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**Guest Speaker: Paul Penelton**

***YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD TREASURE***

Have you ever been “Flandered?” You know what I mean. Have you ever been preyed upon by the “God Squad,” the “Holy Hitmen,” the “Righteous Rangers?”

How many could honestly say, at one time in their life, they felt like Homer Simpson? I know I have! Although as a pastor, I appreciate the effort of the Flanders family to reach their neighbour Homer, I certainly don’t like their methods.

It’s certainly doesn’t make Christianity seem attractive. I think most believers and certainly many businesses are beginning to learn that the “hard sell” is no longer an effective method of influencing someone.

In fact, before I became a Christian, I was “flandered” by a man that I worked with and it was such a turn-off that when I was ready to start my spiritual search the last place I wanted to start was with Christianity. I think a lot of people who’ve been hit over the head by a few bible thumpers in their lives know what Homer, who represents our neighbour, felt like and decided right there and then to never do the same to anyone else.

The problem with that solution is it often becomes our greatest excuse to do nothing. It fosters an attitude of defeat. Can you imagine what would happen to businesses if they took on that attitude? Instead of finding creative ways to sell their product they just sat there. Pretty soon they’d go out of business. Well...guess what? The number of people who profess to have faith in God in Canada is at a historic low. It’s almost like we’ve forgotten why the church exists and what it’s supposed to be.

Some years ago, a friend of mine discovered little museum on Nantucket Island that was devoted to a volunteer organization formed centuries ago. In those days, travel by seas was extremely dangerous. Because of the storms in the Atlantic along the rock coast of Massachusetts, many lives would be lost within a mile or so of land. So a group of volunteers went into the life-saving business. They banded together to form what was called the Humane Society.

These people built little huts all along the shore. They had people watching the sea all the time. Whenever a ship went down, the word would go out, and these people would devote everything to save every life they could. They did not put themselves at risk for money or recognition, but only because they prized human life. To remind them what was at stake they adopted a motto: **You have to go out, but you don't have to come back.**

Although it didn't sound like a very catchy recruiting slogan, it was. All through the museum are accounts of people who would risk everything – to save people they had never met. Over time, things changed. After a while, the U.S. Coast Guard began to take over the task of rescue. For a while, the coast guard and the life-saving society worked side by side. Eventually the idea that carried the day was, "Let the professionals do it. They're better trained. They get paid for it."

Volunteers stopped manning the little huts. They stopped searching the coastlines for ships in danger. They stopped sending teams out to rescue drowning people. Yet, a strange thing happened: They couldn't bring themselves to disband. The life-saving society still exists today. The members meet every once in a while to have dinners. They enjoy one another's company. They're just not in the life-saving business anymore.

The life-saving business is what the church is here for. You and I were made to be in the life-saving business. We don't always see it, but people around us have little mini-shipwrecks every day: A friend gets chewed out by her boss, a child fails a class, a couple's marriage breaks down, a co-worker makes foolish choices, somebody at church gets caught in a lie. The lifelines we have to offer are life, acceptance, love, and hope.

I can just imagine what a tour guide at the museum of the early church would say: *"Friends, there was once a community of believers who were so totally devoted to God that their life together was charged with the Spirit's power. In that band of Christ-followers, believers loved each other with a radical kind of love. They took off their masks and shared their lives with one another. They laughed and cried and prayed and sang and served together in authentic Christian fellowship."*

*The early church tells us that this community of believers, this church, offered unbelievers a vision of life that was so beautiful it took their breath away. It was so bold, so creative, so dynamic, that they couldn't resist it. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."*

Why were people so attracted to the early church? What compelled them to put their lives on the line to illegally gather together? It's the message of Jesus. A message so breathtaking and unlimited that people not only had to have it for themselves but wanted nothing more than to share it with others. It's a message that comforts the grieving and heals the broken-hearted. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused.

It's a message that makes us want to provide resources for those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, the disillusioned. It's the message that breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world. It is simply awesome!

Jesus, before he ascended into heaven, in Matthew 28 (19-20) gave us a kind of spiritual call to arms. He told His followers,

**"Therefore go and make disciples." Matthew 28:19-20 NIV**

He said if you're a follower of mine I want you to out into the world, into your office building, your job site, the hospitals, the prisons and even into your own neighbourhoods and communicate the only message on the face of the planet that can transform a human being's life for eternity.

It's a familiar theme for Christians. It's also something we, on the whole, haven't taken very seriously. Not because we don't have the desire, I think we just don't know how. I don't think we really know what it means to bring the message of Christ into our neighbourhoods.

How do we put ourselves into a situation that doesn't seem forced or into a position that won't cause others to run the other way the moment they see you walking as down the road?

We've often heard the saying "WWJD" or "What Would Jesus Do?" applied to a personal life

decision...should I do this or not do that but not very often have we applied it to evangelism or how to reach our neighbours with the message of Jesus.

What if Jesus lived in my neighbourhood? What would he do? How would he relate to the neighbours in my subdivision? What lessons might I learn from Him? It's not only restricted to people who live near our homes. What if Jesus worked in the next cubicle at work? What if Jesus sat next to me on the "Go-Train" every morning? It could be any environment we're in repeatedly with people who could use faith, hope and love. I think there are four lessons we can learn from Jesus this morning:

***1. If Jesus lived in my neighbourhood, He would have compassion and concern for His neighbours.***

We know this from Scripture because the only place in the entire Bible where Jesus felt the need to tell three stories in a row to make his point is found in **Luke 15**.

In these stories, Jesus tells the story of a sheep wandering away from the flock, a widow who has lost some money, and He talks of a father whose son took his inheritance early only to lose it to wine, women and song.

Essentially, he tells three stories to teach us two lessons:

**A) That which was lost was valuable.** The sheep was valuable to the shepherd. He had a small enough flock that every sheep represented food and cash to support his family. A widow had no real source of income so losing any coin would represent a huge sum to her. And of course, a son matters more to a father than he could possibly ever express.

**B) That which was lost warranted an all out search.** The worth of that sheep caused the shepherd to leave behind the other sheep to go off and search through the bush looking for that wayward sheep. The worth of the coin was so valuable to that widow that she embarked on an all-out search through her home, under every pillow, table, chair, pot and pan to find it. And of course, the father's eyes were constantly, everyday sweeping the horizon waiting, praying, hoping for the return of his son.

What Jesus was trying to drill into his disciples is that anyone who has wandered away, ran off, or anyone who has never known their Heavenly Father is lost to God and in dire need of being found. In fact, God was so concerned He sent His Son on a mission to earth to find them. They warrant a search by Jesus who then commissioned us to invest the effort to search them out and tell them what they're missing, the unconditional love of their Father.

Jesus loves all people. He loves those who are part of the family and he loves the spiritually empty or confused people. In fact, one time, the religious leaders of the day were trying to insult Jesus. "What's the most hurtful thing, the ugliest thing one religious person can say to another? What would be the ultimate dig a Pharisee could dish out to someone who claimed to be righteous? You can picture the contempt when they screamed out, "Jesus, you, you...you...friend of sinners!"

Jesus wore that like a badge of honour! Friend of sinners! He dared to have friends in low places. Jesus himself claimed that moniker in **Luke 19:10** as he described his main agenda: **"The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost." Luke 19:10 NIV**

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, if your goal is to become more like Jesus Christ, you need to adopt all of his practices including becoming a friend of sinners.

We need to be about the mission of seeking and communicating His message of hope to those who either don't get it or don't want it. When we begin to look at other people through the eyes of Jesus, we begin to see them as people who are loved by God, who are valuable to Him, who deserve to know that their Father is looking for them and it begins to change their hearts. It impacts them.

How could it not? Can you imagine what it would be like to realize that your long lost Father has been searching high and low, no matter the cost just for you...so He can share all that He has with you...for the sole purpose of loving you? How would you feel? It's how I felt fifteen years ago when I discovered that God was looking for me.

*A great example of what I'm talking about happened to a guy named Jack Sternberg who grew up in a Jewish home. He was an atheist who had even rejected the faith of his parents. He grew up to become a doctor, a cancer specialist in Little Rock, Arkansas. He saw how a*

*great number of people handled the physical and emotional impact of cancer but nothing had prepared him for one young woman's response.*

*It was a very sad circumstance. He came across a young mother in her early 30's whom he diagnosed with terminal cancer. He couldn't help but feel sadness for a woman who's sickness who would soon leave her young family widowed and motherless. It was almost too much for him to bear. "Yet," he said, "she seemed more concerned about my spiritual welfare, in my knowing Jesus, than in the fact that she was dying. She saw my lostness, my separation from God as a greater tragedy than her own illness. She trusted this Jesus then and for eternity. God had allowed illness to ravage her yet she still loved and worshiped and followed Him. She seemed confident about her future end but very concerned about mine. That," he said, "overwhelmed me." And it was that love for God and for him that caused Jack Sternberg to bend his knees and receive Jesus Christ as his forgiver and as his leader.*

I read that story and thought, "What if I cared that much about my neighbours? What if I saw their lostness and their separation from God as a greater tragedy than all the little concerns of my life that keep me from sharing the message of hope with them." Jesus saw your lostness and my lostness as a greater tragedy than His own torture and death on the cross. That's why He was willing to pay for our sins with His life.

If Jesus lived in my neighbourhood, He would have great concern and great compassion for His neighbours. If you're a follower of Jesus and your heart has no concern and no compassion for those who don't know God then I would begin to question whom it is you are really following. After all, it was His mission and the mission he gave to each one of who claim to believe in Him.

If your heart is dead toward people who don't know God you need to ask God to give you His eyes to love people, read about how Jesus behaved toward people who were far from Him. Think where you would be for eternity if someone had not shared the message of Jesus with you. Jesus would have compassion and concern for His neighbours.

***2. If Jesus lived in my neighbourhood, He would, before talking to the neighbours about God, He'd talk to God about the neighbours.***

In others words, He'd pray. Before He did anything of significance, Jesus would always look to His Father for answers. I find it fascinating that Jesus prayed for those who were far from His Father right up until His death on the cross.

The New Testament was written in the Greek language and if you study the passage in the original language you will discover that as Jesus hands and feet were being nailed to the cross, He kept repeating one prayer over and over as He was hanging in agony on the cross.

He was saying, "**Father, forgive them...Father, forgive them...Father, forgive them...Father, forgive them...They know not what they do.**" Over and over He prayed, until His last breath, for people who had not yet, believed. The question is, are we praying consistently, specifically, fervently for those who don't know God? God listens intently to fervent prayer.

Lee Strobel, the author of *The Case for Christ*, tells the story of a large baptismal service that he was involved in at a church. He said, "As hundreds of people lined up to be baptized, they would often bring someone with them for moral support. The woman at the front of the line, who was about sixty years of age, came forward to be baptized. She had brought a man with her, a very tough looking biker dude for support.

Strobel said to her, "Have you given your life to Jesus Christ? She said wholeheartedly, "Yes, I have!" He said, "I was just going to baptize her when, for some unknown reason, I turned to the man and said, "Have you given your life to Jesus Christ?" His face sort of screwed up and burst into tears, weeping and sobbing, he confessed, "No, I haven't. But I want too right now!"

After the shock wore off, Strobel said, "I led him in prayer, after he confessed his sins and that day he received Jesus as his Lord and Saviour in front of thousands of people and I baptized him and his wife together. As I walked off the platform a woman came running up and threw her arms around me. She was weeping and crying, "Nine years! Nine years! We've been praying for him for nine years. For nine years, not a glimmer of hope, not a glimmer of spiritual interest, no indication whatsoever that he had an interest in Jesus Christ! Look at what God did today!"

Strobel immediately thought of his own brother who's an atheist to this day. He's been praying for him for twenty years and yet saw no glimmer of hope. He had almost given up until this woman's story screamed to him, "Don't give up! Keep praying! Keep bringing it to the Father!"

Some of you have a son, a daughter, a mom, a dad, a best friend or a neighbour in your life who you've been praying for but see no hope. I want to say to you, "Don't give up. Pray consistently, specifically and fervently. As God brings to mind people you know who don't know Jesus write down their initials somewhere as a reminder. If you don't know someone, pray that God will bring someone into your neighbourhood that you can pray into the Kingdom. If Jesus lived in my neighbourhood, he'd pray before He attempted anything of significance for God.

***3. If Jesus lived in my neighbourhood, He would love His neighbours enough to invest time in them.***

Most modern-day Christ-followers have been told since they were little kids to separate themselves from the world.

They've been warned about the places they should never be caught dead in and the types of people to steer clear of – counsel that only serves to make Christians impotent, paranoid, and insular. Church activities have become increasingly inward-focused. Events planned, money raised and spent and jobs created are conducted primarily as a service to its members for the maintenance of the organization. Leith Anderson, observed that

**"It is not uncommon for churches more than twelve years old to not even want newcomers."**

Instead, we can become more like Christ, by learning to model his fascination with building bridges over divides instead of deepening them. Jesus, unlike all other religious leaders of the time, loved to hang out with irreligious people like Zacchaeus, a corrupt first century tax collector.

He was a short little guy. He heard that a great prophet named Jesus was coming to town and he wanted to see Him. He couldn't get a good view so he climbed up a tree. He can now look out and clearly see the man that everyone has been talking about.

He's heard about the miracles, the healings, and this ability to see into people's lives and hopes just to get a glimpse of this great man. The story, in **chapter 19 of the Gospel of Luke** tells us what happened next.

**“When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. Luke 19:5-6 NIV**

Jesus, supernaturally, finds the one person that no one would have chosen to dine with and wants to share a meal with him. That's Jesus mission. That's what Jesus loved to do. He loved to build bridges and the best way to build a bridge into people's lives is to share a meal with them. In the Friendship Factor, Alan McGinnes says,

**“It is no accident so many important encounters occurred between Jesus and His friends when they were at the table. There is something almost sacramental about breaking bread with one another.” Alan McGinnes**

Last Sunday, we talked about that our most valuable commodity – time. It takes time to build relationships. Some of you are still saying, “Time? That's the one thing I don't have!” I haven't got time to invest in the lives of someone who doesn't know God.

What I want to say to you is there are ways you can invest the time it takes that will not add a whole bunch of activities to your life. Why not invite people who don't know God into the activities that you're already going to do anyway.

Let's say you're going to watch the game on TV. Why not invite someone over to watch the game with you. You haven't added one moment of time to your calendar but you did open up the opportunity to share your life with someone. You play golf every week. Why not open up a spot in your foursome for a neighbour?

My daughters play soccer on teams with friends who like to swim and eat hot dogs. We have a swimming pool. Their parents, particularly their fathers like to eat meat. Hmm...what to do? My wife likes to BBQ, I like to eat, my kids like to swim...Is it possible that there are other people in my neighbourhood who like to do the same?

Whatever it is you do, just invite someone along with you and pray that God might use that opportunity to deepen your relationship, to create a bond between you so that something as sensitive and personal as spiritual matters might come up and be discussed. If you build a strong relationship with them out of authentic concern and love for them then you will have the credibility to talk to them about something as important as Jesus. I know if Jesus lived in my neighbourhood, I'd probably find Him next door with the irreligious guy watching the game.

***4. If Jesus lived in my neighbourhood, He wouldn't just share His faith, He'd show it.***

In other words, talk is cheap. Jesus didn't say, "I love the world!" No, He showed that He loved the world. How? By serving the world. He served the blind by restoring their sight.

He served the lepers by his healing touch. He served the crowd on the hillside – literally thousands of people – by multiplying the bread and fish that they might eat. Most of all, in the ultimate act of servanthood, He went to the cross to pay for the sins of the world, to unlock heaven for all who would believe and follow Him.

When we serve others as Jesus did and when we sacrifice for others as Jesus modeled, it can soften the heart of even the hardest individual toward God. It does. Jesus said in Matthew 5:16,

**“Don't hide your light. Let it shine for all. Let your good deeds glow for all to see so they will praise the heavenly Father.” Matthew 5:16 LB**

What Jesus is really trying to say is I want you to serve other people in such a way that it attracts them to the life God is offering.

If you have someone in your life who is far from God, can you peer into their life and identify a need you might be able to meet?

At a small church near Tillsonburg, one man decided to use his snowblower for Jesus. He'd go around the neighbourhood and plow out the driveways of the widows and single moms. The sad part of the story was the wonder in the eyes of the women he helped.

After he plowed her driveway all winter, one woman finally had to ask, “Why do you get up at the crack of dawn to plow my driveway?” Afraid of overwhelming her with the message of Jesus, He initially told her that he just wanted to help out the neighbourhood. What his actions told her was, “you matter.” One day, when the time is right, he’s going to tell her, “You really, really matter to God.” And you matter to me. God has changed my life and He can change yours. And if you’d like, I’ll tell you how he can help you.

Is there a family in your neighbourhood who’s car is not running? Is there a person in your neighbourhood who’s struggling financially? Is there someone in your neighbourhood who needs a babysitter so they can go grocery shopping? Find the need and find a way to serve that need.

In this world where it’s “me first” and everybody looking out for themselves, it is so counter-cultural to serve someone else without expecting anything in return. It causes their eyes to turn towards the cause of these actions. It causes their hearts to open up and see that there is hope in this world. And if you’re doing it out of a heart that is truly changed by God, out of an authentic love and concern for them it’s going to open their heart in ways that nothing else will. If Jesus lived in my neighbourhood he’d serve the neighbourhood.

### ***Conclusion***

Jesus was always taking risks when he stepped outside his inner circle. When Jesus invited Himself into the home of a tax collector, he risked alienating himself from his own followers. Their reaction was recorded in Luke 19:7:

**“But the crowd was displeased, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,’ they grumbled.” Luke 19:7 LB**

They grumbled. “Look what He’s doing.” The truth is that Jesus did not just risk His reputation by hanging out with irreligious people. He ruined His reputation.

Jesus was falsely accused of being a drunkard and a glutton. Why? Because that’s what the people Jesus hung out were doing. He was guilty by association. That’s how closely identified He was with those who were far from God.

We need to be willing to take risks as a church and as followers of Jesus Christ. When split second opportunities come – as they will in life – you can either play it safe or you can play to win for Jesus. These opportunities don't come around every day so we need to be ready to fulfill our mandate, our mission as followers of Christ. We need to make the decision to go for it. I want to urge you to decide now to take a risk when God opens the door of spiritual opportunity.

What's the worst thing that can happen? In your mind, the idea of possibly being shunned at work or in your neighbourhood is enormous. In the first century, when Christians were caught sharing their faith they could be thrown to the lions to be torn apart by the wild beasts. The Roman Emperor Nero used to have these garden parties at night and he wanted to light up his patio. He used to tie up Christians, dip them in tar and fasten them to a pole and light them on fire. Apparently, they made great patio lanterns. That's risk! It didn't stop them. They couldn't kill enough of them.

But we live in Canada. I've never bled for my faith. Most probably, I will never be tortured for my faith. The worst possible thing in the world that's happened to me as a Christian was when someone said to me, "No thanks!" That's it. Did it shatter my soul? Not really.

So I want to do as I close to look down at your bulletin or at a piece of paper and think for a moment about someone or some people in your life who are far from God. I'd like us to take a moment, as the band plays, to write down their initials. I want to pray that God would give us the courage to love and serve these people the way Jesus would. That when an opportunity comes up we're not just going to play it safe, we're going to take a spiritual risk, take a deep breath, and trust God.