

Twenty-three years ago, journalist Peter Lovenheim wrote an OpEd in the *New York Times* titled "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" The essay has been republished numerous times over the years, so you may be familiar with it.

When the piece originally ran back in 2000, Lovenheim had lived in the same Rochester, New York neighborhood for two decades, and several years prior, the community found themselves rocked by a tragic murder-suicide that devastated an entire family. Lovenheim wondered if he and his neighbors had missed signs of trouble, and he lamented how quickly the community seemed to move on from this incident, once some time passed. Lovenheim felt disturbed that no one in his neighborhood seemed to *really* know each other. So, he embarked on a little social experiment: over the course of several months, Lovenheim contacted neighbors and asked to come sleepover.

I ask you all sitting here and watching on line: Is this something you would ever do?

I can stand here and admit, it's not something I could ever imagine doing. But for some reason Lovenheim felt called to. He wrote:

"Why is it that in an age of cheap long-distance rates, discount airlines and the Internet, when we can create community anywhere, we often don't know the people who live next door?

Maybe my neighbors didn't mind living this way, but I did. I wanted to get to know the people whose houses I passed each day — not just what they do for a living and how many children they have, but the depth of their experience and what kind of people they are."

As he walked out of the house for his first sleepover, Lovenheim's teenage daughter rolled her eyes and called him crazy. And although a number of neighbors turned down his request, of the 18 or so he approached, over half said yes. During this experiment, Lovenheim managed to get to know neighbors that included a widower, a young woman with cancer, and a couple with two young children. He enjoyed morning coffee with them, ate dinner with them, talked with them. The formative experience inspired his 2010 book, "In The Neighborhood: The Search For Community On An American Street, One Sleepover At A Time."

Lovenheim's quest might seem unorthodox to some, though at least his sleepovers occurred in his neighborhood and not in unfamiliar territory. Still, the experiment explores one of the central questions from the Gospel this morning: Who do we welcome—and spend time with—at our tables?

Let's consider the events Matthew details. As Jesus sit to dine, many tax collectors and sinners come and sit with him and his disciples. The outraged Pharisees demand to know how Jesus could do such a thing, because the Jewish community does *not* look favorably upon tax collectors. They view those in that profession as collaborators with the Roman authorities. As these men collected money for the Empire, they also profited personally by taking more than was legally due. In short, they are generally despised and shunned, considered social outcasts.

And yet, Jesus calls Matthew the tax collector into his community of disciples to dine with them. He tells the grumbling Pharisees he has come not to save the "healthy" but rather those who are sick.

Just after this exchange, Jesus is asked to heal the dead daughter of one of the synagogue leaders. It's important to note that the Jews considered corpses

unclean and laying hands on the dead a defiling act. Yet Jesus does not hesitate to answer the call to go heal this girl.

Likewise, Jewish laws would've labeled the woman who'd been hemorrhaging for 12 years as "unclean." As she touches the fringe of Jesus's cloak, she almost certainly knows the act would be considered a defiling one for Jesus. And yet, neither angered nor disturbed, he says to her, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well."

Again and again, Jesus chooses to be in relationship with those on the margins—the despised, the outcast, the unclean—crossing social boundaries entrenched in the laws of his time. Again and again he prioritizes mercy over cultural norms, and reorders social and community boundaries by intentionally including the excluded, like the tax collectors and "sinners," along with many others we encounter across scripture: lepers, the blind and lame, the demon-possessed.

Scripture is filled with examples of who Jesus chose to reach out to, to heal, to be with at the table. Theologian Luke Powery, Dean of Duke University Chapel, speaks to this, saying: "[Jesus] inclusivity at the table is an indictment against the status quo. He eats and sits with the demonized, demonstrating that no one, even sinners, is beyond the reach of God's mercy." Powery goes on to explain the relevance of this for us today, noting that "Table fellowship says something about who is accepted in our social networks."

For not only does Jesus sit with the unclean, but he calls his disciples to as well—since the moment he first gathered his 12 apostles, saying, "Follow me." And while the outcast of our time may not include a bleeding woman or a colluder with the Roman empire, there are many our society deems unworthy of a place at the table:

those imprisoned, the refugee, people with drug addictions, the homeless, those with mental illness, our LGBTQ+ community members. And caught up in our cultural and social norms, even the best-intentioned of us can be blind to the ways we may contribute to the exclusion of “the other.”

I've lived in my Ellicott City neighborhood for 23 years now. Many people, myself included, consider it a great place to call home: the schools are great, the housing values high, the people nice. My husband and I both grew up living in some not-so-nice neighborhoods, so we appreciate being able to provide such an experience for our family.

Some time last year, I began noticing a man hanging out in the median at the intersection of Route 40 and St. John's Lane, holding a sign: “Homeless and Hungry.” The man's appearance became more and more regular—soon I saw him nearly every day I drove by. Soon I also began seeing the “concerned” comments on our neighborhood Google group how disturbing it was to have this happen in our neighborhood.

Someone on NextDoor suggested this matter could be “handled” as a safety issue, meaning that a pedestrian should not be loitering in the median of a busy road. And one day not long after, I noticed a Howard County police cruiser parked at the intersection and two officers talking with the man. The next time I drove by, he was gone. I've yet to see him again.

I would love to believe the officers engaged this man in conversation and perhaps inquired out of genuine concern for his safety, maybe tried to direct him to resources. But something in the back of my mind makes me wonder if my neighbors' complaints, thinly veiled as “concerns,” precipitated the man's disappearance.

My neighbors and I no doubt consider ourselves open-minded and inclusive, just as we undoubtedly do here at Christ Church. But as we think of how we welcome the "other," are we using Jesus as our model? When we reflect on the ways we invite others, do we have our Great Teacher's example in mind? Jesus, who wasn't afraid to get dirty. Jesus, who, if he walked the Earth today, might be mistaken for a homeless drifter himself.

Jesus calls us to spend time at the table with those considered unclean. In the rhythm and routine of our own lives, amid the demands of family and work, it's not necessarily an easy reality to live into. We probably spend a lot of time with people a lot like us. Take those sitting beside us on Sunday morning. We may have kids that attend the same school or play sports together, we may live in the same neighborhood, serve in the same ministry. And this is not a bad thing. It's both comfortable and comforting.

But Jesus calls us to risk engaging with people outside those comfort zones. Like the man in the median. Our Lord calls us into fellowship with not the righteous but sinners, to minister to not the healthy but the sick. He calls us, saying "Follow me."

If Jesus walked the Earth today, whose table would he find us at, and who would be beside us? The question is one relevant to not just how well we know our neighbors but how we, as the Church, are intentional about welcoming "the other." Let us pray for open hearts and minds to discern the Gospel's message of radical inclusivity and follow Jesus to a seat at God's great banquet table, where all are invited, all are welcomed, all are loved.