The hardest part of moving to a new town is meeting new people.

Every time we arrived as a family at a new church we were as much strangers to everyone else as they were to us.

But over time our relationships changed.

We went from strangers to acquaintances to friends.

It happened, almost imperceptibly, as we did life together. We shared events. We told stories. And along the way we moved from being strangers to acquaintances to friends.

You’ve experienced that same thing when you moved.

Whether you were moving into a new school, a new house, or a new church; you’ve felt like a stranger.

**What were some of the emotions you felt when you moved somewhere new?**

Last week, we talked about the unintentional barriers that keep us from being able to love our neighborhoods.

Pace of life… Race/Religion/Politics… Fear…

If we allow them, those barriers keep us strangers in our neighborhoods. They also hold us back from becoming friends. And ultimately, they prevent us from loving our neighborhood and seeking the common good for everyone in that neighborhood.

In today’s account from the life of Jesus, written by Luke- who made a careful examination of all the things he writes- Jesus meets someone new and quickly moves from stranger to friend.

You may be familiar with this story if you ever attended Sunday school or VBS because of a song…

Zacchaeus was a wee little man…

Luke 19:1-10

What was it that propelled the relationship of Jesus and Zacchaeus from strangers to friends so quickly?

I think it is found in something as simple being seen and being heard.

Those were two things that Zacchaeus needed- to be seen and to be heard. But because of his position no one in Jericho wanted to see or hear Zacchaeus.

If you stop and think about it, isn’t that what everyone wants? To be seen and to be heard.

It is what is behind so much of the unrest in our nation. People just wanting to be seen and heard.

It is what is behind so much of the mental health crisis today. People wanting to be seen and heard.

And you know this to be true, when someone new moves into a neighborhood… (home, school, church) people just want to be seen and heard.

**Can you identify a person in your life who saw and heard you? And because they did, it made a difference in your life?**

Jesus was the best at seeing and hearing the people that no one else took the time to see and hear. And as his disciples, shouldn’t that be what we are known for as well?

In 1914 World War I was breaking out in Europe. A young man came to visit Martin Buber a theologian and writer.

Buber would later write of the encounter that he was less than engaged with his visitor. Or, to use his own words, he was not there in spirit. Reflecting later on the encounter, Buber noted that he had a friendly conversation, but he never really engaged the deeper questions of the young man.

A short time after that encounter the young man died by suicide.

Martin Buber felt a deep sense of guilt. Not that he had failed to remove the man’s despair, but that he failed to be fully present to the young man.

As Buber writes, he had brought his left-overs to the encounter. He failed to bring his whole being to the conversation.

I’m sure I’ve brought left-overs to too many conversations. Maybe you have as well.

And when we bring left-overs to conversations in our neighborhoods, it means we will remain strangers, or at best acquaintances, but never friends. And that means that we will fail to create a neighborhood in which we seek the common good for every neighbor- by seeing and hearing them.

One of the things Martin Buber learned as a result of his encounter with the young man was to rethink how he approached people.

Buber said that many times we view people as an object or an *it*. (Remember how we talked last week about our pace of life and not wanting to be interrupted? Well, when we see a person as an interruption, we don’t treat them as sacred or holy, we treat them as an object.)

When Jesus entered Jericho, note that Luke says, Jesus was *passing through*. He had no intention of stopping. Jesus could have walked by Zacchaeus that day, but he didn’t. Because Jesus knew what Buber would only learn later- that people are not mere objects, but sacred individuals.

From his encounter with the young man, Buber would go on to teach that when we recognize each person as an inestimable treasure, an image-bearer of the living God, sacred and created from the very breath of God; it brings a whole different perspective to seeing and hearing our neighbors.

To Buber, when we bring our whole self into a conversation with another person, God fills the space in-between those two people. As they come into contact with each other and recognize one another as a person of sacred worth- not an object to be conquered or overcome, God creates a sacred space. In that space those two people can connect across their differences and experience a sacred relationship.

Let me ask you to stop and think about this for a moment.

How do you approach every encounter with a person in your neighborhood?

Do you see them as a person of sacred worth, created from the very breath of God? Do you see that encounter as a sacred space where differences can be transcended?

Or, does their race/religion/politics get in the way?

Or, does fear intimidate you and cause you to hold back?

Or, does the pace of life cause you to avoid taking the time necessary to be fully present?

I bet if we asked Zacchaeus, he’d be glad that Jesus didn’t allow any of those things to get in the way of Jesus seeing and hearing him that day.

Here’s the challenge: if we are going to prioritize loving our neighborhoods, then we need to take the initiative to move from our neighborhoods being a place of strangers and acquaintances to a place filled with friends.

And that begins with how well we see and hear our neighbors.

So how do we make it happen? Follow Jesus’ example.

- See every person in the neighborhood as an image-bearer of the living God, sacred and created from the very breath of God.

- Don’t let the opinions of how other people see a neighbor cloud your ability to see and hear them differently.

- Don’t judge. We’ve come to a point in our culture where we see every encounter as a contest between two opinions. When you judge, you turn your neighbor into an object to be overcome rather than loved.

I appreciate what Pete Scazzero wrote, we should recognize our first task as a disciple of Jesus is to see each person as sacred, asking sincerely, ‘Tell me more. Help me understand how you see the world and how you came to that conclusion.’

- Be fully present, not distracted, when you engage a neighbor.

- Be open. That sacred space that God inhabits between two people of sacred worth is an opportunity for you to learn, grow and stretch.

When we begin to apply these truths to our relationships with our neighbors, our neighborhoods will begin to change.

Don’t wait on someone else to take the first step. Don’t wait for a better neighbor/hood.

As disciples of Jesus, our calling is to see the place where we are and to hear the people we encounter, as the people and places that God has called us to bless. (more on that next week)

If we are willing to see and hear our neighbors that journey from strangers to acquaintances to friends will happen faster than you can imagine.

1. SEE - Identify one neighbor that is a stranger.

Intentionally take a step to get to know them.

2. HEAR - How can you eliminate distractions, so that

you are fully present when engaging a neighbor?