

FamilyLife Today® Radio Transcript

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Will You Be My Neighbor?

Guest: Amy Lively
From the series: The Neighborhood Café (Day 1 of 2)
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Bob: When Amy Lively decided to invite women in the neighborhood over to her house for an open house, she realized she was going to need to employ the “KISS” principle: Keep It Stupendously Simple.

Amy: If it’s not easy for me, it’s not going to be fun for my guests. I use paper plates and store-bought food to keep it simple. There are so many things out there to make this easy. The point is not about having the perfect house. The point is not entertaining and being extravagant. The point is to enjoy the people that you’re with.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today* for Thursday, October 31st. Our host is the President of FamilyLife®, Dennis Rainey, and I’m Bob Lepine. Amy Lively joins us today to explain how her house became the neighborhood café and how God has used that in the lives of many of her neighbors. Stay tuned.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. As you look back on your marriage—I’m going to ask you to give a score here; alright? On a scale of one to ten—

Dennis: Ten!

Bob: I’m not asking about your marriage. [Laughter] I have a particular subject I’m going to ask you about.

Dennis: How would you rate yours, Bob?! [Laughter]

Bob: Mine depends on which day you’re asking; but what I’m asking about, in particular, today is the whole issue of hospitality—getting to know your neighbors and evangelism in the neighborhood.

Dennis: Did you get a call from one of our neighbors? [Laughter]

Bob: On a scale of one to ten—

Dennis: Are you going to humiliate me again, here on *FamilyLife Today*?

Bob: —ten means you feel like you've done an exemplary job in that area. One means nobody should follow your example. Where would you be?

Dennis: That's a good question. This is not a strength.

Bob: We're a zero at our house.

Dennis: You're a zero?

Bob: We're a zero! This has been—not a strength. I mean, this has been an area—

Dennis: We're on the south side of five.

Bob: Yes? Okay.

Dennis: We've done some things; okay? But this is not a strength. Now, some of it has to do with where we live. We live in the country. So, we don't quite have the same kind of neighbors that you'd have in a "neighborhood".

Bob: You're not talking about the quality of the people? You're talking about the distance between houses?

Dennis: That's what I would be talking about. In case they're listening to this broadcast!
[Laughter]

Bob: Right.

Dennis: Here's what I remember from growing up. My mom and our neighbors were very good friends. I mean, there were the usual skirmishes between neighbors that you would have, you know. Something would happen—like I would be climbing one of their trees and break a limb or something—that wouldn't go down really well.

Bob: Right.

Dennis: But she would go borrow butter, sugar—

Bob: Yes.

Dennis: —flour, bread, eggs; and vice versa.

Bob: Yes. In our neighborhood, the Levotneys, and the Larsons, and the Crosbys, and the Lepines used to get together—probably once a month, for bridge club—I think. The neighbors got together. I don't know that they had anything in common other than property lines that were right next to one another.

Dennis: Yes. Today, there have been surveys done. About a third of us don't know anything about our neighbors.

Bob: Right.

Dennis: We don't know them personally. Frankly, almost a third of us say, "We'd like to get to know our neighbors better." Well, we've got a resource for you today—a personal resource. This is a woman who has a passion for helping people be more hospitable. She's dealing with a zero and with somebody on the south side of five—

Amy: I was a negative two—so we're in good company here!

Dennis: Okay; good. Amy Lively joins us on *FamilyLife Today*. She is the creator of The Neighborhood Café. She and her husband David have been married for 23 years. They live in Lancaster, Ohio, along with their daughter Emma. I have to ask you about this—you say you have one "holy dog" and one "unsaintly cat"?

Amy: Well, if anybody has a dog-and-a-cat family, that's how it usually goes. [Laughter]

Dennis: I'm just wondering what a "holy dog" looks like?

Amy: The dog is a golden retriever. She is the sweetest thing. She was a "holy dog" because when I first started reading my Bible and thinking out loud of what God was doing in my life, she was the only one who ever heard it. She was the holy dog because I was sitting there, preaching to her from the sofa. No one else was ever around.

Dennis: And the "unsaintly cat" lives outside—she kind of runs around the neighborhood. Is that the picture?

Amy: He makes himself at home—he picks on the dog.

Dennis: Alright! Well, you've invented this concept of the neighborhood café. Explain what that looks like.

Amy: The Neighborhood Café started in my own living room with my own neighbors. We don't have a neighborhood café—we don't have that gathering spot where people run into each other, and sit down, and have a conversation. We don't have a park—I don't have a toddler. When my daughter was young, it was easy to meet people; but, as she got older, it just wasn't happening naturally in my neighborhood.

I had heard the words "neighborhood Bible study". I thought: "Well, that's great! That's what I'll do! I'll have my neighbors over for a neighborhood Bible study." But there was a problem. I didn't know them. I didn't know the people just right around me. I knew a couple of them who had kids the same age [as my daughter]. I didn't know the people

whose property touched mine. I didn't know the people up and down my street. I wrestled with God for a *long* time over that idea.

Dennis: How long? How long?

Amy: Eight months, probably, of just saying: "You know, I think it was the pizza I ate the night before. This is really crazy. They're going to think I'm nuts!" I had every excuse in the book that was really just a disguise for my fears because I was very afraid to do it. I was afraid of rejection. I was afraid of taking the time. I was afraid of being humiliated—being put on the spot with hard questions about life and faith. I was very afraid.

Dennis: I've got some neighbors who live, not next door, but they are about a half mile down the street. Again, it's a country neighborhood. Technically, they're in the neighborhood; but they're a long ways away. They moved in there about two-and-a-half years ago. We still—we have walked by their house on numerous occasions. Now, one of the reasons is they've got a dog that looks like it would like to bury you if you engage!

Amy: I take dog treats when I go out in my neighborhood.

Dennis: Well, you know, that might not be a bad idea; but we still haven't engaged. I feel—I really feel guilty.

Amy: And embarrassed, too.

Dennis: And embarrassed. Ashamed that, you know, maybe I'm closer to Bob and Mary Ann's zero than I care to realize—

Bob: [Laughing] We have brand-new next-door neighbors. One of these days, we're going to go introduce ourselves to them. They just—I mean—they are brand-new. As they were moving in, I was thinking, "We've got to go knock on the door and take some banana bread or do something;" you know?

Dennis: Well, we're busy! We're really busy.

Bob: Quit making excuses!

Amy: You know, you're never going to have time.

Bob: That's right.

Amy: You're never going to have a clear day on your calendar. Your house is never going to be clean enough. You're never going to have all of the answers, but you just have to do it.

That's what I decided to do. I called it the Rosewood Café because we lived on Rosewood Drive. I invited 89 of my neighbors over for coffee.

Dennis: So you just kind of jumped into the deep end of the pool—

Bob: Whoa, whoa, whoa!

Amy: I did; I did. And you know what I've found? When you're starting something new like that, you have to—

Bob: Eighty-nine! Did you say 89?!

Amy: Yes, I made 90 invitations, and I gave one to my grandma.

Bob: Do you have a big house?

Amy: We do have a big house; and we do have a big neighborhood; but you have to cast a pretty wide net when you start something new like that. I do have to knock on their doors and say: "Hi, my name is Amy. I live right over there. I've been here for seven, eight, or ten years now. I'm very sorry I don't know you. I should know you, but I don't. I would just like to create some community in our neighborhood. I'm having everyone over for coffee and dessert. I really hope you can come."

Bob: That sounds like a warm—I mean, if somebody came to my door and did that—I would kind of feel like, "You know, we ought to go and just meet these people."

Amy: Without fail, people have been so gracious. They say: "You know what? I don't know my neighbors either. I would love to do that!" That doesn't mean they'll come.

One of the things that I've developed in the kit is a place to write down all of their names, and their dog's name, and their hobby—and the things that they share because you forget it when you get home. I just try to keep track of that information so that, the next time I see them, I can remember something about them and start those conversations.

Bob: That morning—that first morning—when everybody hadn't arrived yet, were you just going crazy?

Amy: I was panicked; yes. I had two problems: "What if everyone came?"—

Bob: Right, all 90 of them.

Amy: —and, "What if no one came?"

Bob: Right.

Dennis: Was there an RSVP, though?

Amy: I don't do an RSVP because I want people to have the freedom to come at the last minute. I want it to be low pressure—just, you know: “Please come.” Besides, RSVP is a lost art. People just don't do it.

Dennis: It's pretty much ignored.

Amy: Yes.

Bob: So you were ready for coffee for 90 and dessert for 90, if they all showed up?

Amy: I *knew* they were not *all* going to show up! [Laughter]

But one of the things I thought was, “If everybody comes, I'm going to run out of coffee mugs.” So, I put on the invitation: “I'll brew the beans if you'll bring a mug.” They showed up, clutching their mugs, at my door. I have used that on every invitation since then. All of the Neighborhood Cafés, around the country, now use that because bringing a little bit of comfort from their own kitchen—it gives them the courage. It's an icebreaker or an instant-conversation starter. Women love to have a purpose and some way to participate.

Dennis: Barbara has done a neighborhood ornament exchange.

Amy: Beautiful.

Dennis: That's a great way to do it, as well. It is interesting how you can take a group of strangers, and they instantly gel—

Amy: Yes.

Dennis: —because you do share something in common.

Amy: You have, probably, more in common with your neighbors than with some of the people in your own family because you've all chosen to come to this same area. Your homes are about the same value and, probably, in about the same condition. You probably are in about the same life stage of kids, job, and career.

It's very different than a church gathering—where, at church, people can examine the church, and study the doctrine and the style of worship, and decide to come there. In church, you know, everyone is kind of on the same spiritual page. In your neighborhood, though, you have all of these demographic factors in common, but you don't know where they are in faith. So, having a neighborhood faith gathering is a little different.

Dennis: I think people are isolated and lonely today. I think they're waiting for someone to hang a little bag of coffee and an invitation to bring your own mug—and to have somebody say, "I'll brew the beans if you come." Did you find that they arrived, really wanting to talk and really glad somebody had kind of crossed the property line, so to speak?

Amy: Absolutely! We are just—all of us, in every neighborhood—just desperate for that friendship. Do you know women spend 20 minutes a day on Facebook®? That doesn't seem like a lot when you do just 90 seconds here or there—that adds up to, over three weeks, at a full-time job. I really think, though, that these social networks—they are a symptom of our need for these face-to-face relationships.

There is an epidemic of loneliness. I mean, doctors and nurses call it an epidemic. Loneliness affects us, physically, in our ability to recover from sickness—in our ability to heal. It affects our genetics. Do you remember the song, *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry*?

Dennis: Don't mention songs!!

Bob: [Singing] "Did you heeeaaarr that lonesome—" [Laughter]

Dennis: See? This is what happens when you—

Amy: Yes!

Dennis: You don't realize? You don't listen to *FamilyLife Today* often; do you?

Amy: Well.

Bob: [Singing] "—found the place—"

Dennis: See? This is what happens!

Amy: It's beautiful.

Bob: Thank you.

Dennis: Wow. You're an ambassador. [Laughter] That's why you're good at hospitality.

Amy: You know, I had a Raggedy Ann and Andy record player when I was a kid. I had my dad's old 45s, and I had that little record. I would write down the lyrics. It just broke my heart. That song was so sad. But, you know, at that time—when that song was written—less than 10 percent of homes had only one person living in them; but by 2010, that number had gone up 250 percent.

Bob: Wow!

Amy: One in four of the homes, on your street, is one person living alone. It can be very, very lonely.

Bob: In that first gathering—folks coming and bringing their mugs—did you have a program planned?

Amy: No; no.

Bob: Everybody just visited?

Amy: It's an open house. I love those home shows, on TV, where you get to go house hunting. I love to go to open houses in my neighborhood and in my town—just to see what people's lives are like. Why wait until you're moving out to have an open house?

Bob: Right.

Amy: Do it while you're still there. I just do—it's an old-fashioned concept. People used to do it all the time, especially around the holidays—an open house. I have it for about 90 minutes. I serve refreshments. There is no agenda. There is no Bible study. There is no Scripture reading. There may not even be a prayer because I want it to just be very open. I don't want it to be awkward for people.

I never hide the fact that I'm going to invite them to come back for a devotional, but I also want to have this time. I tell people when I invite them, "Regardless of your desire or your ability to be a part of this, ongoing, just come and meet the neighbors."

Bob: So this *is* an entrée for you? This first event—

Amy: The open house is the entrée; absolutely.

Bob: And what you're hoping is that some of those who come will come back for something more?

Amy: And they do.

Dennis: Have you found that a certain percentage out of—if you invite 100, can you expect 20-25?

Amy: Fifteen to twenty.

Dennis: Fifteen to twenty?

Amy: Yes, if you invite 100.

Dennis: So about 20 percent, max?

Amy: Yes. It depends on how well you know them already. It depends on how you invite them. If you do the mailbox stuffing, like I did—I should clarify—you can't put anything *in* the mailbox—that is a federal offense—but you can hang it on the mailbox, or on the door, or if you do a personal invitation.

Bob: I'm just thinking that I've violated the federal law.

Dennis: I was, too! [Laughter]

Amy: I don't want to get you in trouble!

Dennis: If the Feds want to call me, I know where Bob lives.

Amy: Yes!

Dennis: I was just very careful about what I admitted to, Bob.

Bob: Yes, but I know where you live, too! We'll put you under oath! [Laughter]

The women who came—coming from all different backgrounds—a lot of them—no spiritual lights on in their lives?

Amy: Definitely. We represent, over the course of the years that I've had this in the home, probably 20 local churches in my area. Then, many of no church background at all—and no interest in that at all.

Bob: And when you say to these women, at the open house—do you kind of get everybody's attention and say, "Hey, I just want to let you know—in two weeks, I'm going to be doing this...."?

Amy: Absolutely. At some point, in the open house, people will be sitting around, drinking coffee, and making connections with the other women there. That's a good time to just say: "Thank you all for coming. I'm glad to have met you and have you in my home. We drive by each other's places all of the time." You know, women are dying to see inside your house—they really are! [Laughter]

"I'm so thrilled to meet you, face to face!" I have a guest list, where I try to get their information so we can stay connected. I just say: "You know, I've had so much fun doing this that I'd like to continue. I'd like to invite you back every other week,"—in my case. Women can decide what works for them. I give them a little card—a reminder card—that has the dates and the times that we'll continue to meet again.

Of the women who come to the open house, some will continue to come back and some will not. I usually run my gatherings from January through May. Then, I take off for the summer. Then, I do it again in the fall—September, October, and November.

Dennis: Every other week?

Amy: Every other week.

Dennis: About what percentage—if you had 20 people come to your open house, what could you expect to show up for your Bible study or your devotions?

Amy: If you had 20 come to your open house, which would be a stunning, spectacular turn-out, you could expect four to five to continue to come back.

Bob: I just have to ask you: “Do you think there’s a personality type that does what you do?” I mean, it just seems, to me, that there are people, who are listening and going,—

Amy: “No way, lady!!”

Bob: —“I’m not—my last name is not Lively—okay? So, I’m not a person who can do this neighborhood café thing”

Amy: I would say that this is probably not a method that’s going to work for everybody, and that’s fine; but the command to love God and love our neighbors doesn’t say “...if you’re an extrovert,” or, “...if you have a nice house.” So, we all have to find our own way.

For women who want to do something that is reaching many neighbors, at one time—which really saves a lot of our valuable time—to somebody who is looking for just a very natural way to open up their home, this is a great tool for that.

If this is not your personality, then I love to help people find the way that works for them. For you guys—maybe, it’s you work on cars. You know, you see somebody with their hood up—well, my goodness! Stop and say, “Hey!—”

Bob: “Can I help?”

Amy: Yes; “Can I help? What are you doing?”

Dennis: That would not be a good way to make a friend—

Amy: Okay! If you see someone singing on their front porch, you should stop and join in the harmony.

Dennis: —their car’s going to be at Firestone[®], after the weekend, if I tinker with it!
[Laughter]

Bob: Tell everybody about the box you’ve put together and the resource you’ve created to try to help women.

Amy: It is called The Neighborhood Café kit. It has everything needed to start a neighborhood Bible study. It has a book that explains how I did this—“How did Jesus do it!? How did He relate with His neighbors?” He’s our ultimate example. It gives lots of Scriptures that inspire us to reach out to people and tells how other women have done it.

It has a planning guide, which is just a spiral-bound book to stick in your purse. That’s where you can write down the names of people that you meet and, “Did they said they could come?” It has recipes. It has tools to help you get your home ready. The invitation is in there—the actual pre-printed invitation. You just fill out your name and contact information to pass it out—a follow-up card called a “Thinking of you” card because how many times do you think, “I should really send them a card!” or, “That was a great conversation,” or, “I’ve missed seeing that person.”? So, it has a card to follow-up. That reminder card, that I pass out—that has the dates and times—

Bob: Yes.

Amy: —that’s in there, for you.

There’s also a little—I call it a mini-magazine called *Espresso*—to help start the conversation. When you do have women—from so many different backgrounds—different interests—who may or may not know each other—you have strangers, along with good friends in the room—this just helps everyone start a natural conversation that then goes, eventually and gradually, into the spiritual realm.

Dennis: You know what I really like about the kit is that it comes with a complimentary clean house by Bob Lepine. [Laughter]

Bob: You don’t want to see your house after I’ve cleaned it! [Laughter]

Amy: You know, you only have to do one room! Figure out where you’re going to sit and do one room—maybe, the bathroom—and that’s it.

Bob: Yes.

Amy: Put everything—I have a friend who puts everything in the bathtub. She puts everything in bags.

Dennis: We close doors—

Amy: Sure! You should.

Dennis: —you know; and put a sign over it that says, “Off limits.”

Bob: Yes!

Amy: I have figured out—

Bob: And lock the door so that there’s no way that they can get in! [Laughter]

Amy: —if it’s not easy for me, it’s not going to be fun for my guests. I use paper plates and store-bought food to keep it simple. There are so many things out there to make this easy. The point is not about having the perfect house. The point is not entertaining and being extravagant. The point is to enjoy the people that you’re with.

Dennis: And I want to encourage women to get this—and not just because Bob comes with the kit, to clean your house [Laughter]—but this really will, I think, move you off the couch and into action. A lot of our listeners are feeling like I’m feeling right now—ashamed that I’ve walked by this couple’s house, now, for months—and they’ve not been outside. That’s a good excuse, too.

Amy: “You’re off the hook!”

Dennis: But we just need to stop—we need to stop. Barbara and I—the next time we’re out and about, walking in the neighborhood—need to be intentional and take a little gift or something—and go by and say, “Hi,” and introduce ourselves—just do what you did, which is—

Amy: I would love to hear how that goes for you.

Dennis: Yes; and hope that the dog doesn’t bury us in the backyard.

Amy: You know, when you do that, you will be so amazed and delighted at the people God has put around you. It says in Acts 17:26 that He has chosen the exact places that we should live and the time that we should live there. He was in our neighborhoods long before any homeowner’s association or engineering study. These people are there for His purposes in our lives—the needs in these homes—

Dennis: Yes, yes.

Amy: —I know what they are because I’ve had them in my own home—the loneliness, as we talked about; the frustration; the fears; the addictions; the pain; the sickness—also, the joy; and the fellowship; and the friendship that is waiting there. That is so—the risk is so small compared to the reward when you *finally* go out and meet those people.

Now, when I drive through my neighborhood, and I go by these homes—that, now, I've been into and they've been into mine—I feel safe. I feel secure—not only because we're looking out for each other, in a very literal sense—but because I have finally, after much debate with the Lord, found the blessing of obedience to His number two command.

Bob: And I think there are a lot of people who feel like you feel. When they start to sit down and think about doing it, they get overwhelmed. What you've done, as a service for all of us, is to put together the kit—that you've put together—called The Neighborhood Café—that has everything you need so that you can reach out to your neighbors in a whole new way. It's got a planning guide. It's got a checklist. There's a Facebook group for those who are doing this. There are open house invitations.

You really have taken the years of your experience and made it easy for everybody by putting this resource together. If folks are interested in finding out about how they can host their own open house—have their own neighborhood café—go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click on the link you find there. Again, the website is FamilyLifeToday.com; or you can call, toll-free, 1-800-FL-TODAY. That's 1-800-358-6329. That's 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then, the word, “TODAY”.

I got a nice email from one of our listeners, recently, who wrote and said: “I've been listening to your program, now, for close to four years. I want you to know the program has blessed me so much during my daily drive to work. I am filled with such joy that I'm donating, for the first time, to your program. Keep up the fantastic work! You are advancing God's Kingdom. Many blessings to you'll and to your loved ones.”

That was a nice note from a listener who has been tuned in for four years—after four years, said, “I'm going to make a donation to help support that ministry.” The cost of producing and syndicating this program is something that is covered by folks, like you, who pitch in, from time to time, and help us out. Maybe, you've been listening for four years. Maybe, it's only been four months. Maybe, it's been longer than that. We would love to have you be a part of the team that makes *FamilyLife Today* possible. Would you consider going, online, today to make a donation or calling 1-800-FL-TODAY to make a donation over the phone?

This week, when you make a donation, we'd like to say, “Thank you,” by sending you the *Thanksgiving: A Time to Remember* audio book—Barbara Rainey's book in dramatized fashion in an audio book form—something the whole family could listen to. It's our thank-you gift to you, this week, when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com and click the button that says, “I CARE”, to make an online donation; or you call 1-800-FL-TODAY. Make your donation over the phone. Just request the audio book when you get in touch with us; or request the audio book when you write to us and include a donation. Our mailing address is P O Box 7111, Little Rock, AR. Our zip code is 72223.

We want to encourage you to be back with us again tomorrow when we're going to talk more about hospitality. We're going to talk about what a pain it is—because, I mean, you've got to work hard and get the whole house all spick-and-span before you can even *think* about inviting the neighbors over—or maybe not. Amy Lively has some thoughts about that, and we'll talk about it tomorrow. I hope you can tune in.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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