

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Who’s Your Neighbor?”

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Luke 10:25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’²⁶ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’²⁷ He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’²⁸ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’³⁰ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.’³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.³³ But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.”³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’³⁷ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

The other day Laura and I were having a discussion of the various neighbors we have had in our twenty-five years of life together. I asked her who she thought our most memorable neighbor has been. She wanted to know if she could exclude the neighbors who lived in the drug house that existed briefly across the street from in Salt Lake City. We have lived in four houses and one apartment so there were some real characters from which to choose. The winner would probably be a girl named Laura, a teenager at the time, who was our babysitter and virtual member of the family for three or four years.

I also thought of Dutch. I’m not sure what Dutch’s real first name was but his last name was Clausen so everyone just called him Dutch. Dutch lived across the street from us while I served my first church in Toulon, Illinois. At first I feared he was going to be a difficult neighbor. He shared with me stories about all the crazy ministers who lived in the parsonage before we did and how he didn’t like them. That had me wondering when I would become part of his stories. Then he came over and told Laura that she was mowing the lawn all wrong. Neither of us was thrilled with his criticism.

You must understand that Laura doesn't mow the lawn often, and when she does you should never stop her and tell her she is doing it wrong.

It wasn't long however before Dutch's endearing qualities began to show. He came over to help me rake leaves in the fall. He sprayed my dandelions in the spring. He brought us fresh vegetables from his garden in the summer. He let us park our car in his garage while he was in Arizona for the winter. Because he didn't have a family in the area, Dutch shared his birthday cake and ice cream with us. And even though he was a member of the Methodist church in town, Dutch attended services at the Congregational church a couple times a year, just to let me know that he was interested in what I was doing.

There is an old saying that a fence makes a good neighbor. In many of our neighborhoods and subdivisions, there are rules prohibiting fences. When we lived in Utah however, fences were the rule. Everyone's little piece of the world was separated from the next by a six foot high wooden or vinyl wall. We spent a few years hating the fences but now we miss having a fence every time the dog wants to go outside.

But fences are usually not designed to be neighborly. They are there to keep us away from our neighbors and to keep our neighbors out. A few years ago, most of us witnessed what we once thought improbable, the fall of the Berlin Wall, a fence that separated those who lived in freedom from those oppressed by the power of tyranny. Today we read of a fence built in the West Bank, to separate Palestinians from Israel, and more fences built along the southern border of our own nation, in an attempt to control illegal immigration. I read an article this week that said much of our modern technology is designed around making communication easier yet it is proving to be more of a fence than a tool for intimate communication. Cell phones, voice mail, Facebook, and Twitter are ways to open us up to our friends while at the same time they create boxes and boundaries and borders that divide us from our neighbors. We can choose those with whom we wish to communicate and we can keep ourselves distant from those different than us. We end up spending more time with our social networking friends and less time with our real neighbors.

Children's television host Fred Rogers used to ask the question, "Will you be my neighbor?" But when you think about it, unless it was Mr. Rogers asking the question, this is a very strange question to ask. You can ask someone to be your friend but you usually don't invite someone to be your neighbor. You usually can't just move next door to anyone you want. Neighbors are created by geographical circumstance. However, in a world that keeps getting smaller by the hours, perhaps Mr. Rogers' question is becoming more appropriate. Perhaps it is time to redefine and broaden the term neighbor. Despite our best efforts to isolate ourselves, most of the events of our world teach us that fences, real and imaginary, are coming down. It is difficult if not impossible to live in seclusion and to shut out the rest of the world. What happens a world away has a direct effect upon our lives. Today neighbors are more than just those who live in immediate proximity to us.

While we may yearn for the days of high walls and strong fences, the gospel lesson today teaches us a different lesson about what it means to be a neighbor. Being a neighbor brings opportunity. A neighbor gets to tell the good news of God in action. A neighbor gets to be the presence of Christ to others.

Just about anyone who has heard of the Bible knows the story of the Good Samaritan. The title "Good Samaritan" has become synonymous for one who acts with great mercy and kindness, especially in the treatment of a stranger. To fully appreciate the message of the story you need to look at the preamble. Jesus told this story to a young teacher of the law, a theologian who must have prided himself on knowing it all. The young teacher asked Jesus what needed to be done to inherit eternal life. Forced by Jesus to answer his own question, the young man admits that the law says to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. He then wants to justify himself so he asks another question, "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus responds with the story of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus knew that although this young teacher knew every detail of the law, he did not know the truth of God. Instead the law had become a kind of fence, a way to limit one's responsibility or a way to justify one's limited efforts. The young man's question, "Who is my neighbor?" was really the question, "For how much am I responsible?" In the parable, the priest and the Levite defined their concern for others by the limits of the law. They understood exactly where their responsibility began and ended.

I remember as a boy, raking leaves or painting a fence with my father. After working for a while I would ask my dad, "How many more leaves do I have to rake," or "How many more boards do I need to paint?" I really wanted to know, "Where does this end?" I knew what the answer was going to be but I was hoping for a way out, a justification to quit early or to limit my participation in the project. David Lose writes that the story of the Good Samaritan is so wonderful because it is surprising. It is the Samaritan, the one who doesn't live by the religious rules and expectations of society, who notices and actually sees the beaten man in the ditch and by seeing him is moved to pity. The Samaritan recognizes that when it comes to the question of who is our neighbor, there are no rules or limits. Our neighbor is anyone in need.

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Neighborliness is not a quality in other people. It is simply their claim on ourselves." Neighbors are those who have a claim upon us. That definition is a powerful one straight from the lesson of the Good Samaritan. Neighbors are not those who by mere coincidence, live next door to us. Neighbors are not even those who are necessarily friendly or hospitable toward us. Neighbors may not even be those we like. Rather, a neighbor is one who has a claim upon us. A neighbor is one who has a need that we have some responsibility to meet. Perhaps this is what we fear. Perhaps this is why we are more likely to want to establish limits and build fences.

The lesson of this story is pretty obvious to all. Yet only the Samaritan knew it. The priest and the Levite didn't. The answer to the question of who is our neighbor doesn't come from laws, obligations, education or training. It comes from the eyes of faith which help us see that everyone is a child of God and that helping a neighbor is an opportunity presented by God to show God's love and mercy. The answer isn't found in books and in clear instruction but rather in our obedience to a God who refuses to be anything less than generous with welcoming and caring love. There are no limits. The good news is that we are to love others in the same way God has loved us.

