

The Lovelight Stories

PODCAST

Ep: 4 | LIVING IN THE MARGINS WITH JAMES BARNETT

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00:00.00

lovelightstories

James. Thank you so much for joining me on the Lovelight Stories Podcast today. Your story is one that has stood out to me ever since I met you, and that is a story of you choosing to intentionally live without a home for two years. Share with us a little bit about why you decided to leave your previous life behind and intentionally live homeless.

00:28.33

James

Yeah, sure hey thanks for having me first off, Stephanie. I appreciate you helping me share my story with other people and congrats on the Lovelight Stories Podcast. I'm so excited we're doing this thing.

00:42.63

lovelightstories

Yes.

00:44.33

James

So, yeah and I appreciate the opportunity to share. I was 24 years old I had a lucrative job with JP Morgan Chase. I'm 37 now. So we're talking ancient history, but I was a young guy, super disillusioned with the church, institutionally. And sort of felt like, man I've been sitting here in a pew for 20 you know 24 years and I just got to this point where I was like man I need to get up and go on a search to go find Jesus I'm just not finding him here in God's house and so. Ah, one thing led to another and in short, at 24 I had this lucrative job, sold everything I own and went to go live on the streets with people experiencing homelessness and so I went to go live on the streets living in you know cardboard boxes eating out of dumpsters and playing you know board games in dark alleyways with prostitutes and a few other things every mother hopes her son grows up to do. Um, but yeah, that's what I did and, you know it's really formed the way that I perceive or understand how poverty works and how it affects people and God loves and has given me a double dose of empathy for people experiencing something that I have really had never had to deal with myself.

02:26.18

lovelightstories

Right? Okay, so we need to dive into that in one second. I do want to just ask you I've never asked you this before, but that moment or those moments of trying to wrestle with this calling that you felt was being placed on your heart to follow the gospel and where God was leading you, what did that feel like and was it a fast-moving thing or did it take you quite a while to decide that you were going to leave everything behind?

03:02.42

James

Yeah, good question. So I remember being on a plane ride home from Nicaragua where I had just visited some slums and come face to face with poverty, extreme poverty for the first time in my life, and this was at 24 years old, and so I'm sitting there in the window seat looking over cotton candy clouds thinking, I think I need to go be homeless. And it wasn't you know because when you come back from a trip like that oftentimes you're like man I need to go back to that country and be a missionary there in that country. But for me, it was a little different and I just kind of felt like man just go back to where you were and face poverty and where you're from.

So anyways, I was like I'm going to go homeless but that was like may sixth of 2009 and it wasn't until September sixteenth of 2009 where I actually quit my job. Um, because I had so much debt I acquired, so much debt, I was making just obscene amounts of money but also spending it at twice the speed and I knew that man if I wasn't free to be generous to others, if I was beholden to someone else - and so I actually went through it was Dave Ramsey's financial peace university class to sort of help me figure out how to get rid of this debt and I did and I ate rice and beans from the time I got back from Nicaragua back in may and then all the way up until September so that I could pay off that debt and officially quit my job. Um, and so that I could really genuinely give my life away unhinged, you know.

It was funny too. Dave Ramsey has this saying like you got to live like nobody else so that later you can live like nobody else. And what he means is you know, live frugally so that later you can live in luxury and then he's in recent years added an amendment to that saying so that we can like be generous as well. Um, but at the time is just live no one else. So that later you can live like no one else. Well off, but I just I thought it was so funny because right I was like eating rice and beans so that I could then go and live homeless. Probably not what he was thinking about when he said that but it was it was such a great help.

05:28.61

lovelightstories

Um, yes, Wow, well different interpretations. Yes, yes, Wow and I mean just as an outsider looking in on that story in those years, the moments that you decided to make such a big leap - to me, that takes so much courage and I can hardly imagine doing that and it's very apparent that the Lord must have really been working in you and through you to take that leap. So when you did this and you first started out, who are some of the people that you met? And was life on the streets the way you thought it would be?

06:19.90

James

Yeah I remember the one guy I met. He went by the name gator, and that was his street name. I met him and he had just been offered this this job on a construction site and he wanted to take the position, but he couldn't. And wanted to work his way off the streets but he couldn't afford this \$67 to \$80 pair of steel-toe work boots that were required as protective equipment in order for him to take the position, and so it took money to make money for him and he was in a position where he didn't have that. As are most people who are living in food insecurity where they really

need to prioritize where their money goes or trying to get in indoors and so realizing that even somebody who is actively trying to overcome their obstacles does need someone to come alongside of them. You know there's this saying you got to pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Well, what do we do about people that don't even have a pair of boots to begin with? And I get that this is quite a literal parallel here, because I did get him boots but you know, apply that to every other area of your life where you're like you know thinking and these people they just need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps. Now maybe they do and maybe they've got a really nice pair of boots and laces and everything that they need and um and then are just choosing not to do anything about it. But there are a lot of people in the world that are living in such precarity that they can't they don't even have a pair of boots to pull themselves up by, and so it's I believe the job of the church to come alongside of people and see in them what God sees in them and help them discern how they're wired for the glory of God and help move them in that direction guiding them and helping them along the way, helping them see assets and helping them see obstacles.

08:18.36

lovelightstories

Yes, yes, so people like gator he was doing what he could to get a job and to get out of his position, but he needed just a little bit to get a pair of boots and I think that's really powerful and I think a lot of us could probably understand that. Um but I would say the stereotype of people experiencing homelessness is that they're there because of their own doing and they're not trying to get out of it and perhaps they're on drugs or just not actively trying to get out of their position, I guess you could say. So how much of that is true? Did you see some of that when you were spending your few years there? or was it mostly people like gator?

09:14.40

James

Right, so I think the first and most important thing I can do here is make a distinction between people experiencing homelessness and people who are panhandling, because I think the people who are panhandling become this visible face of what is assumed "homelessness". But in my experience, you know, being homeless for two years by choice where I'm actively trying to understand how homelessness works, if you will and why people are there. It's a pretty small percentage of the homeless population that's out on the street corners asking for loose change. I will say in my experience and of course I'm limited only by my experience, and I can only speak to my experience. So I would say that almost 100%, I'm going to say 99.9 ah because I want to leave a little space there, but percent of people who are panhandling do end up using this for drugs and alcohol. Or whatever other addictions that they might have, like I have a good friend who has a cell phone addiction. He's got nine cell phones right now and he's on the streets and he just can't stop buying him, so you know, and it's just like mindless entertainment streaming and things like this.

10:39.70

lovelightstories

Oh wow.

10:48.76

James

These are the sort of things that keep him isolated, never struggled with drugs, never struggled with alcohol. Um, but ah seven years ago he lost his newborn baby daughter and um that wreaked havoc in his heart and that could be any of us and that's kind of what brought him to the streets. In his despair he isolated and so I often say like man the solution to homelessness is actually not a roof though that would be a great first step for anybody wanting to help open their

homes, but the solution for homelessness is community because often homelessness is wrapped in isolation. So yeah, so that's I guess that's just the distinction I would make first off is that yes a lot of people do exploit people's willingness to help and will fly a sign and say hey I need help. And I mean in in my 10 years of or now 14 years of talking about these things I've committed to saying to people who are asking for my help through a car window at a traffic light, I've committed to inviting them over and saying, "you say you're hungry. I would love to feed you. I would like to share a meal with you. I'd like it to be your favorite meal. I'd like you to come over early, maybe we go grocery shopping. We cook your favorite meal and you get to meet my family, and if you need a place to stay for the night you can do that. If you need help finding work, We can do that." Um, but basically invite them into a relationship. And I'd say in about 14 years, maybe one person has said yes to me, and I think what that does is that's a sad statistic, because I do it all the time. I hand out an index card with my name and my number and my email address and I say hey if you can, if you want help I want to help you. I'd like to sit down with you because there's not a lot of time here. The light is about to turn green and I think they know that a lot of the people who are out there flying signs they know that there's not the time that it takes for a person to come out up out of homelessness is not the time that it takes for a light to go from red to green and they know that and that's why it's such a lucrative business on street corners I mean some people are making 4 or \$500 an hour just on a street corner at the right time of day and so my belief is Jesus invites his followers to say yes to someone who's in need. So we don't get to say anything but yes in my opinion, but the yes might look a little different, right? If it's housing that's needed, it's our house. If it's food that's needed, it's our food, right? God doesn't just provide for us.

13:47.36

lovelightstories

Yes.

13:51.75

James

The blessing is not for the individual. But for the community. God's promise of blessing of provision is that to Abraham is that it would move and it would multiply as it's given away. and so one of the marks of this blessing, the things that are in our pockets in our wallets. Breath in our lungs. Every cell of our body is to be stewarded in the temporal for the eternal and so I think that our answer is yes, but it's a more intimate. Yes, it's not a quick band-aid it's because you want to give it away.

Kind of going on a rant here about this panhandling thing. But I really think it's important that folks understand man we give in a way that sets people up to be givers, not just recipients. I mean we're all made in the image of a God who created life out of dust and then invites us to go and do the same. He's like man yeah I may do in my image. This is what I did I want you to go look out in the world find the dust and look at it and be a type of people who can look at the dust and say man I think that can be something, I think we can make something out of that. And because that's the case for you. It's also the case for them, the people who are asking. So is what I'm giving today going to set them up to be a giver tomorrow? Well the answer depends on whether what you give is it transactional, or is it relational? I believe Jesus invites us to make it relational and that is not a scapegoat for not being generous financially, but it's far deeper than that. It's inviting people into a home that you don't even believe is yours whether or not you're the home owner, right? Because if God not only made us, but purchased us as well, what can we claim to own if we don't even own ourselves? My very body is not mine. My car is not mine. My home is not mine and so that leads me to give in a relational and intimate way.

15:47.77

lovelightstories

Yes.

15:54.86

James

To people who you know might be exploiting a system but give them a jarring answer invite him into relationship.

16:01.27

lovelightstories

Yes, Wow That is just an absolutely powerful insight and perspective, and a big part of it has come from your own experience in understanding this difference between panhandling and living in Homelessness. And realizing that this homelessness is not just a lack of financial means it's a big lack of relationship and community and broken relationships like your friend. You said before his addiction to cell phones, he started being on the streets because he really just kind of lost it after his daughter died, and that is so incredibly understandable. I'm sure a lot of us can relate with our own stories of grief and hardship.

16:48.18

James

Um, right.

16:58.94

lovelightstories

And realizing how difficult that can be and if we're not surrounded in community how much more isolating walking that path can be, um so wow! Thank you for sharing that perspective and helping us understand how to give beyond just the initial transaction - give something that's lasting and that's eternal and inviting people into relationship and sharing the love and the light of Jesus. Incredible. So I want to ask a little bit more about people that you met on the streets. In those 2 years did you make friends with them? Are you still friends with them today? Anything you want to share I guess about that? Because again, if it's all about relationships or maybe not all about, but a big part of this is relationships, I'm willing to bet you have a few really interesting people that you met.

18:07.14

James

Yeah I have and you know unfortunately some of them were hard to track down and over the years have passed away without me knowing in the moment. One of my closest friends, I suspect he's passed. When you're on the streets you have a thousand different cell phone numbers and you just kind of pay as you go and so numbers are always changing. It's hard to track down people. But um, but yeah, like when I was on the streets I didn't really have a home to bring people into or a community either I would say that's one of the downfalls of what I did is I was on the I was on the move all the time. I wasn't staying in 1 place. I was homeless on the streets of a different city for about a month at a time for over the course of 2 years and so it's hard to bear fruit if you keep transplanting yourself, right? Like if you take an orange tree in your yard. You just like keep digging it up and eventually, it's just going to die because it's just like what's the soil here like what's the situation right? And so um, but yeah anyways I still stay in touch with a few friends specifically from Atlanta and where we touch base every now and then and you know some have decided to stay on the streets and some have finally found housing. Um, but yeah, it's good and I think even now the way my organization, Neighborly, the way we enact poverty relief

as we say it's relationship-based poverty relief, in hopes of advocating for biblical justice. Basically the vision is to sort of deinstitutionalize charity. Um, so that we by creating meaningful relationships with people at a disadvantage. So that an institution is not the hub through which we must go to experience real relationship with people on the edge and so the way we even do things now is...you know people ask and what does it look like to partner with neighborly? And really it just means becoming friends. I was hanging out the other day at a Cuban restaurant with a Colombian refugee in a Colombian pastor and that Colombian Pastor's brother and we're all just enjoying ourselves eating great food laughing. You know, struggling through some language barriers and just kind of embracing the awkwardness, and at one point this guy he leans over to me and was one of the guys who was like considering volunteering and doing English conversation partner with this guy to help him practice his English and ah, he's like so what does it look like what would it look like to partner with Neighborly and volunteer? and I'm like man, this! You know, going out to dinner, having some good laughs, maybe singing some really awful karaoke together. And like for me, it's just you know it's hopping in the car and going on a drive with people and while we go and do all the things that are necessary in order for them to get their green card status we're listening to Michael Jackson because well, that's the only thing we have in common that we know of because of the language barrier, but we both love Billy Jean and have listened to it many times in or up. So um, yeah, a relationship. Honestly I would say even like the poverty relief side of things is really born out of relationship. That relationship is not really the derivative or the result of a transaction but that it's relationship that I'm seeking with people.

22:09.64

lovelightstories

Yes, exactly that makes so much sense too because even in our daily life. We always say relationships mean more than...it's who you know not what you know, right? And it's so true that relationships are the root of beauty and flourishing in our life. But if those relationships are broken or nonexistent, they're the root of difficulty and trouble. I guess that's kind of the picture you're painting for us, even with something so difficult as Homelessness.

22:53.28

James

Well you think about it, right? You might say, well I'm passionate about ending homelessness or ending hunger or ending human trafficking. well in in order for you to maintain your passion, the problem needs to continue to exist but if you're passionate about a person who happens to be homeless. Well then there can be a continued relationship when the problem no longer exists, right? Your passion doesn't die, and I think that that's the sustainable way to relationally end poverty by actually caring more about the person than the problem, caring more about the person than even progress, because the gestation period of a person who's experiencing homelessness to then come into this whole flourishing life, it's most complex form of poverty I've ever worked with in the midst of literally everything. You know, human trafficking and you know hunger or clean water issues or education issues. I mean homelessness is probably the most difficult one and it's the one that we have all face if we live in the United States of America every time we end up at a red light. You know, but there's but there's...I guess I made homelessness and panhandler synonymous with that last statement, but to make that distinction would be important but yeah I think we're faced with it either way every day, you know?

24:39.46

lovelightstories

Right? Yes, agreed. Okay, so we've talked a little bit about your experience on the streets and things of that nature. Do you have anything, I guess I'm curious and you don't have to answer this if you don't want, but I'm just curious what that experience was like to be James for a day. Did you

ever have a reprieve from that lifestyle, or were you day after day living like you said you said sleeping in cardboard boxes, and what was that like?

25:21.72

James

Yeah, um, if you woke up as me for a day you might hate the sun. I mean, I remember that was the one thing that really shook me is how much I hated the sunshine. I know that's kind of maybe even a silly thing to mention, but for me, it was pretty heartbreaking. I spun into a depression like early on and I had no idea how attached to my things my identity was and so um, it was pretty difficult initially to think I had nothing and I was like well what do I do with myself? It's certainly a cool idea to go live homeless and be around other people who are experiencing suffering, but what was I going to do so I was like well I guess I'll just start hanging out where everybody else hangs out who seems to be homeless.

26:10.64

lovelightstories

Yeah.

26:18.94

James

So it was you know eating breakfast at feeding Kitchens or um, you know going to the library in the middle of the day and after a rain, especially during the rain, being at the library. It was hanging out on park benches and you know town squares. Um, talking with people. I'd just sit and read my Bible and um and then end up in in good conversation. Oftentimes I'd try to find somebody who maybe looked strange and alarming, someone who I would find myself to be uncomfortable around and I'd go talk to them, because I figure man if I feel like I'm uncomfortable around this person I bet everybody else does too and when they walk by I wonder if anybody really engages in conversation with this person. So I would try to go find the person you know wearing a tutu and ah in a garbage bag as a t-shirt, right?

The person who really is maybe talking to themselves. Ah you know I would always go up to those folks. It was scary at first and still is, like I just did this I don't know about a month ago in a parking lot. This guy was talking to himself and I was like hey. Hey man are you doing okay? is there anything I can do to be helpful to you? I just kind of yeah and there was something to be helpful. He needed a jacket. Anyways, we connected and he got a jacket but yeah I would spend time out just looking for the person who seemed like the untouchable.

27:57.43

lovelightstories

And when you would reach out to people that made you uncomfortable - Did you often find that there wasn't as much to be afraid of, or was it sometimes a dicey conversation? Did you ever feel unsafe?

28:13.40

James

Nice, yeah, yeah, totally I mean it really depends on the person, right? like man I'd say for every many unsafe looking people that I talked to there might have been 2 that were actually, you know, threatened me. Um, but mostly it was people struggling with mental illness that I just had to develop a heart and an empathy for, because a lot of people are homeless because they do struggle with mental illness and when you're trying to talk to somebody who maybe isn't really capable of holding a conversation it was exhausting, I'll say that, but I think it was it was worth it,

and I know that it honored my God. And Jesus, he says he's in disguise, disguised as the least of these. So I guess that was kind of the mission right is to just go around and figure out man who looks like the absolute least you know, and so and then just like go love them figure out how I can see the image of God in them and then not be afraid right? because um, you know there aren't that many reasons to be afraid of people. You only fear what you don't know. You fear what you don't understand. You don't have empathy for some, I know empathy is really important to you and I and I know that you just don't, you don't really love people you don't understand. And so you usually fear them. And so if we're to be a people who love, we're going to have to develop a double portion of empathy. And the only way we're going to do that is by entering into spaces that are uncomfortable for us around people who look, act, or think differently.

30:08.35

lovelightstories

Yes, wow and that is so incredibly true. I mean, I say that all the time too. We don't understand what we don't know. Like if we don't know enough about a topic, we come to conclusions and it's harder for us to empathize. So understanding and seeking to understand is the first step to coming to have empathy and love for people and that's essentially what you were doing through your call to speak to those that made you uncomfortable and pretty soon it sounds as though you learned that most people you don't need to be afraid of and you came to understand why they were there in their perspectives and that is just such a beautiful outright application of living like Jesus and loving to love others.

So that's just incredible. I am kind of turning things a little bit, but before we jump into more about Neighborly, I would like to just know - This might be on the minds of other people too throughout this conversation, but when we walk past people who are living on the streets or people who are panhandling I think our inclination is we don't know how to respond and what to do and we oftentimes put our head down and look away and I'm just curious how you were treated during those couple of years on the streets and like if you experienced that or how you were treated by others and if you were treated the same as other people you were meeting along the way.

31:51.56

James

Yeah I was treated well I mean I have like gameshow-host teeth and it's kind of a dead giveaway that this guy is not you know using drugs out here or you know I may have looked a little rough, I looked a little malnourished, I'll say that, but I also kind of just looked like a millennial wearing skinny jeans and you know, I don't know if really everyone thought man this guy is homeless but when I would be with my other friends who were very visibly homeless, you know, maybe pushing a shopping cart or something like that where you could tell like okay those are their possessions in there. Um, yes, people would absolutely look away and it was hurtful, especially because I knew the people I was with. My heart ached more for them, right?

I Don't care if you pay attention to me. But like this guy right here, I'm thinking of somebody specific whose name I won't use. Um, but just like what he has been through if you only knew, lost his job he had because he had a stroke and lost his job then his house burned down and his wife left them. It would be really hard for you too, and to not say hello I mean that's just the bare minimum. You know, like the bare minimum is to acknowledge another person's humanity.

33:19.10

lovelightstories

Yes.

33:25.50

James

Now here's the rub is most of us know that if we did that that would kind of feel like an invitation to ask us for stuff right? like I don't know like I've never been a woman at a bar but I would imagine that if I were at a woman at a bar, I would you know, I know how guys think. Any inkling of attention that someone is interested like I mean just guys just take it out of context and just assume a woman's interested. This is how we do it. That's how we roll. But we read into everything, right? And then we're like oh she wants a drink because she like looked past me for a second, and so it's kind of like that on the streets, you know. And I understand that even now right like maybe I'm on my way to go somewhere and I know that if I look someone in the eyes acknowledge their humanity I know I'm getting panhandled. So what I'll do is I'll do that but I'll keep walking and I'll say, hey don't stop what you're saying, because they'll start to do their pitch. I'll say don't stop what you're saying I want to hear what you have to say, but I'm late somewhere and I need to keep going so I need you to walk with me. Can you go for a walk with me? and so on that walk I'll learn a little bit about the person and at that point I will give them my information. Not everybody's comfortable with giving out their address. I get that. We do. But um, we have cameras all around our house and you know sometimes there's people laying in our front yard who just need to take a break under the shade of a tree. Sometimes there's people sleeping in our carport at night and, but that's kind of getting off point like you could just give your email address right? or you can make a new email address just designated for this. Um, and this is a way you can continue that relationship even if you are late somewhere. And you can have good meaningful dialogue about what's actually helpful. But most of the time I was I was treated pretty well personally, oftentimes. Shrugged off when my friends would be with me, because I would be keeping company with people who looked different. Um, but a lot of times the times I was acknowledged was when youth groups would come out and try to evangelize to me. Um, so I thought that was interesting, but it wasn't effective. I wouldn't recommend anything that was done at that time. Um because they were just giving me a gospel track and moving on. But yeah, if they had stopped and listened for a moment they might learn that the friend to my left is out on the streets as well because he loves Jesus and he wants to care for people who are hurting.

36:09.35

lovelightstories

Wow, that just goes to show how much we take into account looks when we're interacting with other people, and it's not surprising, because I think our looks can tell a lot about how we take care of ourselves etc. But it doesn't tell us the story behind why you've maybe taken your care of yourself the way that you have or whatever it is and, it's ah, kind of a sad reality in a lot of ways that we do put so much emphasis on looks, but I think it's just part of our human nature, so we don't need to shame ourselves for that, but maybe becoming more aware of our reaction and then digging deeper into why we have that reaction and thinking about that and starting to you know, talk ourselves into this point if we're uncomfortable talking ourselves into the point of actually um, going up and talking to someone or trying the trick that you do - keep walking and go on a walk with them. I think that is an incredibly thoughtful way of interacting. And really something that any of us can go and do even if we're a little uncomfortable. Maybe bring our friend with us or if we're with someone um, try it sometime when we're not alone.

37:34.45

James

Yeah, and I'll also say like not everybody like if when we're functioning like as a Christian I believe I'm part of this body of Christ called the Church. It's supposed to be functioning interdependently. So I might, maybe I'm a single woman, I'm not uncomfortable, or I'm not comfortable having this gentleman over for dinner. Um, we'll reach out to a few maybe single guys who would feel

comfortable. Or maybe you know you're not comfortable. You've got kids in your house and you have no way of sort of protecting them who are also the vulnerable while welcoming in the stranger, the vulnerable and so you don't want to serve one to the neglect of the other. And so you're like, man I can't welcome them into my house, but I have a heart to. Well within the body of Christ there are supposed to be diverse and we are supposed to function interdependently, meaning we can lean on one another. Maybe somebody can meet that need you know.

38:41.24

lovelightstories

Right? right? I love it. That is very convicting and very doable too. I think it comes from a sound perspective that you have of experiencing this yourself having done the work internally and going out externally and taking action and finding ways to love others out of broken relationships, essentially, and restoring relationships and giving people more than just something transactional. Thank you for all of that insight. And can you just share very briefly how that experience led to you starting Neighborly, because if I am remembering things right You started neighborly while actually still living on the streets, right?

39:36.70

James

That's right, yeah, almost simultaneously and I mean I just wanted something to do while I was out there in case I, you know, didn't have anything to do I wanted a way to be generous and if I sell everything I own, I won't really have much in the way of finances or provision to give to people who need provision. So I started, it was actually called "clothe your neighbor as yourself". And during that time we were selling clothing online and I would use the funds to provide clothing to my friends like the pair of steel toe work boots that facilitated employment but over many years and starting to work in developing countries to provide school uniforms to children who wanted to receive an education. Um. And because they were required and in some developing countries I was like man you know kids in school. Um, but what if what if the water they're drinking is unclean? Well they're going to be out of school and their grades are going to suffer what if but if you know girls in Kenya they won't go to school when they're on their period. And so if they don't have the proper hygiene stuff then they won't be able to, they won't be able to get those good grades. They won't be able to graduate. They won't be able to overcome the perpetual cycle of poverty that they were born into.

And so like really treating the whole person it started to feel like man we should we should change our name from clothe your neighbor to maybe neighborly within which this organization we can, start to clothe our neighbor. Sure. But maybe also heal our neighbor to shelter our neighbor to feed our neighbor to welcome our neighbor to free our neighbor. Working to serve refugees coming into the country feeding people who are showing up so early at these labor pools these day labor places who are experiencing homelessness but want to work and they just need a good meal. To send them out early in the morning. You know, working with a community to create clean water, so that the kids can feel healthy and can go to school. Yeah, so basically during this time I just got a real taste for um. Poverty and then I got to see um all of its evil manifestations and wanted to do something about it but more than anything wanting to help invite the church into that narrative to give the church opportunities to be faithful to Jesus.

42:21.77

James

Yeah, because I think that's part of the deal, right? It's faith in works are not at odds with each other. works are just the natural byproduct of living faith as we see it's in James, it's not faith verse works. The book of James just articulates how it's living faith versus dead faith. Living faith which

produces works and dead faith which does not, and so I want to create opportunities to both disciple people to help cultivate holiness in their life, and rhythms of holiness in their life and give them opportunity to engage in a relational way with people at a disadvantage, not just knowing of people and poverty, but genuinely knowing them. You know there's this paravian activist and priest named Gustavo Gutierrez who said okay, so you say you love the poor, then tell me what are their names? A scathing indictment for those of us who would never argue that Jesus invites us to care for the poor and yet don't actually know anyone experiencing poverty....if we can't give those names, the question is, do we really, have we really loved them? Maybe we've loved an issue or a topic. We've loved the idea of dismantling an injustice in the world. But if we haven't loved a person, we have neglected to love Christ in the flesh.

43:54.75

lovelightstories

Um, wow that's a mic drop right there. That is so powerful and you can just see the journey that neighborly has taken has mirrored that of your experiences. Starting while you were still experiencing homelessness on the streets intentionally yourself and coming to that realization that it's really about relationships and getting into the margins with people and coming to know their name and that's where the journey of redemption really begins. I just have to say thank you so much for all of that insight. I mean, it really kind of brings the gospel to light, right? and also kind of I guess, for lack of better words, dumbs down the idea of homelessness and living on the streets into so distills it really into something that's a call to action for us to just know them get to know them, understand them. And through coming to understand, we then come to have more empathy, and so essentially, that's what you're doing with Neighborly. You're putting that into action by spending time together. and I just really think that's a very beautiful thing. So James I know that neighborly receives donations for all of your different outreaches, you may call them. Um, can you just share briefly a little bit about that and how people could support this if they feel led to?

45:42.47

James

Yeah, absolutely if something resonated here for you and you want to go deeper and figure out, man could we do a local initiative in our community? We have a way for people to do that by becoming a local a Neighborly advocate. And you can also support financially. We stopped selling clothing to fund our initiatives, which is what we did for a very long time. It just started to take over my time and instead of being out under bridges with people I ended up behind a computer or behind a phone on Instagram trying to look cooler than I really am, right, trying to keep up with the algorithms that increasingly render me obsolete. The more I'm with the people I serve and less that I'm on my phone, so don't get me started on that. You can tell I have some strong feelings about that. But by stepping away we've suffered financially and so we're at 73% funded in our initiatives, but luckily we've been finding people who want to partner with us in that way so that would be important. <http://thatsneighborly.org>. People can do that, and if you'd like to have me out as well and speak to your community I do events like that, preach at churches or in coffee shops or living rooms. That's more my style anyways. But um I love to get to know like man, How is god moving this in this community? And how can we help cultivate a missional vision for our lives and develop holier patterns and rhythms? So that when we serve it doesn't feel like we're signing up for a volunteer opportunity. It's just woven into our very being. Everything we do, we do with intentionality.

47:36.89

lovelightstories

Yes, and you definitely would be the person that I would call to speak at my church or in my living room with a group of friends in my community, because I mean your story itself is just not very common, you could say, right? And the perspective that you have is so pure and beautiful and you just have a wonderful way of weaving in the gospel too. And really trying to put into action what it is we read in the bible.

So. James I want to thank you so much for sharing your perspective, your experiences, your stories today. And helping us come to understand this topic of homelessness and what that really means in our God-given call to meet them in the margins.

48:32.82

James

Yeah, absolutely - a joy to be with you, Stephanie. Thank you so much for having me be a part of this.

48:38.80

lovelightstories

Thank you.