



November 23-24, 2019
Pastor Ellis White and Rachel White

For Your Neighbors: The Art of Receiving

Luke 7:36-38

ELLIS: Welcome to Chapel Hill! My name is Ellis White, I'm the Pastor of Weekend Services. And this week, I'm being joined by a very special person to share our final message on neighboring... my wife!

RACHEL: Hi, my name is Rachel, and aside from being Ellis' wife, I am the LifeGroup Coordinator here at Chapel Hill, as well as a candidate for ordination with our Presbytery. The last few weeks we've been journeying through this series on how to love our neighbor. Pastor Mark began by sharing that loving our neighbor is not an optional extra in our faith, but, according to Jesus is on a par with loving God.

Not only that, but he shared with us that we often try to wiggle out of loving our literal neighbor, by interpreting neighbor to mean everyone. But if everyone is our neighbor, no one is our neighbor! So we've been talking about what it might look like to love our literal, living next to us, neighbors.

ELLIS: Over the last few weeks, we've learned three practical ways to love our neighbor...first, we must KNOW our neighbor if we are going to love them. Second, we can SERVE our neighbor to practically demonstrate that love. And third, we can HOST our neighbor in our home to demonstrate loving hospitality. But, to be honest, I wonder if we really did all this, whether it might start to seem to our neighbors like we've put on our super-neighbor cape and gone to work in our neighborhood?

RACHEL: I remember one time, I was so desperate to love our neighbors and demonstrate the love of Jesus to them, that I began to look for any opportunity to serve them. We had one particular set of neighbors who had just found out they were pregnant. One afternoon on the driveway, she shared with me, that she was worried about how they were going to pay for all the stuff they needed for her baby. I saw my moment, and right then and there, I opened up the garage and started handing her one thing after another. We had everything they needed!

The next day, both members of the couple were totally effusing gratitude to me for all the things I had given them. But where conversation previously had easily moved onto other topics, it kind of got stuck on, "Wow. You are so amazing. How could I ever repay you?" Suddenly I felt a divide between us where there wasn't one before. Before we felt like equals, but now I was on a pedestal.

ELLIS: It can be so easy for loving our neighbors to become a set of one-way relationships. And the reality is that relationships don't work when they are only one-way. One of the amazing things about

Jesus was that, although he spent most of his life serving others, ultimately laying down his life for others, he was also willing to accept help and service from others. This weekend, we're going to take a look at another party that Jesus attended. This party, unlike the one we heard about last weekend, was at the house of a respectable religious leader, but it was to be rudely interrupted by an intruder. We will be in Luke 7:36-38. The passage will be on the screens.

RACHEL: "One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment." (Luke 7:36-38 ESV)

ELLIS: This is a story found in all four accounts of Jesus life—all four gospels. Each one records it slightly differently, and some scholars believe they might refer to two separate occasions when a similar event occurred. Regardless, the gospel writers felt this was an incredibly important story in the life of Jesus.

Jesus is once again at a party, as we saw last week. Last week, he was dining with sinners, at Matthew's house, but this week, he's dining with a group of religious people. Jesus did not discriminate when it came to dinner party invites! As Jesus was dining, a woman came in. We can infer from the description in the passage that this woman was a prostitute. She brings with her a jar of expensive perfume; one of the other gospel writers suggests it was worth about one year's wages, so we're talking really nice Chanel!

RACHEL: As she approaches Jesus, which she does so from behind, which sounds a little strange, until you realize how Jesus was lying. Ellis, I wonder, could you demonstrate? You see, when they dined, they reclined at the table, with their stinky feet as far away from the food as possible. And so, this prostitute approached Jesus from behind, knelt down as she was crying, with her tears falling on Jesus' feet. As she did so, she took the perfume, and poured it all out on his feet, wiping it and her tears with her hair. And then, perhaps most stunning of all, she began to kiss his feet. I have never kissed Ellis' feet, and I don't plan on doing it today.

Obviously, those who were gathered were shocked by what they saw. In particular, that Jesus would allow such a woman to come anywhere near him, let alone perform such an intimate act upon him.

ELLIS: As we reflected on this passage, we began to realize that it shows us something very significant about how Jesus demonstrated his love for others during his time here on earth. We so often think of Jesus as the servant, who came not to be served, but to serve, and yet, here we have an instance of Jesus receiving an act of service from the most unlikely of people. Most of the time we think about Jesus' relationships with people being one-way, where he did the serving, or the healing, and they simply received. But here, we have things going in the opposite direction.

As I mentioned earlier, if we go about loving our neighbors in a one-way manner. If we go about getting to know them, serving them and hosting them, without ever allowing them to reciprocate, we will fall short of the love that Jesus demonstrated for humanity when he was on earth. Jesus

showed what it looks like to have a two-way relationship with those whom he came to love, and I think we can learn from Jesus in this passage, some valuable lessons that we can apply to our loving of our neighbors.

RACHEL: There are two things we see in this passage, that Jesus does, that we believe can help us as we think through how to really love our neighbor: humility and vulnerability.

First, Jesus shows humility in the way he was willing to be served. He wasn't too high and mighty to accept this act of love from a person whom the religious people would have shunned. Very telling is the reaction of the host, in verse 39, who says "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." (Luke 7:39 ESV) The implication is that Jesus ought to have more pride in his position—Jesus was a respected member of the community, unlike this woman. This was improper behavior of someone of Jesus' stature.

And yet, Jesus did not think so. Jesus did not think himself too great to receive this act of love from this woman. In fact, in Mark's gospel he even called this act a "beautiful thing." Jesus knew who this woman was, he knew what she had done, and yet he did not turn her away because it would have damaged his reputation, or his public image. Jesus was more concerned for this woman, and her ability to show her love for him, than he was for his own image.

ELLIS: One Saturday morning when I was on my way to a Deacon's retreat, I stopped at Albertson's to pick up some cookies. When I got back to my car, it wouldn't start again. So I tried to jump it with my battery pack from Costco, but that didn't work. I called roadside assistance, and of course it was going to take them an hour to come out... So I decided to walk home and wait there. When I arrived, I saw my neighbor outside, the husband of the couple that Rachel had just given all our baby stuff to.

Now, I am about as useful with cars, as an elephant in a mine field. I have no idea what I'm doing, and usually do more harm than good. I ended up realizing that if I wanted to get to the Deacons retreat a little bit quicker, I might do well to ask my neighbor, who I knew used to manage a towing company for some help. But do you think I wanted to do that? No! Why? Because I'm a man, and men don't ask for help!

However, the more I sat and waited the more prideful I realized I was being. And so I humbled myself and went over to ask if he might help. Of course, he jumped into action! He drove me back over, tried to jump start it, before determining it was a dead battery. He removed the old battery and took me to Costco to buy a new one before installing it. And I was on my way to the Deacon retreat!

RACHEL: Ellis learned what it meant to humble himself and swallow his pride, and I'm very thankful because it helped our relationship with our neighbors become deeper and more meaningful. When they saw that we needed help too, we were no longer on a pedestal, and our relationship became a relationship of peers, rather than a one-way relationship.

ELLIS: So, we see Jesus demonstrate humility in this passage, but we also see him demonstrate vulnerability. I don't know if you've ever done a foot-washing ceremony before? I know some churches do them. I remember our youth group doing one, and it was an incredibly uncomfortable

experience for me, allowing someone else to touch my feet. There is something very exposing and vulnerable. I mean, you haven't seen my feet, but let's just say, they aren't the prettiest. I've never had a pedicure in my life, and I never plan on it.

There is something incredibly intimate about the act that takes place between Jesus and this woman. Not only did she wash his feet, but she did so with her tears and her hair. Tears are a very personal thing, that many people feel uncomfortable with showing in public, and yet here is this woman crying on Jesus' feet. And... in that time, women were not supposed to have their hair loose around any man, except their husband, and here is this woman wiping Jesus' feet with her hair. This act is deeply personal in nature. Jesus allowed himself to be incredibly vulnerable in the way that he received love from this woman.

RACHEL: Some time ago, we had neighbors, let's call them Jack and Lucy, who we had been getting to know. One night, around 10pm we had a knock on the door. Outside was Lucy, who I barely knew at the time, and she was crying because she had just had a massive fight with Jack and he had locked her out without her keys and without her cell phone. So I invited her in and began to comfort her, but then she turned to Ellis and said, will you go over there and talk to him?

ELLIS: Now, my first thought is: "Are you kidding? What if he has a gun?" I'm serious, right. This is America. I thought, "I should call the cops." But then I looked back at Lucy, crying on our couch, and I realized that I had no choice; I had to help.

As I walked over, I felt totally vulnerable. I had no way to defend myself if something were to happen. I went over and the door had been reopened and it was a little bit ajar. When I saw this, I thought: "Thank goodness! The coast is clear. Lucy can just go back home." So, I went back to my house, told Lucy the door was open, and she could go back.

But she insisted, "Please, can you go talk to him!" I looked at Rachel as if it say, "Help!" Rachel just motioned with her eyes to go back over there. So, feeling totally exposed, I walk over and knock on the door. No answer. I ring the doorbell. Nothing. So I slowly push open the door, calling his name, "Jack! Jack!" Still nothing. I slowly walk in, ready to be shot at, still calling his name, "Jack! Jack!" Nothing. I walk through the house and realize that he's not there.

I return home and tell Lucy, and she asks if we could come over and I give Jack a call from her phone. So we head on over and my wife stays with Lucy while I try to reach Jack on the phone. Eventually I get through to him and convince him to come home.

RACHEL: A couple of months later, I had gone out to my garage to grab something, and Jack was outside by his garage too. As we got talking, he reflected that he knew we were into all this Jesus stuff. He thought Jesus was a good guy, and that he hoped we could see he was a good moral person too. That he knew he drank too much, but he hoped God would see that overall he was a good person and accept him for that.

In that moment, I was able to share with him that Jesus loved him just as he was. That the crazy thing was that the good news is that we didn't need to get it all right before he loved us. That I was just as

messed up and broken as he was – and knew that because he lived next door – he had heard me yell at my kids, he knew what I was really like. I knew what he was like too (this was after the story I shared with you earlier) – and that didn't change anything. I told him we loved having them as neighbors, and more than that, Jesus loved him as he was too.

ELLIS: Sometimes we need to be vulnerable in the way we love our neighbors, whether that's through sharing our own flaws and imperfections like Rachel did, or doing something a little bit risky like I did. When we do, we take our relationships with our neighbors to the next level, and the opportunity for us to show them love is greatly increased.

So, Jesus demonstrated humility and vulnerability in his interaction with this woman, and we believe that we should demonstrate both humility and vulnerability in our interactions with our neighbors too.

RACHEL: So, how do we practically do that? We want to suggest to you one thing that you can do to demonstrate both humility and vulnerability to your neighbors and take those relationships from being one-way to a much deeper two-way relationship. And it's really simple: ask your neighbor for help. Next time you notice that you have a need, big or small, take a moment and ask yourself, is this something I could ask for help with? And is this something a particular neighbor could help with?

Now it could be tempting to start making up fake needs just to have an excuse to connect with your neighbors in this way. But I want to suggest to you that it is only in our genuine needs that we can show true humility and vulnerability, and so it is worth making sure you don't shortcut your way to asking for help.

One of the biggest issues, I think we struggle with in our context, is that for most of us, we have enough money and resources to deal with our own needs without ever needing to ask a neighbor for help. Moreover, we've been brought up to not impose ourselves on others, and so the thought of asking a neighbor for help can even feel wrong.

ELLIS: But it wasn't always this way. There was a time when neighbors would ask each other for eggs, or sugar, or milk, rather than get in the car and run to the store to buy what they need. There was a time when it wasn't weird to borrow things that you might need from your neighbor.

When we moved into our new house, we had several projects that we wanted to do. I spent a lot of time and money at Home Depot. During that time, I began to dream and think about all the fancy tools I might be able to add to my collection. But my wife was quick to remind me that we had a neighbor with more than enough tools for every task that we needed to accomplish. And so, once again, I swallowed my pride, gave up on my consumeristic desires, and reached out to our neighbor for help.

RACHEL: Or maybe it isn't borrowing eggs or tools... For me, asking for help from a neighbor has looked like asking for help with our kids... Saying yes to the offer from one of neighbors to look after Evelyn on the day we moved house, even though the neighbor that offered had a six-month-old. Or it

has looked like texting a neighbor when I'm running late to ask them to get Evelyn from the bus stop, even though it's embarrassing to admit that I'm late!

ELLIS: So, as we close this series, we want to encourage you to add another practice to your neighboring: to ask your neighbor for help. We've even added another sticker to the map outside in the lobby. We'd love you, as you begin these practices to keep putting stickers on that map. Not as a sign of pride, but so that we can celebrate together what God is doing in our midst, as we, as a whole church turn our hearts outwards to be for our city and for our neighbors.

RACHEL: To that end, we'd also like to hear your own stories of neighboring. If you have a story of loving your neighbor in some way that you would be willing for us to share with the congregation to celebrate what God is doing, we'd like you to submit it. Next to the map you will find pieces of paper that you can write your own neighboring stories on and drop them in the basket by the map. Or, you can email communications@chapelhillpc.org and tell us your story via email.

ELLIS: As we close this series, I want us to remember that ultimately, none of these acts are going to save us, even if they do earn us gold stars on our rewards chart! Ultimately, we all fall short of God's standards, and it is only because of Jesus that we can be accepted. God's love and acceptance of us is based not upon our love for our neighbors, but upon Jesus' love for the whole world. God loves you whether you love your neighbors or not. But because God loves you, and accepts you, we can love our neighbors.

Would you pray with me?