

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT |

Who are the Keystone People in Your Neighbourhood?

By Dr. Preston Pouteaux

How bees can inspire us to live out our faith

Several years ago my wife and I spent time in France. We travelled to Juno Beach where my relatives fought in the Second World War to liberate a small town along the Normandy coast. Bayeux, France, has at its centre a beautiful cathedral. It is a wonder of architecture that still stands even through multiple wars and conflicts.

I was astonished at how the relatively thin stone masonry could uphold vaulted arches over the centuries. Bayeux Cathedral is a feat of engineering. The secret of its longevity rests in the precise placement of a few simple stones. Above every arch and vaulted ceiling in the Bayeux Cathedral rests a keystone.

Keystones are essential to the integrity of the whole structure. They are not typically the most elaborate or decorated part of the building, but without them the cathedral would not be stable. Arches can't be finished unless the keystone is in place, even though they may be small and bear surprisingly little weight themselves. Keystones are positioned in such a way as to allow the rest of the arch or vault to retain its shape and support the load, a technique that has allowed stonemasons to build some of the world's most awe-inspiring wonders.

In ecosystems, biologists have identified keystones of a different kind. Keystone species are animals that may not be the most elaborate or celebrated, but hold a vital role in their environment. They provide essential support in small ways that make a big difference, so much so that without them the system may not be self-sustaining. If particular keystone species were to disappear, hundreds of other species could not thrive.

Honeybees are a keystone species. As pollinators, honeybees visit millions of flowers across vast areas. This pollination plays a pivotal role in helping plants reproduce, grow fruit and support other insects, birds and humans. Yes, you and I rely on bees.

Keystone species, although not the most interesting or noteworthy from a distance, are essential in sustaining the whole through their minute and valuable work. We enjoy the food we eat and the beautiful world we live in thanks largely to very small, but precisely placed creatures.

I am an avid beekeeper and have two beehives in my suburban backyard. I am still amazed that 100,000 members of a keystone species live in my garden apiary. How could something so small, so apparently insignificant, be so pivotal and vital to the health of our world?

Several years ago I set up a bench beside my beehive and would watch as the honeybees would come and go, working day in and out visiting countless flowers and trees in my neighbourhood. As my own imagination started to wrap itself around the enormity of the task these honeybees engaged in, I was enthralled.

Like little bottle rockets, the honeybees start their day launching from the hive and return slowly after pollinating thousands of plants. Their hard work makes my neighbourhood beautiful, and I barely see them working. It was not until I slowed down enough, sat among the flowers myself and listened for the buzz that I could see their minuscule efforts taking shape all around me. Apple trees, berry bushes and whole fields of canola were benefiting from them. I knew the honeybee was responsible for much of the produce I buy at the grocery store, but to know they were making the immediate world around me come alive – I was awestruck.

Do I, as a pastor and neighbour, move about my neighbourhood actively, attentively, patiently and with a focus to bring life? Do I make things beautiful? Do I ensure others benefit from the life I lead? Do I start my day intent on leaving it better than I found it? Do I work with others to find creative ways of helping my city thrive? I asked myself, “Am I a keystone person?”

Keystone people may not be the most noticeable or celebrated, but through their care and attentiveness become essential to their neighbourhood. They support and give shape to the health of their community. Keystone neighbours are life-giving people who in time become important to the world they help create. I wondered, if I moved away or was removed from my neighbourhood, would it be a sad day? Would people realize something good, refreshing and lifegiving had left? I wondered, “Am I a keystone person?”

This question has been, in many ways, the foundation of my work. I questioned the impact of my life and faith as I watched those bees come and go from their hive. Was I merely working for my own benefit? I could say I was working for the wellbeing of my closest friends and family, but was I truly tending to the improvement of my whole city in a lasting way? My experience at the beehive raised this very important question. Was I postured in such a way to bring life to the world around me? And what would need to change to become more that kind of person?

Keystone people are the community connectors, those who see small ideas and bring them to life. They are the eyes of the city, the sages who observe and find patterns. They work to bring pieces together, redeem what is broken and strive for peace. Keystone people instil a sense of hope that grows beyond themselves, often sacrificially. They love deeply and genuinely, serving with a deep character-shaped influence. They are humble and create a culture of growth, breathing life into everything they do.

Jesus was a keystone person. All around Him were religious leaders vying for their own glory and political leaders struggling for power. But Jesus, this miracle-working man, was not striving for either power or glory in the sense the people of that day would expect.

In time Jesus’ disciples began to make sense, albeit in fits and starts, of what He was doing among them. He came to be near and bring life. Jesus came to live with and among the people He loved. Not only to experience the daily grind of the fishmongers, but to show these fishermen the Father’s heart – loving and redeeming His creation.

This redemptive love pivoted not on a throne or through a media campaign. Jesus did not achieve His Father's purposes with a war or with a government. Rather, all the Father completed in Jesus happened in the most well-placed, small and beautiful acts of love and grace the world has ever known. Jesus was precisely where the Father wanted Him to be.

Peter saw the poetry in it all. He saw the subversive and perfect way Jesus worked to establish the Kingdom of God. In Acts 4 Peter preaches, "For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, 'The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else!" (Acts 4:11–12). Peter is saying Jesus is the keystone, the pivotal piece that holds everything together.

By the world's standards Jesus should have been in the reject pile – an inefficient ruler, a weak warrior and a soft politician. He was not the pillar of glory and power the world would expect from the Almighty God become man. But the one who was rejected became the Saviour of the whole, who through love, sacrifice and obedience became the Keystone upon which the Kingdom of God is built.

If Jesus became the keystone, then could we be invited to be His keystone people? Are we standing in-between to bless, uphold and love those around us? Does the life of Jesus serve as a central point of reference for how we bring life to our neighbourhood? The answers to these questions could change the whole shape of our lives.

Neighbour keepers

I'm the first to admit keeping bees is an unusual practice. Honeybees are stinging creatures not contained or tamed. No amount of discipline, shackles or training will make them any more or less than what they are. They live according to a pattern, but not according to my will.

I am only the keeper of the bees. I set up a home and an environment for them to thrive in, and pour affection and care on them. If I keep them well, they return. If I fail to keep them well, they swarm – they pack up their bags and go. I may be the owner of my bees, yet they are among the freest of any livestock.

Cultivate and *keep* are two words and practices we do not tend to use today. We consume, use, expend and tweak. We may problem-solve and collaborate, but few of us see the world through this agrarian language.

Cultivation takes time, and keeping requires a special kind of attention. They are words that can shape the way we see the places where we live and shape a faith open to caring for our neighbours.

The language of cultivating and keeping is found right at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 2:15. Here we read about Adam, this first man and the world's first gardener. God asked him to relate to this special paradise garden of Eden with a particular posture. We read, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Adam was invited to be a keeper of the garden. It was a core posture that God shaped in him, and it sets the tone for how we ought to view the world we inhabit.

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO BECOME A NEIGHBOUR KEEPER IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- Be a community connector by starting a neighbourhood directory. People who live close to each other are often more than happy to know and be known by their neighbours.
- Plan a block party for the summer, serve hot cocoa on Halloween or surprise your neighbours by booking a horse-drawn sleigh ride in the winter.
- Always support a lemonade stand and buy all the girl guide cookies that come to your door.
- Trade with your neighbours. I've traded my honey for butter tarts, hummus, even duck meat (that's another story!).
- Start a neighbourhood Facebook page. Give it a logo and a creative name.
- Organize a community garden tour, exchange plants or share seeds.
- Drop off handwritten notes of gratitude or encouragement to your neighbours. This is a surprisingly profound act of kindness.
- Foster trust in everything. Open your home, listen for stories and speak without an agenda.
- Be a quirky neighbour – be bold, inviting, silly and caring. Memories are built by neighbourhood characters.
- Remember those who are alone, and intentionally reach out.
- Never pass over your neighbourhood – move through it. Walk and ask God to shape your imagination to see your neighbours as God does. – PP

However, it did not take long for the full-on abandonment of this invitation to be a keeper. In Genesis 4 Adam's sons Cain and Abel face off, and Cain kills Abel. God confronted Cain asking him, "Where is Abel?" Cain simply shrugged and replied, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain's flippant comment shows the extent of his fractured heart – from one called to tend and keep to passing off this responsibility as though it were nothing.

However, Cain's words echo the sentiments of our own hearts. When we hear of sorrow or suffering around the world, let alone in our own cities and neighbourhoods, we turn around almost as if to say, "I don't know. Am I my neighbourhood's keeper?"

We may not be complicit in the ills affecting our city, but God takes them seriously. From Jesus we learn God is deeply interested in the well-being of people, so much so that God came to this broken, unkept world, embracing fractured hearts that we might see what love looks like and respond.

It is because of Jesus we are able to say, "I am my brother's keeper." We have the resources we need to be that person. Jesus is tending to the sorrow and gathering keepers like you and me to be what Adam was called to be.

Jesus interestingly is called the New Adam. He is taking all that is broken and making it beautiful and whole again. He is showing us what it is to be God's keystone people, and restoring the work of the keeper by calling us to do the same.

Somewhere along the way, in a backyard apiary in my neighbourhood of Rainbow Falls, Jesus invited me to join Him too. Moment by moment, I am simply learning to say yes to God's invitation to keep, guard, restore, care for and serve those who live near me.

It seems to me we're keeping a lot more than bees.

END

Excerpt from *The Bees of Rainbow Falls: Finding Faith, Imagination and Delight in Your Neighbourhood* (Urban Loft Publishers, 2017). To learn more about engaging with your neighbours, visit Preston's website at www.IntoTheNeighbourhood.ca

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