

The End & Back Again: to the beginning

Returning to the Journey with Jesus in Mark's Gospel: Part 5

Show Time

Week 1. READ: Mark 12:28-34

If the Gospel of Mark were a play in a theater, it would be a traditional three act play. The first act would be a brief introduction of the main character namely Jesus Christ (1:1-13). As quickly as the curtain came up it went down following the baptism and temptation of Jesus.

The second act makes up for the brevity of the first because it captures the ministry of Jesus (1:14-13:37). This act has three scenes, the first of which is Jesus' work in the region of Galilee (1:14-7:23). In this scene are stories about Jesus' preaching, teaching, healing and calling followers to join him in this work. All of these stories surround the Sea of Galilee. The second scene of the second act includes stories of Jesus' ministry beyond Galilee (7:24-10:52). The concluding story in scene two is the healing of a blind man who joins Jesus on the road to Jerusalem for the final week of Jesus' life. The third scene begins with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and ends with a series of teachings about the end of time called the 'little apocalypse' (11:1-13:37). The second act ends with Jesus saying "Keep awake," (13:37). The curtain drops before the final act begins. Those final two words would cause a buzz during intermission.

The third act opens up by announcing that it is two days before Passover (14:1) and the religious leaders are conspiring to have Jesus arrested. The series of stories that

unfold are all linked to the betrayal, trial, death and announcement of the empty tomb (14:1-16:8). The actions are strong, the tension in the stories is palpable as the followers of Jesus celebrate the Passover amid Jesus' words that must have confounded his disciples that the Passover bread is his body and the wine his blood. From the agony of Jesus praying in the garden to his swift arrest, the narrative takes a surprising twist when "all of them (his disciples) deserted him and fled," (14:50).

Who witnessed the death of Jesus if the eleven (minus Judas who had betrayed him) disciples had run for cover and hid themselves because of fearing for their own life? The first witness mentioned is a gentile military leader (15:39) who testifies that this man Jesus was "God's Son!" While the list of names varies slightly, the women who followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem watched Jesus die from a distance and were the witnesses to the empty tomb (15:40, 47, 16:1). The message of the crucified and risen Lord came from the lips of women! Thanks be to God for their often hidden yet courageous presence when it mattered most in the life of Jesus.

Over the next five weeks we will read some concluding stories from Mark. Each week the study will reveal greater clarity on the central teaching of the greatest commandment (12:28-34). This teaching is critical to understand what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus. While the teaching to love God with our whole self and love our neighbor as we love ourselves seems basic, it has many applications that challenge our life. Knowing what the greatest commandment is and practicing it in our life are two different things. The reality is if we all practiced the loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, crime and chaos would radically decrease in our cities, small towns and rural areas.

Digging into Mark 12 and the Greatest Commandment

Let's look at the context of Mark 12 and the three conflict stories in vv. 13-34:

1) The first conflict (12:13-17) arises with the Pharisees (a religious group most concerned with ritual purity) and a Jewish political group called the Herodian's because of their support of King Herod and his compromises with Rome – and together they were trying to trap Jesus. The question they asked was about citizenship and paying taxes. Jesus demonstrated wisdom in handling this with the use of a coin and the “head” on it to justify returning to Rome what is Rome's by paying their taxes.

2) The next conflict (12:18-27) was with the Sadducees concerning the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees were a Jewish religious group that only valued the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament – Genesis – Deuteronomy) as being the word of God. They try to trap Jesus with some crazy rule about marriage. Jesus side steps it by saying that there are no marriage relationships in heaven!

3) Finally, a teacher of the law, a scribe, came legitimately to inquire about the greatest commandment. Unlike the first two encounters, this man earnestly sought to learn from Jesus. In the end, Jesus said he was not far from the kingdom of God (12:34).

Shema (“hear”) is the Hebrew word that begins the most important prayer in Judaism. It is found in Deuteronomy 6:4, which starts with the command to “hear.” The Shema prayer was so influential and important that Jesus used it as the beginning of his answer to the “greatest commandment” question in Mark 12:28–30:

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.

The whole Shema prayer, in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, is spoken daily in Jewish tradition:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Later Jewish tradition developed a three-part Shema prayer that also included Deuteronomy 11:13–29 and Numbers 15:37–41. Tradition states these three parts cover all aspects of the Ten Commandments.

When Jesus answered the question of which commandment is first, he acknowledged the Lord God is most important and worthy of our complete devotion. It is no surprise that the scribe replied this way in verses 32–33: *You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to*

love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

The “love your neighbor” portion of the Great Commandment is not part of the Shema. It is found in Leviticus 19:18. The Apostle Paul wrote about the command to love your neighbor in Romans 13:8-10. Paul summarizes the Ten Commandments by the command to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Paul wrote: *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law* (13:10).

Martin Luther and Being a Good Neighbor

In this 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation led by Dr. Martin Luther in 1517, wrote helpful explanations of the Ten Commandments that pertain to our neighbor. In his numbering of the commandments, the fifth commandment says: *You shall not murder*. He explains its meaning when he wrote: *We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs*. Not only are we to bring no harm but rather being a neighbor means that we are an asset to our neighbors by being helpful where we can.

The seventh commandment addresses our neighbors' property. *You shall not steal*. How are we to live as neighbors? *We are to fear and love God so that we neither take our neighbors' money or property nor acquire them by using shoddy merchandise or crooked deals, but instead help them to improve and protect their property and income*. This explanation suggests both a natural watchful eye for our neighbors' property and in any dealings with our neighbor, they must be above board. In fact, we are to lend a helping hand where possible.

In an age where the news is called fake and truth is elusive, the eighth commandment calls us to account: *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.* Luther spells out what he understands this commandment to mean: *We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.* It is easy to point fingers at Washington, Springfield, the courtroom, or anyone who has angered you, but the change in our culture begins with us. Imagine if we all began to speak only the good about others. Our behavior and attitude influence others more than we know.

These explanations have much to say to us and our world if we will listen and live them out. Similar to the Seventh Commandment about property is the call to protect our neighbor's house (Commandment Nine) wife, and other possessions (Commandment Ten). Jesus said to the expert teacher on the law that he was not far from God's kingdom. In other words, he was indeed living as God intended by pursuing God with his heart, mind and soul and treating people with love and respect.

Discussion Questions

1. How are you doing in loving your neighbors? How do you show them love?
2. What challenges do you face in knowing and caring for your neighbors?
3. What was your experience with your neighbors as a child?
4. What ideas do you have to strengthen your neighborhood relationships?

Week 2. READ: Mark 12:38-44

As we enter into the story for today, Jesus continued his teaching in the temple. In the opening story Jesus rips the experts in Jewish law for their desire for honor and privilege. He paints the scribes as show offs with no heart or spirit. Not only do they sit in the prime seats, dress to parade their wealth and seek to impress the listeners with their lengthy prayers. The real blow is highlighting the action of gouging widows by taking their homes and perhaps their household goods.

Jesus contrasts the actions of the scribes with the widow who is honored by him for her complete trust and generosity. He noted that this widow was extremely poor yet Jesus regarded her gift as the most generous compared to the offerings of the rich. Let's review who Jesus calls and invites to follow him and who he gives special attention to in Mark:

- He calls and selects twelve including four fisherman, a tax collector and no religious leaders like Pharisees, Sadducees, or experts in the law (scribes).
- He heals the sick, feeds the hungry; casts out demons even among gentile youth, casts demons out of a non-Jewish man living in the tombs and sends this man home to tell his own people how much the Lord has done for him (5:19-20).
- Jesus welcomes children, blesses and uses them to illustrate the pure trust needed to enter the kingdom of God.
- While Jesus healed and taught many, only a select few men and women followed him throughout his ministry. Shortly before entering Jerusalem for the final week of his life, Jesus healed Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, and invited him to join the journey 10:52.

Grace Church is a member of an ecumenical community development organization called CCDA (Christian Community Development Association). The CEO of CCDA, Noel Castellanos writes about Jesus the Galilean:

Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, “We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.” “Nazareth!” exclaimed Nathanael. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” “Come and see for yourself,” Philip replied, (John 1:35-46).

Shockingly, Jesus entered the world in a social reality more closely resembling the barrio (Latino neighborhood), with all of its issues, than it did the pristine and secure suburbs we value so much in our North American culture. Nazareth, which was located in Galilee, is where Jesus spent the majority of his time preaching, healing and ministering. It was becoming clear to me that Jesus not only came into the world to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18), but that he actually became poor himself to identify with those on the margins of society. Sean Freyne observes,

Given the importance of Jerusalem to Jewish thinking at that time, I wondered why Galilee had become such an important point of reference in the Gospels. Galilee seemed of little or no importance in the Hebrew Bible, and apparently had negative connotations for some of the people (Matthew 21:10-11; John 1:46, 49; 7:52). It seems to me that Galilee must have been of special salvific significance to the first Christians, since it plays an important role in the post-Easter memory of the followers of Jesus and became part of the earliest kerygma [the message of the early church in its preaching and teaching about

Jesus] (Acts 10:37-41). The question pressed itself: Why is Jesus' ethnic identity as a Jewish Galilean from Nazareth an important dimension of the incarnation [when Jesus became a human], and what does it disclose about the beauty and originality of Jesus' liberating life message?

The fact that our God-turned-Galilean entered a social and political reality rooted among the poor and culturally marginalized of his day caused me to reexamine the theological significance of this aspect of the incarnation. It was shocking that Jesus entered the world in a marginalized community in Galilee, which was seen as a region full of sinners because of its mix of Gentile cultures, diverse languages and religious beliefs that constantly called into question their authenticity and purity as Jews [the author is contrasting the Northern region of Galilee with its unique history resulting in a mixed culture following the Assyrian captivity with the history of the Southern region of Judah which fell later to the Babylonians].

*Commenting on the disciples' denial of Jesus to the Roman officers, Orlando Costas used to say, "Peter could deny Jesus three times, but the moment he opened his mouth to talk, he could not deny that he was a Galilean, because of his distinctive accent." Jesus spoke with that same distinct Galilean accent! (Noel Castellanos, *Where the Cross Meets the Street: What Happens to the Neighborhood when God is at the Center*, Downers Grove: IVP, pp. 78-80, 2015).*

It becomes clear in the contrast between the scribes and the generous widow that it is not status but the attitude of the heart that matters when it comes to following Jesus. He came to call people to follow him not to be "religious." Following implies living and doing what Jesus did and

taught. The kingdom call is open to anyone who is willing to follow.

Discussion Questions

1. What grabs your attention as you reflect back on today's reading from Mark 12:38-44?
2. What is it about being a follower of Jesus do you find the most challenging?
3. What is it about being a follower of Jesus that you could not live without?
4. Who is on your mind to encourage their faith or with whom to share your faith? Pray for them and wait for the door God will open.

Notes

Week 3. READ: Mark 13:1-8

Jesus is questioned privately about the end of life (Parousia) by four of his disciples: Peter, James, John and Andrew. There will be wars and rumors of wars. Frankly, try and think of a time when somewhere in this world there have not been wars or posturing for war like North Korea and the United States. People, the quest for power, wealth, and control has led the death of millions upon millions of people. This word of Jesus gives us no indication when the world will end.

Jesus is spot on in the prediction that many will say they know the date for the end of the world. Many false prophets have arisen. They too have come and gone. Martin Luther was said to have been asked what he would do if he knew today was the final day. Luther was planting trees at that moment and he replied he would try and finish planting his trees. He was confident in his identity in Christ and the value of the job he was doing.

The point that these readings make is we do not know when our lives will end nor when the world will cease. As long as we claim the promise of faith in Christ, we are good to go. In the meantime, we have work to do as Christians in sharing the hope and new life we have in him with others. (This must be our passion and focus, not worrying about the end of time). That will take care of itself. It's in God's hands, not ours!

Jesus was asked by lawyer what he had do to earn eternal life in Luke 10:25-28. The Great Commandment is quoted as the answer to his own question when Jesus asked him what the law said in response to this question. To get greater clarity, the lawyer asked a follow up question: "And who is my neighbor?" (10:29). In answering this question, Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan (10:30-37).

In their book, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door*, Jay Pathak & Dave Runyon offer a provocative take on neighboring:

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Let's try a quick exercise. Oh, and a warning. This might hurt a little bit.

We've both done this exercise with hundreds of churches and thousands of people, and a number of them have jokingly referred to this as "the chart of shame." This exercise might be convicting, and if it is, that's probably healthy. But the point of the exercise is not to bring shame; it's to move the Great Commandment from a theory into a real-world context.

To begin, imagine that the middle box in the chart on page 14 is your house and the other boxes are the eight houses situated nearest to you—the eight households that God has placed closest to where you live.

Now, you might live in a community that doesn't look like a tic-tac-toe board. That's okay. Whether you live on a greenbelt, a cul-de-sac, a rural lot with five-acre parcels, or in a corner apartment, try to picture the locations of your eight nearest neighbors—the eight who live closest to you—however they might be situated.

Then in the middle of the chart, simply write your home address. In the other boxes, fill in the three sub-points within each box—a, b, and c—as follows:

- *a. — Write the names of the people who live in the house represented by the box. If you can*

give first and last names, that's great. If it's only first names, that's fine too.

- *b. — Write down some relevant information about each person, some data or facts about him or her that you couldn't see just by standing in your driveway, things you might know if you've spoken to the person once or twice. We don't mean drives a red car or has yellow roses by the sidewalk, because you could see that from your driveway. We mean information you've gathered from actually speaking to a neighbor, such as grew up in Idaho, is a lawyer, plays golf, is from Ethiopia, had a father in World War II.*
- *c. — Write down some in-depth information you would know after connecting with people. This might include their career plans or dreams of starting a family or anything to do with the purpose of their lives. What motivates them to do what they do? What would they say about God? What do they most fear? What are their spiritual beliefs and practices? Write down anything meaningful that you've learned through interacting with them.*

a.

b.

c.

a.

b.

c.

a.

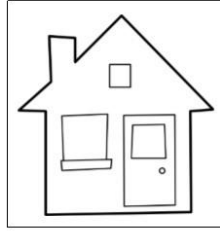
b.

c.

a.

b.

c.



a.

b.

c.

a.

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a.

b.

c.

a.

b.

c.

Okay, how did you do? After leading this exercise numerous times in many different venues, we have observed that the results are strikingly consistent:

- *About 10 percent of people can fill out the names of all eight of their neighbors, line a.*
- *About 3 percent can fill out line b for every home.*
- *Less than 1 percent can fill out line c for every home.*

Take a step back and consider what this means. Jesus said to love our neighbors. Sure, the teaching extends to our metaphoric neighbors—people everywhere in need. This extends to the people we work with, the parent on our kid's soccer team, and even the person on the other side of the world who is in need of a meal. But it also means our actual neighbors—the people who live next door.

So are we doing this? Are we actually loving our neighbors? What does this exercise reveal about our neighboring or lack thereof? Our chart may not reveal what you'd like it to, and it's important not to shy away from how this makes you feel. Lean in and feel the burn.

Now let's take a minute to reconcile the reality of your chart with the Great Commandment. Jesus says that your enemy should be your neighbor. He says that you should go out of your way to be the neighbor of someone who comes from a place or history of open hostility toward you or your way of life. Clearly he's stretching our understanding of what it means to love. We would define this kind of love as advanced or graduate-level love. The reality is that most of us aren't at the graduate level; we need to start with the basics. We need to go back to kindergarten and think about our literal next-door neighbors before we attempt to love everyone else on the face of the planet. How could we begin, for example, to care for a wounded terrorist if we haven't reached out to our neighbors? So let's start by learning our neighbors' names. If you've lived next to your neighbors for a long time and still don't know their names, it can be awkward. But you have to start somewhere. They probably don't know your name either. Someone has to break the ice. Why not you?

And here's one more question to consider as you begin this journey: What do you think about when you hear the word love? Theologians write about it, poets muse about it, singers sing about. We want to be really clear: we are none of those. We are relatively normal guys. We're not deep thinkers, nor do we have any musical skills whatsoever—we'd embarrass ourselves on a karaoke stage. And, if we happened to rhyme, it's not on purpose. But we do know this about love: to love someone, it helps to actually know their name. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, pp. 36-40, 2012).

How did you do on this exercise? It is eye-opening for me. To be transparent, Jody and I have lived in our home for ten years. Out of the eight neighbors in this graph, Jody and I know three households quite well. One home is up for sale and our next door neighbor's home has been vacant the whole time we have lived in our home. Another neighbor we talk to several times a month when we are both out of doors. We know a mild degree about them but have managed to forget their names! Finally, we do not know two households of our backyard neighbors.

We have room to grow! Being a neighbor takes time and intentionality. For one who has preached and written a bunch about being a neighbor, this exercise was humbling. I am a little embarrassed but it is good to be honest. We have work to do to be good neighbors. How about you?

Discussion Questions

1. As you read the story of the Good Samaritan, is the reading quoted above in alignment with Jesus' teaching on being neighbor? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. What did you learn by doing the exercise of naming your neighbors?

3. What are three ideas you can come up with to break the ice and meet or connect more meaningfully with your neighbors?
4. What will be your first step – first attempt? Who will pray for you about this?

Notes

Week 4. READ: Mark 13:24-37

Show Time

Jesus will return. The earth will end someday. When? Jesus said, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,” (13:32). If Jesus did not even know when that will happen, then who else would ever know? Interestingly enough, predictions about the end of the world (including the beginning date of the *Millennium Apocalypse*: a belief in a thousand year period in which Christ will rule on earth before the final judgement based on Revelation 20:1-6) have been recorded since the fourth century. Here is a sampling of the dates and those who named this date:

1. Bishop Martin of Tours, France (326-397 CE) said that the world would end in the year 400 CE saying that “there is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born.” Martin Luther was named after Martin of Tours. Martin Luther (1483-1546) thought Christ would return no later than 1600.
2. Bishop and martyr Irenaeus in Gaul (France) ca. 130-202 CE, and Bishop Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170-235 CE) predicted that Christ would return in 500 CE based on the dimensions of Noah’s ark. (I have no idea what they were thinking!).
3. Millennium dates are always popular for end of the world predictions: 1/1/1000 – predicted by Pope Sylvester II (946-1003); and 1/1/2000 – Jerry Falwell saw God pouring out the judgement on the world on this day. Isaac Newton (1642-1726) predicted the Millennium would begin in 2000 and psychic and Christian mystic Edgar Cayce (1877-1945) predicted the Second Coming of Christ would happen in 2000.

4. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703-1791) predicted that the millennium would begin in 1836.
5. William Miller (1782-1849) founder of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church predicted Christ would return on 3/21/1844 and Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) heavily influenced the formation of the Jehovah's Witnesses, predicting Christ's return in 1874.
6. In late 1976 on the 700 Club, Pat Robertson predicted the end of the world would come in 1982.
7. Dates predicted for Christ's return or the end of the world include: 2001, 2003, 2006-7, 2010-2014, and 2017.
8. For the fun of it, here is the furthest out prediction yet: according to the Canadian philosopher John Leslie (1940-), dooms day is 11,120 CE.

Dwelling in the Word

The Christian practice of listening deeply to a specific biblical story is part of ancient church history. *Church Innovations*, a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating tools to assist congregational renewal, developed a specific pattern called Dwelling in the Word that is practiced in congregations around the world. The practice involves listening to the Scripture and to each other so as to allow the Spirit of God to speak. Upon asking the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds, people who Dwell in the Word often experience spiritual formation and transformation of the mind (Romans 12:2).

Martin Luther wrote about the importance of asking the Holy Spirit to open our minds and heart as we listen to God's Word: *Where the Spirit does not open the Scripture, the Scripture is not understood even though it is read.* It is this same Spirit which Luther attributes with the power of God to *call, gather, enlighten and make holy* in his explanation to

the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed. We would be in no-where-ville in our faith if it were not for the Holy Spirit. Do not underestimate the importance of inviting the Holy Spirit into your meditation on the Scripture to give you much needed insight and understanding.

The Lancaster Mennonite Conference has put together this helpful information on Dwelling in the Word (with permission granted by Church Innovations, at: [www.http://images.acswebnetworks.com](http://images.acswebnetworks.com)). Here is a graph that draws the distinction between informational reading and formational reading of Scripture:

Informational Reading	Formational Reading
Quick reading to cover as much as possible	Living in the same text for a period of time
Linear reading to acquire knowledge, information, and techniques to support personal position, or change the world to our way of functioning.	Multi-layered with depth that changes our quality of being.
Master the Word; control it.	Servant of the Word; receive it.
Manipulate the text for our intentions.	Formed and transformed by the text.
Analytical and critical reading through our perceptions or needs.	Being with the Word humbly and willingly.
Problem-solving or instructional manual.	Open to the God of Mystery addressing us.

Dwelling in the Word begins by preparing to listen

- ▶ The leader provides a brief introduction to the practice of Dwelling in the Word - more if the practice is new to any member in the group; less if it is a developed practice.
- ▶ The leader invites and prepares the group to listen to the Spirit's nudging through spoken or silent prayer.
- ▶ Before the passage is read, the leader should instruct hearers to be aware of what word or phrase captures their attention or use one of the questions below for reflection.
- ▶ Ask a volunteer to read the text aloud and indicate there will be a moment of silence following the reading to reflect on a word, phrase, or question.
- ▶ Additional questions applicable to all scriptures:
 - What word or phrase "stops you cold" - catches your imagination or dominates your thoughts?
 - What was surprising? What questions did you have about the text?
 - What would you like to ask a Bible scholar about the text?
 - How does this text read us and our world?
 - What is God doing in this text? What are God's followers doing in the text? What is the Good News for us?
 - What is God saying to us through this passage? How are we being changed or transformed in our personal and corporate life?
 - How is God sending and equipping us to be witnesses? How are we to be signs of the kingdom (reign) of God?
 - What does following Jesus look like (feel, smell, taste, sound) in the text?

- How does this text inform us about what following Jesus looks like for us here and now?

After reading the Scripture text and silence, draw attention back together as a community

- ▶ The leader invites each person to get up out of their seat and find one person to share with for two-three minutes - someone they do not know or do not know very well (a reasonably friendly-looking person-stranger).
- ▶ Invite persons to take turns listening attentively and carefully to the other. Listen the other into “free speech” regarding their questions and reflections of the text. Listen carefully so that each can share what they heard the other share.
- ▶ At the half way point, the leader indicates it is time to switch the sharing and listening.
- ▶ After sharing in pairs, gather together with others to form a group of 6-8. Each person will introduce their partner and what they heard shared about the text (meaning, challenges, etc.). This is a practice in listening as well as speaking.
- ▶ If you have several groups of 6-8 people, call the entire group together and invite several persons to share on common themes or particular reflections that were significant for those in the group. Record the reflections that relate to the work of the group.

Dwelling in the Word can use any Bible story to open us to God, to others and to deeper spiritual truth. However, Patrick Keifert and Pat Taylor Ellison of *Church Innovations* have introduced congregations throughout the world to Dwelling in the Word using Luke 10:1-12. Bishop Clements of the Northern Illinois Synod (ELCA) has been using this same text with the Synod Council, pastors of the synod and has encouraged all of the congregations that make up the NI

Synod to use this text for the next year. It enables us to be listening together across the synod for the Spirit's direction and the voice of our neighbors.

Using the instructions above and the text below, gather as a family or a group and several times a month at minimum, read and reflect on this story. As you pay attention to the story and use the questions above, listen to each other. What is capturing your attention?

Luke 10:1-12:

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ² He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³ Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴ Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵ Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' ⁶ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷ Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸ Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹ cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' ¹⁰ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹ 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near. ¹² I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

Dwelling in the World

While you keep Luke 10 in mind throughout your day, what do you notice that God may be doing in the lives of the people you meet, those you work with, your classmates, your neighbors, the person ahead or behind you in the grocery line, and even your family? Pay attention as conversation begins for any glimmer of what the Spirit may be doing or saying. Do they need to hear a word of grace, love, acceptance, respect or mercy? Maybe you are to say little but simply listen to them into free speech – no more empty phrases. Attentive to the Word and to the other person, trust God to direct you as you listen.

The essence of Dwelling in the World is being the eyes and ears of Jesus where ever you are. With your heart and mind open to the Holy Spirit through Dwelling in Word, our antenna are raised as we seek to be attentive to the activity of God in the lives of the people we meet. In this way, as we listen to our neighbor, we may be able to draw the faith out of a person. This is a learned skill. Or, we may discover an opportunity to encourage, offer comfort or even a prayer. It may lead to chance to lovingly serve in a small or large way as Jesus served. We become the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.

Hospitality

God is the source of power in our lives if we use the metaphor of an electrical circuit. Dwelling in the Word is the conductor or wiring of the circuit spiritual discipline carries the electrical current. Dwelling in the World is the switch that can be opened or closed to the people we encounter each day. Hospitality is the device or load like a light bulb that is illumined – makes visible the power and activity of God. What do you notice that may surprise you

about hospitality in the Luke 10 story? Who gives hospitality to whom?

When we think about hospitality as the church we often think about having greeters at the door of the church on Sunday morning or having coffee available after worship. Interestingly enough, the hospitality in Luke 10 is shown to the Christians who have been sent out to various communities to which Jesus is planning to go. The Christians are sent into the world not standing at the door of the church as greeters. The food and drink is provided not by the Christians but by the “people of peace” who welcome them as strangers into their own homes.

A whole list of Christian behavior is outlined in Romans 12:9-21. In 12:13b, Paul writes, *extend hospitality to strangers*. The Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia*. It literally means to love strangers. The opposite of loving strangers is fearing strangers called *xenophobia*. It is this fear that wants to build walls and keep people out. We are sent to love strangers for the sake of the gospel. It is a risk we called to make so that all people may come to experience the joy of following Jesus.

Returning to Luke 10, we are sent to look for people of peace in our neighborhood. They show signs of openness to you – a smile, some warmth, a conversation. Take the time to listen and to get acquainted. Be open to any hospitality offered. This is how relationships are made and neighborhoods become stronger. It is here where we listen to discover what God is already doing in this person’s life. This is where your witness to Jesus is welcome.

Listen to the people. After you have listened to God and your neighbor, begin to discern what is God doing here? What is

next? CCDA introduced me to this Chinese poem which says:

*Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them
Love them
Start with what they know
Build on what they have.
But of the best leaders
When their task is accomplished
Their work is done
The people will remark,
“We have done it ourselves.”*

Discussion Questions

1. What have you learned about people who say the end of the world is near?
2. What grabbed your attention as you reflected on Luke 10:1-12?
3. Think of a time when you learned something from someone else. Share a time when you listened deeply to another person you knew quite well only to learn something you never knew before. What did that teach you?
4. When have you received hospitality from a stranger? How did you feel? What does this Chinese poem say to you?

Notes

Week 5. READ: Mark 16:14-16

We conclude our study of Mark with a portion of the Longer Ending:

Later he (Jesus) appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.

This is Jesus’ Great Commission in Mark. This is a go and tell the whole creation command. It was given to the first followers. It is the command of Christ for his church. It is not optional nor should it be because this is the life-giving story of Jesus that changes lives inside out – yours and mine. Jesus story has become our story of faith. It is our story to tell.

While Jesus tells us to go into the world, into your neighborhood and share the story of Jesus at the appropriate time in a conversation as the Holy Spirit leads you, let’s be honest, we do not often think or act this way. Instead of thinking of us as church going out into the world, we have just thought people would “come” to church. The funny thing is that we are the church. The word “church” in the language of the New Testament is Greek and this word means “people who follow Jesus.” It was only much later, after Christianity was legalized in the fourth century that special buildings were built for the Christian church. Up until then, the church met in peoples’ homes. We are the church and Grace is the facility in which we meet to worship, learn, eat as a community, pray, study God’s word, and gather to plan our ministry. Our building also is a

resource for the neighborhood as seen in programs like Friday Fun Fest!

As the church, we are to go and tell. How will people hear and discover the story of Jesus if we do not go and tell? It is on us. Jesus is calling you and me to stand up by sharing his love and his call to faith in him with our neighbors.

As we go into the apartments, the condos and the homes of our neighbors, as we listen and get acquainted with our neighbors, we will walk into situations which are unjust. There is enough judgment and ridicule of people simply based on their appearance in our society to say that we will experience people who are hurting, need attention and love.

Jesus did not sit silently by when people were criticized and mocked because of who God made them to be. We all are sinner and we all make mistakes. Jesus stood up against Simon, the religious leader who had invited him to dinner at his house, when he pointed a finger of judgement at a woman who wept and washed Jesus feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-50).

Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Jesus advocated for this woman and refused to allow Simon's judgmental attitude to block him from speaking forgiveness, affirmation and love

for this woman. He affirms her faith and welcomes her into God's kingdom (7:50).

The church cannot talk about Jesus and fail to address the injustice in our world. Edmund Burke, was a Christian serving in the House of Commons in Great Britain in the eighteenth century when he wrote: *All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men [and women] to do nothing.*” Burke correctly identifies that apathy and silence is simply endorsing evil by doing nothing. How many Christians looked the other way and said nothing when Adolph Hitler began to rise to power? What I am thinking about here is on a more personal level where a neighbor, friend or family member are ignored, glared at, have insults thrown their way simply because of where they live, because they are poor, the color of their skin, their sexual identity, or the fact they do not speak English well. Will you stand up for your neighbor?

The Burke quote comes from a book by Mark Labberton, *Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus*, Downers Grove: IVP Books, p. 16, 2010. What I value most in this book by Labberton, is how he challenges my thinking. It helps me to think through how being passive is as wrong as doing acts of injustice because I allow it to continue. This is not the way of Jesus. I am including these additional quotes from the book for you to discuss and ponder. May they challenge you as they challenge me:

What this means in spiritual terms, then, is that our hearts thwart God's heart for justice. The One who made us for a loving and just relationship with God, with ourselves, and with one another also gave us the freedom not to love. Many of us think we are simply choosing to live in between the two options, passively letting the pieces fall where they will. But

the net result when good people do nothing is that injustice thrives (p. 18).

Scripture makes clear what my own human experience confirms: nothing in the whole world is harder or more important to change at a fundamental level than the human heart (Gen 3; Rom 3). If our personal and historical experience haven't already taught this to us, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ should make it plain. Human beings do not readily change...

The primary Christian confession of faith that "Jesus is Lord" means that the reign of Jesus over all things recasts power in any and all places. No one and nothing else is Lord: neither economic power nor powerlessness, neither political power nor powerlessness, neither class power nor powerlessness. Under the just and loving reign of Jesus, all power is and will be redefined in light of the saving and re-creating power of the One before whom every knee will bow. Injustice at its core always involves the abuse of power. Justice is the right ordering of power. To call Jesus Lord means bringing all of our lives and world before the One who as Lord reorders power and asks us to follow him in doing so. The first and second commandments call God's people to practice using our life's powers to do two central things: to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind," and to "love your neighbor as yourself." If we actually seek to do this, it changes our understanding of why and how power and injustice matter, and compels us to live lives that reorder power according to the loving and re-creating reign of Jesus (p. 22)...

In a complicated world of profound injustice, the crisis of the human heart is crucial to social transformation. Changing our world depends on changing our hearts: how we perceive, name and act in the world. The ways of the heart are reflected in the world daily in how we perceive (see and assess one another), how we name (frame and position one another) and how we act (engage or distance one another). These three are inseparable, simultaneous but distinguishable, and they are a potent force.

Political, social and economic changes are critical. Law and the rule of law are fundamental needs. Especially in a world where the human heart is so bent in on itself, external, public and systemic structures must be brought to bear in service of the most vulnerable. And (not but) within, under, around and through all these will be individuals and societies in whose hearts there needs to be significant changes if the systemic change is going to be sustainable and substantial (p. 23).

Part of going to our neighbor is to build a relationship by listening so we can extend the love of Jesus. Relationships take time and can get messy. Life is messy at times. All of our experiences in life are not the same. It takes time to understand others. Jesus is with us in the conversation. Jesus wants everyone to know and experience his love for them through us. It is challenging. It can challenge our perspective and stretch us. I have a lot more room to grow. Sometimes I am not very courageous to stand up against injustice that I see another person facing. But I keep working at it. I hope you will too!

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the human heart is so hard to change? What has helped to change your heart at different times? What holds you back?

2. What did you find helpful in the quotes by Mark Labberton?
3. What of his quotes makes you uncomfortable?
4. What do you take away from the story of Jesus, Simon and the woman washing Jesus' feet? What do you need to stand up the Simon's in our world?

Notes