

Walking the children to school: a neighbourhood story

My family moved to our neighbourhood three years ago and began the work of connecting and making our home here. It has been a slow and humbling time. I have been confronted with my own agendas and baggage - a need to be someone who comes to help, start something, improve life and offer my own 'awesomeness' to the street. I have had to (and continue to) learn to slow down in order to show up, let myself be seen, let go of my agendas and be open and ready to participate in the common good as it is named by my neighbours. Following Jesus in my neighbourhood has me on a strange and disorienting journey in which I believe I am called to be a supporting cast member.

Soon after moving to our neighbourhood we looked at putting our kids in the local schools. This meant leaving the best school district around to attend what was a modest little known school with an average reputation at best. We struggled deeply with this decision and the potential impact it would have on our kids. After numerous conversations with neighbours, friends and educators, we knew that all our concerns about our kid's education were secondary to the importance of them forming relationships in the neighbourhood and connecting to families through the school. This was a significant part of life in the neighbourhood that we believed we were called to participate in.

The school has been a lovely community and our children have thrived there. One of the ways we have participated in our school community has been through the simple practice of joining our kids in walking to school. There is a "walking school bus" made up of neighbourhood families that pick up kids along the route and are joined by parents as they are able as well. Parents who are stuck (early meetings, no childcare, sick, etc.) will drive/walk their kids to the group and drop them off with a wave to a familiar parent. We make sure everyone gets to school safely. Grandparents, nannies, babysitters, teachers and younger siblings join in. Dogs join in. Newcomers to our city or to our country have a place to make connections. Our kids are building relationships across different age groups, getting to know local parents and neighbours and exercising their minds and bodies before school. This simple practice is weaving the fabric of neighbours that support and care about one another in some pretty significant ways.

On these walks I have learned about my neighbours fears, their gifts and passions, ongoing challenges with our kids and laughed a whole lot about the antics that occur before 8:15am. We have begun to wrestle with issues of affordable housing for our friends, with density and new developments on our streets, with how we support refugees coming to our city, with transit, disgruntled neighbours, broken relationships and more. I have heard how many of my neighbours, long before my family showed up on the block, have been working towards the common good. Marlene, a civic engineer lobbied the local government a few years back to have a developer building on our block, upgrade our local park and create a cul-de-sac on our street to lessen car traffic. Mary runs a pet rescue for cats down by the waterfront and supports and resources others with pets in the area. Katie, a yoga teacher, practices in the neighbourhood and in our homes. She also makes it her business to care for a sick neighbour suffering with chronic fatigue and supports her with restorative yoga friendship.

So where is God in all of this? What has all this neighbourly kindness to do with God's mission in the world and how we join with this? Where is the local church? I struggle with my connection to a local congregation and feel a bit 'out on my own', with a web of other believers I connect with across the city for support and discernment. I don't have the definitive word on all that God is doing where I live. It is deeper, wider and brighter than I can comprehend. I am just one piece, one thread in a fabric that is being woven as the Holy Spirit is at work amongst the people where I live. Here is a little of what I am learning on this journey...

As a person of faith I am automatically suspicious to my friends and neighbours. I am aware that there is concern over what agendas I may bring to my relationships. I have to constantly let go of any agendas that I have (and those I possibly don't know I have!) and show up as I am - with humility. Joining God at work in my neighbourhood is not a back entry or secret path to converting my neighbours. It is not an evangelism tactic. It is a reorientation of what it means to follow Jesus. It takes me out of my place of power and control (performing actions and activities to move people from point 'a' to 'b') to being a participant in the work of the Spirit. This is a strange space, requires new practices and usually involves unexpected partners. As much as I think I 'know' this I am surprised how often my body/gut/memory defaults to agendas and treating people like objects.

I can't start with leading any initiatives or causes. This is really hard. I like to be the idea person and the 'fix it' person. Church life rewards us for being self-starters, group leaders and those that make things happen. I am learning that showing up in my neighbourhood requires that I honour and create space for others. Showing up to plant the newest and 'best' church, host the largest block party, plant the up-and-coming garden and so on, that is really about me and not what is going on in my community. I must start with who God is and what God is doing. Where are there signs of God's kingdom and life in this place and amongst these people? What are the stories and themes that I continue to hear people talk about? What are the concerns that keep us up at night? What are the dreams that give us hope and expectation for this place? God is active in a myriad of ways around me. I am trying to listen and pay attention to where God might be calling me to participate in the midst of this. If I begin with my own sense of what needs to be done - then I am not listening or paying attention to the work that God has already been doing amongst these people before I arrived and will continue after I am gone. I am not the initiator of good things - God is.

We live a stone's throw from a hospital, a mental health facility and a hospice so there are a lot of sick and grieving people who walk our streets. This winter I walked my puppy by a woman standing with an aggressive looking dog, outside a home beautifully decorated for Christmas. She appeared to be admiring the Christmas lights and greenery. I continued on and was startled a moment later to hear the woman yell, scream and then begin kicking her dog. I was so alarmed that I continued on for a moment before stopping, turning and wondering what to do. I was walking my puppy and was not comfortable with getting close to her dog - yet I knew I could not walk away. I looked up and down my street and saw Mary coming out of her house having heard the same disturbing sounds. We had not met before. We talked hurriedly as we moved towards this woman and her dog and Mary was prepared to talk the lead in addressing this woman. I crossed the street with my puppy and stayed close by to support her. What unfolded was the strangest and most beautiful encounter. Mary directly addressed what she had seen

and told the woman simply that it was wrong and could not continue. She took her picture and said she was prepared to report her if needed. Mary's body language, her words and her attitude were all those of someone who speaks truth *and* is full of compassion and grace. Her goal was to support and help this woman manage her dog. Mary and this woman spent a good 45 minutes talking and practicing some basic training with the dog. I watched from across the street and continued on my way when I could see that the encounter would not escalate.

A few weeks later I was out walking my dog again and came across Mary at the front of her house with some of the stray cats she cares for. I told her how well I thought she had handled the whole situation and how impressed I was with her calm ability to de-escalate what could have been a very different encounter. She laughed and began to tell me more. When she had left her house to go and talk to the woman, she had felt anger and distress. She had marched down the street, as she explained, with the blood pulsing through her veins. 'I really could have laid into her,' she said, 'but as I approached her I knew that if I did not give her respect and did not approach her in a spirit of gentleness, then I would achieve nothing.' So she did just that. Then Mary told me what had happened next. A couple of hours later Mary was out getting groceries and heard someone behind her saying, 'Hello, it's me again.' Mary turned and it was the same woman speaking. She thanked Mary for taking the time to talk with her earlier and for her help. No one had given her that much attention and support in a long time. They talked right there in the grocery store for another 30 minutes. Mary learned that the woman had been couch surfing, with her dog, while visiting a dying relative at the hospice. She was clearly in distress and dealing with major instability.

Mary sized me up a little, as she told me all of this. Then she looked across the street (as we kept her cats and my puppy a healthy distance apart) and said, 'It really was a God-thing. If I had approached the woman in anger, I never would have listened and been available to her - which is what she and that dog needed. It really was one of those moments that you know you are part of something bigger.'

I continue to be surprised at the many ways that God is at work amongst the people in my neighbourhood. Learning how to follow Jesus involves listening to the many ways that the Spirit is working in and through the lives of the people I share life with. It is slow and I am really such a novice at all of this; however, I am so grateful for the opportunity to be a part of naming the "God-moments". I am so glad to listen to my neighbours as they name and point to the common good that we all participate in together.