

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

July 22, 2018

Creating Space to Engage our Neighbors – Won't You Be My Neighbor

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I think if I took a survey across all of our campuses this weekend, even those who are listening via podcast and I asked the question, what is it that you wish you had more of? I think my hypothesis would reveal the common two answers would probably be time and money. You know, 24 hours in a day just doesn't seem like enough to get the things done that we need to get to. As a matter of fact, somebody is probably thinking right now about something you didn't get done or needs to get done or you're trying to figure out how are you going to get it done? And then, you know, as far as money is concerned, there are always these growing list of needs and wants that seem to be just kind of out of reach, but the thing about money, at least there's an opportunity to get more of it. You know, you can maybe climb higher in your career and you can get paid more or you could do a side hustle or maybe you can invest and you can grow money, but that's not the same thing for time. We don't get any more time, what we have is what we have and the hard part about that is we don't even know how much we have. We just know that it's limited.

There is a physicist who once said time is our most valuable non renewable resource and if we want to treat it with respect, we need to set priorities. And then William Penn, who is the founder of a state of Pennsylvania or the province of Pennsylvania at the time, he said, time is what we want most, but what we use worse. You know, the funny thing about that is we've got technology, we've got, you know, phones and apps and all sorts of things that help us to stay scheduled and stay organized, but we're more stressed and more unorganized than we've ever been. And just to be transparent, I feel like over the last year it's been man, a very up and downtime is I've tried to manage my own calendar. As a matter of fact, over the last year I've had two blunders with my schedule and weddings that I had scheduled. Now you all know that you don't mess with a bride and her day that might get you cut. But I think it's because I've just been too ambitious with my yeses. And my yeses needed to be aligned with the right priorities and rhythms in my life?

Well, this is what we see Jesus doing in the Gospels. We see his examples being aligned to the father's priorities. As a matter of fact, in Luke chapter two, we see him even as a youth, his parents are looking for him and they finally find him and he says, why are you seeking me? Didn't you know I must be about my father's business? And then in John 15, he says, I only do what I see the father doing.

This weekend we continue our series, Won't You Be My Neighbor? And we wanted to zoom in on this idea of what it means to create space to be present with one another. And the reality is to love and engage our neighbors like Jesus calls us to, it takes time and intentionality. So for the next few minutes, I wanted to share with you an interview with two of our friends living in the Chirilagua neighborhood of Alexandria. Dawnielle Miller is the executive director of the organization called Casa Chirilagua. And some of her friends prayed about where God would plant them and they ended up and the Chirilagua neighborhood and they've been planted there

since 2007. So we want to listen in on this journey of neighboring that they've been on and how they've created space to do so.

So Dawnielle, sometime after college you find yourself in DC, you feel like God has called you to the Chirilagua neighborhood, this Central American Latino community to live. So you plant yourself there. Can you talk about what it was like to create space in your calendar to engage with this new community that you were in?

Dawnielle: Yeah, it was very hard. It was, it was challenging at first. I was trying to manage the difference between my life prior to living in Chirilagua and then my new life in Chirilagua making space for new relationships and friendships because I was a pretty extroverted person. So that extroversion multiplied in friendships and I had many friendships by the time I moved to the neighborhood. And I often found myself with one foot in two different worlds. But then I knew that I needed to choose and make some changes in the way that I utilized my time in order to really be available to my neighbors and to really have the time and space to get to know them and build real relationships. I was visiting a friend of mine who had a single family home and visiting her and her husband and her foster son and they had this massive house and things were very quiet and peaceful and everyone had their space. And I returned back to my apartment and I remember pulling up to the space and just sitting in my car and looking at the apartment building and saying, what am I doing? Why am I here? Most of my friends from the outside, I would say are from my twenty something DC life would say things like, I can't believe you're sharing a room, what are you in college? And then the families that I lived with were sometimes living 10 people to a one or two bedroom apartment. And as I sat there and prayed, I remember the Lord gave me a vision and the walls came down on the apartment building and I remember, it was as if I could see right into all of these apartments and I could see multiple people nestled in each bedroom with people sleeping on couches and people sleeping on cots in the living room. And I remember thinking, you have been given so much, you are so privileged and you don't even see it and you're pining for this other lifestyle when you're really not sacrificing that much. You have your own bedroom and you're sharing a two bedroom apartment with two other people. And I just remember there was this transformational moment of this is where I need to be. This is good for me and I don't want to be anywhere else.

Joshua: So Dawnielle, I want to ask you about just the transition to starting Casa Chirilagua, which is the organization that you lead as executive director. That's not why you moved to Chirilagua, but hey, you're here. After two years of being here, I think it was two years and then I guess, Rachel, you come at some point during that time.

Dawnielle: We even said when we moved in, programs don't transform communities, relationships do and I said to my friends with whom I moved into the neighborhood, we will not start an organization. We are just going to be good neighbors and we're going to get to know our neighbors and love them well. And then about a year and a half at the end of living in the neighborhood, we were listening to the stories of the community. And as we listened, we heard a heart cry from the parents that they would like support in the educational development of their children. Many of them said the one thing they wanted for their children was for them to have the educational opportunities that they didn't have. And so Emily was an educator and she said, hey, I could do an after-school program, and she started an after-school program. And then about

two years into that, some friends of ours who had a not for profit came to us and said, we've been thinking about utilizing our not for profit as an umbrella organization to incubate ministries that we believe in and would you be willing to consider. What you're doing is one of the first ministries that we would like to help grow up and launch. And again, my heart said, no, no, no, that's not why we're here. But we realized that what we were doing was not going to be sustainable to continue working part time jobs and doing the afterschool program and mentoring programs. So we prayed about it and we really felt like God said, go for it. And so about four months later, we jumped, that was August of 2010 and just quit our jobs. We had no idea how we were going to fund it and just trusted that the Lord would provide.

Joshua: I want to go back to something you just said about listening to the needs in the community. Tell us how you were able to create space in your schedule or kind of what sort of things were happening that would create an environment for you to be able to listen, or to engage in conversation or hear about what was happening.

Dawnielle: Right. So it wasn't creating a forum where we called all of the neighbors over and had a sit down, 'okay, we're here to listen'. It was just through the everyday relationships. It was, we would make a giant pot of spaghetti and intentionally make extras and then stand on the balcony of our apartment and invite everyone who is in the park to come over for dinner. And through sitting and having conversation over dinners through my Spanish, which was still developing, right, and continues to develop. And we would listen to people's stories and by listening to people's stories and getting to know them; the heartbeat of what they're desiring for themselves and for their families would come out. Or we would just come home from work and decided to just sit on the bench in the park while the parents are watching their children play. Or choosing to grab our bags and walk to the grocery store that's in the neighborhood so that we're available to brush up against people and hear their stories.

Joshua: So basically what you're saying is you just made intentional choices that would put you in the path of the people that you lived in community with, people that you wanted to engage with. And it was just through those choices that these revelations of what the actual needs were came about.

Rachel: Yes. One of the things that I've read is that we make some of our closest friends in high school and college because it takes... Friendship is built on long stretches of unplanned time together. That we build friendships when there's no other... there's nothing else to do and that when we're only making time for people over coffee or we can meet for lunch between this meeting at work and this meeting at work that doesn't leave time to just be. And I think that one of the lessons of this neighborhood is the standing outside the not driving your car up and just running in your front door, but standing in your driveway and allowing the conversation to take 20 minutes or 30 minutes or an hour in the driveway that real friendships develop when you don't have anything else on the schedule.

Joshua: Talk to us about how you create space to a neighbor in this community as a stay at home mom with priorities of your own, having a husband and three kids.

Rachel: I mean, when, when you're a mom, your life is constantly being pulled in lots of different directions, but kids are also. They don't do much like they go with you. They don't have... And, I think bringing my kids with me and being part of the neighborhood, choosing to play at the playgrounds here in our community. So we're getting to know neighbors within close proximity, so we're building relationships with people that will see again and again and again. I'm very intentionally choosing to send our kids to the school right here in our neighborhood, so we're building relationships at school functions with our neighbors. Part of that has been making some choices about our children's time. We've been very intentional about not doing a lot of activities with our kids. They have taken lessons here and then or participated soccer every once in awhile, but we know that if our life is getting them packed in the van to take them to sports practices and take them to clubs and different activities, then we're not here. And so part of the decision that my husband and I have made is to let our kids be bored, let them play in the alley, let them play in the front yard and get to know the kids that live right here around us. They don't need to have structured, coached activities at all time to build good solid relationships with other kids and to build the life skills that we prioritize as a household. When you're getting to know your neighbors, you're going to need to work through conflict with them in a way that having a structured activity at school doesn't, I think doesn't serve kids as well as you get in a fight with the kid that lives across the street, the next day you're all gonna get on the bus together again and you're going to have to work that out. So I feel like by making choices to be here and to be centered and focused right here within the, just the streets right around our house, our kids are learning the kind of Christ-like neighboring that we want for them, for the rest of their lives.

Joshua: Rachel, help us maybe process through how we do that in an area where we're very scheduled, where our calendars literally dictate to us what we do. And if something gets out of sorts, it throws the entire day off. So what would your encouragement be to someone who's not wired like you, who is very scheduled? What's an encouragement to them to put themselves in a position where they can be more open to interruption?

Rachel: Right. I think one of the things I've learned when I'm building a new relationship with a neighbor, I'm just getting to know is, please always feel free to ask. If I can't do it I'm going to say no. I promise you that if you coming to my house as a burden, I'm going to say no. If you asked me to watch your kids and I know that I can't do it, I'm going to say no. So if you can trust me that I'll say no when I really truly can't do it. I hope that invites you say yes and to ask because you could trust me that if I'm saying yes, I really mean yes. Please give me your kids for the afternoon. Please let me help you run this errand. Because if I'm saying yes, it means that I really am excited to do it.

Joshua: I love that you talked about saying yes and saying no. I love to kind of ask, how do you determine when to say yes and when to say no. What's the line for you? How have you been able to draw boundaries or what do those boundaries look like?

Rachel: My husband says lots of great things, but one of the things that he talks about is people limits. I think we're really, North Americans are really tuned into introversion or extroversion and my husband always talks about people limits. Like he can do so much people peopling during the course of a day and he reaches this point where he says that's, that's my people limit. And I think it takes self knowledge and some time to process. Where is your people limit? What

is the point in which you realize I need to say I can't do anymore? I need to have some quiet time. I need my house to just be our family for the evening. And I think that I'm also as a mom, learning to read my children that I may be ready to have another party, but my kids need the house to be quiet this evening and knowing that part of my job as a mom is to take care of their needs and making sure our home is a place where they can feel rest.

Joshua: Dawnielle, Rachel said earlier that she talked to her kids about why they're saying yes to certain things. Jesus was very focused on his mission here on earth. There are two instances in the Gospel of Mark where people are asking for Jesus. There's one time in Mark one where his disciples saying, hey, someone is looking for you. Then the Mark three his disciples were saying, hey, your mom and your brother are looking for you. And in both instances Jesus just shrugs it off. The first instance, he says, well, let's go over here, I know they're calling me here, but let's go over here. And then the second instance of, well, who is my mom and my brother? You know, these people here, my mom, as a matter, I'm content where I am right now. How do you balance that in terms of being focused on where you are and not being distracted by other things that are coming around or things that are coming up. How do you know where to put your focus?

Dawnielle: There are seasons when that is easier and seasons where that is more challenging and I am well aware that the seasons when it comes easier is when I have very good time with the Lord. When I am taking a good time in the morning to engage with scripture, to journal and be intentional about what's going on inside of me and taking space to listen to what God is saying. Then it's much easier to, to know what my yes is and what my no is. And it's much easier to, to be able to do the things that God has told me to do and say the things that God has told me to say and to let other things pass by. But when that's off, then it gets off kilter and it tends to quickly become chaotic. Sometimes, maybe even anxiety inducing or I start doing the bidding of other people rather than the bidding of God. And it's a hard line to learn to stay focused on and to stay in a space where I am making time to listen to God and follow what he's telling me to do and how to use, how to use my time.

Joshua: Lawrence Ajayi is a community activist, a entrepreneur, community developer. He says we often want the benefits of community but not the burden of the community. Can you guys talk to us about the challenge you face of creating a space to be in one another's lives and to engage with the community here in Chirilagua, but then also, carrying or being a part of some of the burdens that the community is carrying. Can you talk to us about how you navigate that?

Dawnielle: I think over time we've both become much better at learning how to place the burden at the feet of Jesus and to walk with people in their burdens, but then can leave them behind instead of continuing to carry them. A specific example that's very recent and it's still very real and very raw for both of us, is that two students who we've done life with for eight years are US citizens and they're in high school now and they recently received the news that their mother is going to be deported. She doesn't have a criminal record and their mother had the opportunity to try to fight to stay here, but it would have been a losing battle according to all of the legal professionals we visited. She chose to voluntarily deport so it could be on her timeline and that the family could choose to do it together. And we don't have a program at Casa to walk through families that are going through this. And so a number of us in our free time as neighbors started going to legal appointments and taking her to check ins with homeland security and figuring out

walking with the family through what life is going to look like after mom goes home and the kids return to life without their mother; and the questions that come along with that and helping them figure out the legal documentation of if something happens to dad, what's going to happen to the kids? All of those things to then helping them get their passports in order and helping them buy plane tickets to go with their mother to say goodbye and throwing a barbecue for the family as their last hurrah together.

Rachel: And friends volunteering to take family portraits before she got on the plane so they could have family pictures of their last time probably for a long time that they're all together.

Dawnielle: Yeah, so that's the type of stuff where it's hard to unload the burden because the pain for them continues. And walking with this young lady who is a great high school student in is two years away from graduating high school and she will be the first person in her family to ever do that and her mom so badly wanted to be there to see her do that and knowing that's not going to be their reality.

Joshua: Since you guys have been in Chirilagua can you tell us how you have experienced the help of the community or how they have taught you and how they've helped you?

Dawnielle: My grandmother has been one of the most important people in my life. She was the one who delighted in me and in her eyes I could do no wrong. She always encouraged me and I remember the moment when I was sitting at work and I received the phone call that she had passed away. And I went home and I was really sad and I went and I visited our neighbor who lived below us, Yanet[?]. Yanet, just knew how to take care of me and she made me food and sat and she listened to me tell stories about my grandmother and what a wonderful woman she was through the midst of my broken Spanish because I didn't, I didn't have all of the vocabulary. But she was patient with me and Yanet put me back together to get me on a plane and get me home to my family so that I could grieve the passing of my grandmother. And it was this beautiful moment where she was there for me and was my second mom when I didn't have any of my family around, but she stepped in and became my family. And I also remember how challenging it was for me when I had the realization that her grandmother passed away and she had to grieve from here because if she went home she wouldn't be able to come back. And that kindness that she extended to me, I could only extend back by being a listening ear and helping her grieve, but she didn't have the chance to have that same closure.

Joshua: So in closing, we are nearing the end of our neighboring series. We've heard a lot of fascinating and challenging messages and encouraging messages as well. We'd love to hear from both of you if possible, just some encouraging words that you would offer to us as we are trying to neighbor well.

Rachel: I think one of the biggest lessons I've learned in neighboring well is the difference between entertaining someone and hospitality. And you're probably familiar with this idea, but Martha Stewart entertains and Pinterest entertains and it's about you as the entertainer. And hospitality is about your guests, it's about your neighbor. And for me, hospitality means moving my dirty laundry pile from the couch to the floor so I can offer you the couch. And when we can get over that hurdle of what it means to offer your space to someone means offering yourself, not

a pristine Pinterest worthy spread. I think we're going to suddenly have more room and more time because the preparation suddenly looks a lot different. It's about preparing my heart and not vacuuming the carpet.

Dawnielle: From my standpoint my encouragement would be based on two of the core values that we have here at Casa, which are relational and rooted. And I would like to challenge NCC to say, how are you being relational in the place where you are in your community. And how are you rooting yourself in the place where God has placed you? I believe that we are called to a people and to a place and that those things are connected, that the place where we live impacts the daily life of the people who live in that place. And it's not just caring about the people that you see, but also caring holistically for the place where you live. And so if I care more about picking up the trash on the road if I live in that place. I care more about advocating for good policy with my city leaders if I live in that place. And I'm going to advocate for policies that benefit the whole, if I know the people of that place, it's not just about me and what I want and I think that they're intertwined. I also believe we have a lot of Biblical examples of the importance of people and place and that God calls us to root ourselves and there is incredible opportunity for the furthering of God's Kingdom and the Gospel in doing so.

Joshua: Social comparison theory says this, we tend to judge ourselves and how far along we are based off of what other people are doing or what they're accomplishing or the things that we see happening with them. And I think this is a moment where we could take in what we just heard from Dawnielle and Rachel and we can start to either validate or invalidate how we're neighboring based off of their story and what they're doing. But we didn't show you this interview, we didn't engage in this interview because we felt like this was the gold standard, that this was how you do it. We didn't show you this interview because we felt like this was an apples to apples comparison. We just wanted to show you a real life example. We wanted to show you people who are on this journey and who are living this and who are trying to work out what it means to neighbor like Jesus calls us to.

Now your reality might be different. And I would say probably for the most of us it is very different. But that's okay. All of us are not called to what Dawnielle and Rachel are called to, all of us don't have the freedom with our schedules, to do the things that they can do and that's okay, but we can be more intentional. We can use our time wisely and effectively. God has placed people in our path wherever we may find ourselves, people that we can engage with and we can build relationships with, people that we can be a more intentional with. So our goal each week of this series was just to set the table for you to think about what this means for you, to inspire you and to encourage you and push you to think through how you can be a more intentional. How can you contextualize this for the communities that you're in, where you work, where you live, where you work out, all the places where you regularly frequent.

One last challenge that I want to give you this week as we've zoomed in this particular week on the theme of controlling your calendar. When I was really young, my mother taught me proverbs 3: 5 & 6. It says,

⁵ *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding;*⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will direct your paths."*

You know, as I began to study that more and examine what that meant for my life, I can see how my schedule and everything else gets off course because I'm not trusting God with those things, I'm not going to him first, I am leaning to my own understanding, I'm not always acknowledging him therefore my path gets off. So what this means is I need to check in and I need to make sure that the thing that I want to do aligns with the things that he wants me to do. It's kind of like my kids, you know, like they're growing and they're getting more freedoms, but, and they think it's okay for them to do so, but it's cool for them to check in with me because what they think is a good idea might not be a good idea, it's the same in our relationship with God. Although we have matured and we've grown and we are discovering more and learning more, we still need to check in and make sure the things that we think are good ideas are actually good ideas and they are the things that God desires for us. So maybe there's just a simple prayer this week. God, show me where I need to make some edits so I can be present and available the way you would have for me to be and I can experience the things that you desire for me to experience

Let's pray. God that is our prayer that you would help us to make the edits that we need to make. But God help us to not compare ourselves to others and to either validate or invalidate based off of what we've seen and heard. God, help us to just take that next step whatever that may be. Help us to turn over our calendars into, to seek you and acknowledge you in all of our ways so that our paths don't get off, but we can go in the direction that you called us to and we can be the neighbors that you desire us to be. So, in all of these things, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.