

Good morning!  
Let's pray.

May the words of my lips,  
And the meditations of all our hearts,  
Be acceptable to you,  
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer,  
In Jesus' name we pray.  
Amen.

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## [INTRODUCTION: Are your windows open?]

### **Are your windows open to the world around you?**

As you made your way here this morning,  
Did you stop to listen to the song of the birds,  
mourning the radiant passing of the leaves that were once their home?  
Did you slow down to take a deep breath of the crisp autumn air,  
mingled with the scattered scents of suburban life?  
Did you notice your neighbors, raking up the last of the fallen leaves, or accompanying the  
morning adventures of their canine counterparts?  
Did you say, "Good morning, how's it going?"  
How *are* they doing?  
Are their eyes weary from a sleepless night courtesy of their distressed, newborn baby?  
Or are their minds endlessly occupied with the reckless antics of their adolescent?  
Perhaps they had a fight with their spouse last night, every night, on the verge of no return.  
Or maybe they're exiled within the loneliness of their own suffering, longing for the attention, the  
voice, the touch of another human soul who sees them, cares, and dares to enter into their world.

Are your windows open to the world around you?

The moment we awake from sleep, our eyes are opened to an opportunity to take in, even drink  
from, the beauty and mystery of the world that God has strategically placed around us, the  
garden that God has lovingly planted us within.

So **where** has God lovingly planted you? **Who** has God strategically placed around you?

What array of gifts, skills, resources, personality, culture, and experience has God uniquely given  
to you for the mission of His Kingdom here on earth?

We've been so steeped in a cultural worldview of individualism, consumerism, and hyper-mobility  
that we've, in effect, boarded up the windows of our souls to only pursue and embrace that which

benefits and affects ourselves. And while technology and globalization have created more external connections than ever before, the self-orientation of our hearts has caused us to lock the door from the inside, insulating us from our God-given responsibility *and* need for others.

Daniel Grothe, in his book *The Power of Place*, sharply identifies our present ailment and prescribes the following remedy to our generation:

**“To notice. To see.**

**To pay attention to the details of our lives,  
the neighborhoods in which we live,  
and the subplots of the stories of the saints and sinners  
with whom we’re traveling the road of life.**

**Seeing. Noticing. Hallowing the everyday experiences that the majority of us so regularly miss.**

**[We need] an ophthalmologist for our souls, diagnosing our blurred vision and fitting us with new lenses that open new worlds to us.**

**[We need] a cartographer of the sense realm, mapping the terrain, introducing us to the significant landmarks that we’ve walked by a thousand times unawares. Shaking us out of our haphazard haziness and showing us what’s always been there.**

**The re-enchantment of the world is exactly what we need in our screen-saturated society.**

**Look up and see.**

**See it all.”<sup>1</sup>**

Look so deeply into the boring that you perceive the beauty.

Listen so intently to the mundane that you hear the miraculous.

And probe the everyday textures that furnish your daily rhythms, until you feel the fresh touch of creation being renewed in each moment.

Are your windows open to the world around you? [5:00]

We’re in a series called Marks of a Thriving Church, and we’ve already read this passage together as a congregation about 7 times in the last 7 weeks. And we’re gonna read it today, again.

It’s often the most familiar passages that breed the deepest contempt in us.

“This AGAIN?! Come on! Move onto something new pastor!

We’ve been in this series so long. I get it already!”

But do you? It seems as though the Lord would have us linger here a bit longer.

As we read this familiar passage, again, I want us to turn our eyes toward a familiar sight that we see every Sunday, as we gather to worship, week after week, but perhaps fail to truly notice.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Grothe, *The Power of Place*

It may actually be the most important visual to anchor our worship in its most critical purpose on this side of eternity. As I read Acts 2:42-47, I want all of us to look out through these Western windows into the Greensborough garden that God has planted Cornerstone in, the glory of this particular place He has graciously gifted to us, the literal neighborhood that God has moved into through the Cornerstone family.

It's so easy, as a worshipping community, to shut ourselves in, keeping our eyes and hearts closed to the very life and lore that surrounds us, as if they were distractions. When in fact, it's these very details that serve as doorways to discover God's purpose and presence in the place where he's put us. So as I read this passage, offering us an ancient window into the life of the Early Church, I want it to serve as a lens through which we might imagine together how Cornerstone might continue to be and become a thriving church in this window of opportunity that we have to our curious neighbors.

Acts chapter 2, verses 42–47

Behold the Word of God:

**“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”<sup>2</sup>**

This is the Word of the Lord. [8:00]

Consider our church family, devoting ourselves to meeting together weekly to be immersed in the Scriptures, engaging in transformative worship and mutual servanthood that flows into the rest of our week. Then think about the supportive fellowship, shared meals and constant prayer we experience in and through small groups and other forms of intimate community spaces throughout the week. All of this leads us toward the Spirit-Empowered witness that we are called to collectively and individually in our homes, our communities, and our world at large. But sometimes the quantity and scope of these marks might overwhelm us and tempt us to withdraw into a vague and unspecific Christianity that is a mile wide and an inch deep. In the process of going into all the world, seeking to become all things to all people, we run the risk of becoming rootless, effectively becoming nothing to no one. Ever moving, ever changing, ever searching, when both the problem *and* the solution were always right here, right now, all along.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:42-47, ESV

## [Part I: God in the Neighborhood]

One of Cornerstone's distinctives is "God in the neighborhood"; drawn from the Message Bible's paraphrase of **John 1:14**, that Jesus, "**The Word, became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.**"<sup>3</sup> In the Old Testament, after humanity had chosen exile over Eden, the tabernacle in ancient Israel functioned as a mobile outpost of God's world in ours, a gracious portal into heaven on earth. But this tabernacle was guarded on every side by prohibitions and limitations so that we would never take the gravity of God's presence lightly or for granted. As the narrative of the biblical canon carries on, humanity likewise carries on as we always have from the beginning, forsaking the pleasure of God's presence and the treasure of His ways for counterfeits of our own making. After what seemed like a long drought of God's voice, and the apparent absence of His presence, it turns out that God had been patiently working out the mechanics of his own brilliant plan to reconcile and restore us to all that we were created for, particularly in loving union with Himself. The infinite magnitude and scale of God's plan centered and condensed upon a single human being, in a particular geographic place, at a specific time of socio-cultural history. The Gospel writers open their respective sagas telling the story about Jesus of *Nazareth*, 2,000 years ago, a real person in a real place & time, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit but born of the virgin Mary. The eternal Word through whom and for whom all things were Created, materializing in the form of a helpless infant, craving the nurturing embrace of his earthly parents. British writer and novelist, G. K. Chesterton sums it up this way:

"A mass of legend and literature, which increases and will never end, has repeated and rung the changes on that single paradox; that the hands that had made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle. Upon this paradox, we might almost say upon this jest, all the literature of our faith is founded."

Upon this paradox, and within this child, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Jesus, out of the abundance of his loving communion with the Father & the Spirit in eternity past, became our living tabernacle as the unthinkable solution to our self-appointed exile. In a stroke of divine wisdom and unprecedented mercy, Jesus descended the mountains of divine perfection and reached beyond the home of his heavenly abode, moving into our neighborhood, subjecting himself to all our human conditions and circumstances, enduring the full brunt of our suffering, shame, and sin, and through pierced skin and shed blood, single-handedly pioneering and re-engineering the human pathway back to God the Father.

But not only did Jesus lay His life down as a sacrificial bridge to make us at one with God, the movement was mutual, and as Christ breathed His last and gave up the ghost, our heavenly Father eagerly breathed upon us and gave us His Holy Ghost. In Christ, our dismal departure from the garden of Eden had come full circle, as we returned home to our Father and His breath of life returned to us through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we have become a living temple of God's presence to the world around us. **Jesus moved into our neighborhood as a catalyst to bringing us home, and grafted us into the family of God with the mission of incarnating our local neighborhoods and communities in the same way He did for us.**

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:14, MSG

## [Part II: Curious Neighbors]

The book of Acts highlights the outward spread of the Gospel through the prominent leaders and figures of the early Church, from Jerusalem to Samaria and beyond. But what about the thousands of other believers that came to Christ, but went right back home to their families, neighbors, and communities. We can get the impression that the itinerant life of the apostles and evangelists are the ideal picture of radical surrender that Jesus requires of His followers. But the reality is that most of us are not called to be apostles, or traveling evangelists, or even pastors, but all of us are called to be saints and missionaries in the muck and mire of everyday life. You may never get to preach a sermon on a stage in front of thousands, but neither will that world-famous preacher ever get the opportunity to speak face to face daily with your neighbor. You may not travel to every corner of the known world bringing the Gospel to those who've never heard it, but neither will those overseas missionaries get the chance to redeem your neighbors' stained experience and assumptions of Jesus & His followers through everyday words and deeds. Remember that even Jesus lived for 30 years in virtual obscurity to the world of his day, except for his family and neighbors who grew up alongside him in Nazareth. And the numerical impact at the end of his life paled in comparison to the overnight growth of the church in Acts 2. To be specific, Acts 2:41 tells us that 3000 souls were added to them that day. That's a metric of 2500% growth in one day! Which means that the existing 120 believers that were gathered together became a measly 4% of the Christian community in less than 24 hours.

Talk about a volunteer problem.

And we thought we had a lot of newcomers here at Cornerstone.

Luke doesn't tell us about what leadership books they read, or what managerial strategies they employed; but what's exceedingly clear is that God had poured out His Holy Spirit upon this local community and that imperishable Flame began to spread like wildfire through the individual lives and collective presence of those believers in that city. This burning bush of a church Body glowed so brightly that Acts 2:47 says that "they had favor with all the people". This community's devotion to Jesus and one another was visibly noticeable to their curious neighbors. But while the outward spread of the Gospel attracted the attention of the surrounding community, I believe that the downward deepening of the Gospel in this geographic location depended on this local church's ability to notice and reciprocate a humble posture of curiosity toward their neighbors. To embrace their adjacent world as an embodiment of Jesus' very own embrace.

We see this in the very next verses, in Acts chapter 3, as Peter & John manifested God's healing power to a man that was unable to walk from birth, a man who was laid daily at the gate of the temple, who over the years may have become the most ignored landmark that devout Jewish worshippers would have hustled past lest he be noticed by them. [18:30]

What local landmarks and signposts have you taken for granted on your rhythmic commutes to and from home?

*Who* are the regular bypassers that you have failed to notice, pay attention to or turn aside to make time for?

Maybe the better question is, "**Who is your neighbor?**"

That was the question asked by an expert of Jewish law in Luke 10, when Jesus had explained to the lawyer that eternal life was to be found by loving God with everything and loving his neighbor as himself. Thinking himself clever, the man responded to Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Seeking to justify his lovelessness, this “expert on Jewish law” sought to create a convenient category of “non-neighbour”, whom he would not be responsible for loving. Ironically, Jesus responds by sharing a parable that makes it clear that it is precisely the stranger, the apparent “non-neighbour”, that God expects us to show mercy when the opportunity and need arises. This lawyer is living proof that you can spend your life getting degrees in Bible doctrine, and studying systematic theology, and never truly hear the voice of God. Unlike this professional religious scribe, Jesus understood the spirit of Leviticus 19, in which God commanded His people to love their neighbors and the strangers in their midst as themselves, for they themselves were once the orphans and outcasts that God grafted into His own household as beloved children.

**So, who is your neighbor?**

Is there anyone you’ve deemed unworthy of the very mercy you’ve been shown?

It’s never too late to start. Especially when Jesus, the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever, stands patiently at the door and knocks, for the church or the soul that has locked him out for want of their own security.

Are your windows open to the world around you?

Where has God planted you to cultivate His Kingdom?

Who are the curious neighbors that God is calling you to notice and be curious about?

**When the church is thriving, curious neighbors take notice; but when the believing community takes notice of their curious neighbors, it leads to an incarnate embrace that embodies the love of Jesus through the proximity of local, everyday relationships.**

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## [CONCLUSION: How to Be A Curious Neighbor]

As we conclude, I want to encourage you with some practical ways to become a curious neighbor to your curious neighbors.

<sup>4</sup>First, do you actually know the names of the neighbors who live around you? When I moved into my new neighborhood in Brooklin about a year ago, I created a simple table that visually mapped my side of the street, the row in front of us and the couple houses behind us. In two weeks, I had intentionally memorized the names of 70 neighbors on our street and where they lived.

Course you know me, super shy and intimidated to meet new people; but seriously, even if you’re not an extrovert like I am, getting out of your comfort zone to learn the names of the neighbours who you *don’t* know is a great start.

<sup>5</sup>Second, go for attentive walks around the neighborhood, with the deliberate intent to stop a few times to chat with some of your neighbors to get to know them better. I have friends that make fun of me because when they visited our house, we weren’t able to even make it around our street when we went for a walk because I stopped to talk to every neighbor I saw.

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<sup>4</sup> **1) Make an effort to learn the names of your neighbors.**

<sup>5</sup> **2) Go for attentive walks, making time to chat with your neighbors.**

But you know what? Over time and after pressing past the small talk, some of those neighbours have mentioned to me that they're struggling with depression, or the pain of losing a loved one. Most of my neighbors aren't Christians, so you can imagine my reservations to reveal my job title to these sophisticated suburbanites. But just like the early Church in Acts, we can't control whether our neighbors' curiosity leads to faith or persecution, admiration or mockery. We have no control of that. But our genuine curiosity to know them better and serve them humbly as neighbors over time will communicate more than our religious affiliation ever will. One neighbor opened up about her personal struggle of faith in a passing conversation one day *because* she knew I was a pastor, and it's one of many journeys that God has set me on with these precious neighbors that I've been blessed me to live alongside.

<sup>6</sup>Third, send an unexpected, encouraging message to one of your neighbors affirming something you appreciate about them or what they've done. By doing that you're setting the temperature for what is explicitly valued and commended in your neighborhood through a simple gesture. Seriously, if you have their number, you can do it right now. This is one of the rare times where you *should* actually be texting in church. Just send an encouraging message, thanking and appreciating them.

This is probably a good time to mention one sidenote about your "neighbors":

While many of you are probably thinking of the people that live on your street, as you should, the reality is that a neighbor is simply someone that you brush shoulders with or see regularly throughout the week. This could be a fellow student, commuter, colleague at work, maybe a barber or hairdresser, perhaps it's an uncle, aunty or grandparent, maybe it's your sibling, child, or parent. I've actually been convicted this week about the fact that my closest neighbor is actually my wife, Emily, I do life alongside her more than anyone else in my life. Focus on 3-5 of your closest neighbors, whether relationally close or geographically close. Consider how you might practice curious, neighborly love in these direct circles of influence that God has placed you.

<sup>7</sup>Fourth, and I know I'm preaching to the choir here at Cornerstone, but get involved in some kind of initiative or ministry to put you face to face and hand to hand with the local community you're part of. You can visit our Local Impact webpage (as shown on the screen) or chat with Bethany Nolson to learn more about Cornerstone's local projects, initiatives and partnerships. Pastor Kevin has been the community rep at Greensborough Public School for the last 15 years; that's half the time I've been alive. Basically, he attends meetings where the needs of the school are presented, and he comes back to Cornerstone and coordinates with Bethany, our Outreach Director, to see if there's anything we can do about it. Since this relationship started, Cornerstone has helped retrofit a classroom for students with special needs, given them hundreds of

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<sup>6</sup> **3) Send an encouraging text of appreciation to one of your neighbors.**

<sup>7</sup> **4) Get involved in a local community or Cornerstone initiative:**

<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/localimpact/> (Include link/QR code to webpage)

backpacks with school supplies over the years, gave each staff at the school gift cards for their classroom during the pandemic, took donations *from* them for our pantry and gave donations *to* them for their food drive. Now you know why he's our friendly neighborhood Youth Pastor; he's actually a suburban superhero.

The crazy part about it is I *first* met Kevin, about 18 years ago, when I was a delinquent grade 7 student at Greensborough Public School, where they were running a basketball program at the school for kids in the area. Special mention to Colin, Mike, Geoff, Calvin & Shaun, who started that initiative back in the day, before Cornerstone even had our own community facility, we have always been a local church that incarnates and embraces this neighboring community in the name of Jesus.

I recently bumped into one of my teachers from Greensborough at a Starbucks in Whitby, and I mentioned to her that I'm now a pastor at Cornerstone Church right around the corner. She turned to her niece and said, "Oh yeah, that's the church that's always giving us stuff. That's where you got that water bottle and all those school supplies from."

An early Cornerstone motto and objective was that we would become "**a church that would be missed**" -- that the greater community would actually feel the poorer for Cornerstone's absence if for some hypothetical reason we had to close the church or relocate to another area. And it all flows from our theology of incarnation, that God – in Christ – moved into the neighborhood, and sends us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to go forth and do likewise. When the church is thriving, curious neighbors take notice; but when the believing community itself becomes a curious neighbor, it leads to an incarnate embrace that embodies the love of Jesus through the proximity of local, everyday relationships.

**So who is your neighbor?**

**And are your windows open to the world around you?**

[7:30]

That last question that I've asked throughout the message comes from a story told by aforementioned pastor Daniel Grothe in the same book I quoted earlier. He shares a story about a nun who was set to be married to *an eligible* suitor within the week, when suddenly she had a "vision of the world dying—for lack of prayer. She could almost hear the world gasping, as a drowning man gasps for air." As she looked around, it seemed as though even the Church did not know that the world was dying – for want of prayer. "As instant as a leaping altar flame, she vowed her life to ceaseless intercession, and none could dissuade her. She founded a contemplative order of prayer – lest the world should die.

Was she quite wrong?

Was she wrong at all?

Or is our world saved by those who keep the windows open on another World?"

Grothe concludes that the Lord's prayer, "Hallowed be thy name, on earth as it is in heaven", is really a "prayer that aches for the beauty of God's name to get worked out in the very real conditions of our lives.



The holiness of God invading the unholy streets.

In short, the praying people of God are called to participate in the re-sanctification of creation by welcoming and making space for the name of God.

To make up a word, we Christians are called to the re-holy-ing of the world.”

This leads to the <sup>8</sup>final way we can practice loving curiosity toward our curious neighbors.

The most fundamental way we can re-enchance, re-sanctify, and re-holy our local communities is by specifically and persistently praying for our neighbors. **Through prayer, we keep our earthly window open on God’s World, and invite that heavenly realm into this place.**

So in closing, I want us to turn again t’ward this Western window, but this time, if you’re able to, I’d like us all to stand and face our neighboring community. And just as we did during our very first worship service in this facility, we’re gonna stretch our hands toward this window, toward our community, toward our neighbors. You can also be mindful of your own local neighbors as we pray. And as I lead us in this prayer for our precious neighbors, the same prayer pastor Steve led us in years ago, I want you to keep your eyes open as we bless this Greensborough community, and beyond, in Jesus’ name. Let’s pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, even as we stretch out our hands to pray your blessing on the greater community in which you’ve placed us, we’re reminded of how you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So fill us with your Spirit, that we too, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not yet know you to the knowledge and love of you, for the honour of your name, and for the sake of God’s mission to restore this world through his people in his time. Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for making Cornerstone Centre a reality. May we only ever use this building as the kingdom tool you intend it to be. Through it, may we spread your fragrance throughout the greater community. Make us agents of influence for you. Make us a bright, salty presence for you in Markham. And because we can’t give away what we don’t have, we pray that you will continually flood our souls with your Spirit and life, Lord Jesus. Penetrate and possess our whole being so utterly that our lives may only be a radiance of yours. Shine through us, that every person we come into contact with—not only through this building, but in our workplaces, schools, and the neighborhoods where we live—may experience the reality of your loving presence. May we, like the Acts 2 church, enjoy the goodwill of the people of our community, and may you add to our fellowship—daily—those who are being saved. In Jesus’ name we pray, and the whole church said, “Amen!”

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<sup>8</sup> 5) Pray specifically and persistently for your neighbors.