happens if I remove my hand?

You can still play softball with one hand. I played with former coworker who only had one hand and he was way better than I was. But it'll be harder. I'm worse off without my hand. Meanwhile, my hand is worthless. If it's removed from my body, it's no longer handy. It can no longer do the things that make it useful.

Also can really do is rot. It's the same for our communities and the people removed from them. Like this lonely man and Luke. Both the man and the community suffer when they removed from each other. So here's some homework. Yes, even from the substitute. Reach out to someone. Be intentional. Show that you care, help their loneliness, and maybe even feel better yourself.

Scriptures like these led us to our new vision statement and to the Good Neighbor Experiment. You may remember we kicked off the Good Neighbor Experiment last summer with a sermon series, and then about a dozen of us from horizons took part in the fall. It's about building relationships with neighbors. It's about having conversations and learning gifts of the people around us.

But living longer and happier is good to now. I lived in my house for two years before I joined the experiment. I did not know my neighbors. I'm bad with names. Some of you know that about me already. I'm awkward. You may have noticed that as well. Is it awkward to mention it twice? I'm, I'm busy. I'm task oriented.

We all have excuses. And so did I. But being free to fail was one of the first things we covered in the Good Neighbor experiment. Because too often excuses like mine stop us before we start. It's okay to fail like I did for two years, not really connecting with my neighbors. It's okay to give yourself grace. So when we fail and we will, we don't quit.

We keep on going even when we're witnesses for Christ. Let's keep on going in Luke to see how Jesus connects in verse 30, Jesus asked him, what is your name? Legion? He replied, because many demons had gone into him, and they begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the abyss. A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside.

The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission. When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. Jesus connected with the man, of course, but he also connected with the demon, and he showed it mercy.

He allowed them to go the demon to go into the pigs instead of the abyss. Continuing verse with verse 34, when those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus feet, dressed and in his right mind, and they were afraid.

Those who had seen it told the people how the demon possessed man had been cured. Then all the people of the region of the scenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left. And who saw that last part coming? Jesus got into the boat and left. Yes, Jesus, save the man that tracks.

He has already cured paralysis. He healed a dead man. He has compassion. And Jesus shows love. Yes, witnesses were scared. Moses, Elijah, Peter, these pillars of faith. Or at one point or another, we're afraid in the Bible. So it's understandable for the Greeks to be afraid. And of course, it's understandable for us to be afraid. Fear is natural as long as we aren't consumed by it.

But they asked Jesus to leave and he did. This is different from other passages and that difference is meaningful. But more on that later. Back to the demon possessed man. He was not living his authentic self. His identity and his values were shadowed. Thankfully, most of us are. Hopefully all of us are not possessed. But we do have our sin shadowing our values.

This man was healed instantly. He was accepted back into his community. Ours may take longer, but even if that's true, we should still give our sins to Jesus to find out. Because every sinner that comes to Christ is an amazing transformation, an inside out change. By removing this man's demon, Jesus allowed him to be his authentic self, and that granted him greater joy.

Let's see how the man responds in Luke verse 38, the man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him. But Jesus sent him away, saying, return home and tell how much God has done for you. So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him. This man begged to go with Jesus, but that wasn't God's plan.

God listens to us, but his plan may be different from ours. God's plan for this man was to go all over town and tell how much Jesus had done for him. He was called to be a witness, just like we are. That's why Jesus could leave the scenes, because he left a witness behind to do his work. Few of us are in the boat, but we can all be witnesses.

So how can we be witnesses for that? Let's look at Matthew chapter five, verse 16. Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father in heaven. When God

changes us, it shows like a shining light, but it doesn't show the same for everyone. God knows we all have gifts and that our gifts are different.

This is explained by First Peter chapter four, verse ten. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received. Serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. So combine these two verses together. I know it's a little dangerous, but the Bible tells us to use our gifts so that we can shine for others. Also known as living authentically.

Now, a great example of living authentically comes from Kung Fu Panda. Seriously, if you haven't seen the movie, I've watched it many times. The main character is Po, a kung fu loving panda, but he is clumsy. He is careless, but God chooses him or fate as they call it in the movie. So he begins to train as the next kung fu leader.

But he's a noodle cook, not a warrior, so he doubts himself, his teachers doubt him, and even the other kung fu masters doubt him because Po is not living authentically. He's trying to be one of them, a kung fu master. But he's not. Instead, when Po learns to be himself and follow his gifts, his light shines through. The same will happen for us.

Pastor Mandy, call this knowing your story and her sermons, the good neighbor experiment. It called a joy and living authentically. That's why I'm using those terms. Now, joy is not happiness. Happiness is fleeting, quickly extinguished after a football game, for example. Whereas joy is a long term feeling and long term is better if you're a parent, you may know this.

Your kids may not always make you happy, but they bring you joy. You can ask my parents. When we have joy, it's easier for us to reach out to others. And these connections, even new ones, are opportunities to be a witness. To many of you, I was a stranger before today by sharing my name again, I'm Jesse Sparks.

We started a new connection. Sharing names can be difficult, but it's the first step in connecting with our neighbors. Living out the horizons vision statement. And if we want stronger relationships, if we want to be witnesses, we have to start somewhere. As you know, relationships can take years to form, so don't expect new ones overnight. So before I give some examples of neighboring, here's a good summary from looking for God in Messy Places by Jacob ones.

Be acts like you want everybody to be a part of your community. Jesus wants us to treat everyone as part of the we, even if we think they'll make a stinking mess of the place. Everyone I know I struggle with that one too, but it's important we're Christians, not gatekeepers. Jesus even connected with the demon. We can connect with our neighbors and our coworkers, even those on the outskirts of our communities.

Everybody. So here are some small, intentional acts of care we can incorporate in our lives. None of these will be earth shattering, but it just shows what we can do. You can share food with a neighbor. Giving cookies is a trope as old as time because it works by them. If you can't bake, maybe you got some last week at the bake sale.

The stomach is a good door to the soul. It works for Po, the Kung Fu Panda. Formula for meals are bigger, but they work too. Or if your garden over delivers like minded this summer, give away some

produce. Hebrews 13. To put it well, do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

I equate food with hospitality, but there are other ways you can also walk your neighborhood. If you have a dog, they'll love it. If you have kids, they work to. You can start at your comfort level both with walking and with neighbors. At first, just pay attention to them and then, you know, scout it out. But eventually you can start waving and maybe even work up to having some small talk as a bonus exercise.

And being outside both helps your attitude. Another example is always a holiday around the corner. You can send a card, you can be creative. You can do something festive. Pi day is the 14th of March, 3.14 pi and it doesn't like pi. It always comes back to food for me. So National Good Neighbor Day, September 28th. I bet horizons will celebrate that.

Do you know a teacher? You can support them on the first day of school, or you can celebrate with them on the last. The last day of school is also Summer palooza here at horizons. Perhaps the most effective method is asking someone for help and makes them feel good for helping you. It makes you feel vulnerable, shows your vulnerability, helps you connect.

Remember Ecclesiastes from before two are better than one. Next time you need something small, see if you can borrow it. Another suggestion spend some time in communal spaces or your front yard. See and be seen. Let your light shine through. You can eat, read, garden, hang out. Whatever your gifts are, share them with others. I know these things work because these are things that the horizons cohort did and their neighboring experiment, including Jen, who was on stage before.

Because making connections builds a better and more inclusive community for everyone. That's why it's our vision statement. Now, that community does include our coworkers. So these opportunities you can work, you can use excuse me with everybody can be used in everyday work relationships that.

I've gotten out there. You can share coffee or soda or water breaks. You can get your steps in by walking around the office and asking for help is still one of the best icebreakers. Just remember that if someone asks you for help around the office explained in Galatians chapter six verse two, carry each other's burdens, and in this way you, for you will fulfill the law of Christ.

So help and be helped and have conversations, conversations strengthen our relationships. We learn and share about skills and interests and gifts. They're not easy for everyone, but Paul tells us in the Bible that we don't need wisdom and we don't need eloquence. We don't have to be perfect. Our conversations don't have to begin with a massive repent, and we may never get there.

Most of us aren't meant to shout into the megaphone on the street corner. Jesus said, they will know us by our love. Our shining light can be how we live God's love, using our own gifts, Christ will find his way into our relationships, but we should still be mindful and intentional. If you don't feel good about a relationship, that could be the Holy Spirit working within you could be asking you to be more authentic or to be a witness, or could be asking you to pull back. That's okay to.

So I started my message today asking who you would go to if you were to prepare a message after Jesus. Of course, for me, that was a former coworker. His name is Randy. I started working with

Randy about 15 years ago. Randy is helpful. He is friendly. His light is shining. I quickly learned that Randy was a Christian.

He didn't hide it, but with deeper conversations I found out that Randy was a retired pastor with a theology degree from Harvard. So when I was asked to give this message, I knew who I was going to turn to because I made the connections and found the gifts before I needed to use them. Sharing the gospel often begins with its small, intentional acts of care and presence in everyday relationships, like this relationship where Randy and others shared the gospel with me and like the relationships we all have with our neighbors and coworkers, both sides benefit when we make connections.

Now, like you, I also have connections with coworkers that do not have a deep faith. That didn't stop me from inviting them to the horizon. Saturday morning workout group. It didn't stop my introverted and possibly uncomfortable wife from inviting her coworkers, or from other fitness teammates, from reminding their neighbors. And importantly, it didn't stop them from showing up because they can't say yes if we don't ask.

Sharing the gospel often begins with small, intentional acts of care and presence in everyday relationships. So by the way, you're all invited as well. Saturday at 8 a.m..

The church. By that I mean you and I and everyone here. We'll be continuing our work with relationships and neighborly and expanding our relationships. It could be a quick one on one conversation with someone you don't know. It could be a large hosted event at a church members house. It could be one of our outreach programs that are out in the hall.

The more involved we are, the more connected we become and the more opportunities we have to connect to those outside of church. Now, finally, I know I am up here speaking as an able bodied white man and not everyone is that. Adjust accordingly and be safe. Connecting with our neighbors to live God's love. Just like the man in Luke who was asked to be a witness for God.

So yes, Christ does let just about anyone up here, because everyone can be great, because anybody can serve and anybody can be a witness.

Let us pray. This prayer comes from the Good Neighbor Experiment, and I thought it would fit in here. God of gifts. Thank you for the skills you have given us, which make it possible to practice loving our neighbor as ourselves. Help us to keep these gifts in our mind, and to celebrate that you have given them to us as an expression of your love.

And in those areas of our lives where we feel we are lacking, turn us away from the shame so that we might receive your unconditional love. And where possible, may we foster these ingredients in our lives so we might truly love our neighbors. We ask this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen.