9-9/10-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 10:25-37 Won’t You Be My Neighbor Series

Connecting with Our Community (Part 1)

Have you looked at our neighbor map in the hallway lately? Have you added your household to a street in Springboro or a surrounding city or township, to mark wherever you may live?

Over the past three weeks, I have been fascinated to watch the map grow, as more flags have been added. The first service to mark their homes on the map was a Saturday night service, when I realized over half who were present that evening live in the same neighborhood west of the church and south of UDF. After the first weekend I realized how few from the church live near the parsonage in the Spices subdivision as well as how few live within three blocks of the church. We have many from the congregation who drive in from beyond the city limits, from south and west, from north and even east.

And if you begin to look at the names that correlate with the flags, I guarantee you will find names of people you do not know. Some will attend worship at a time different than you. And some are families from Bright Beginnings Christian Preschool who have added their households during Meet the Teacher or at drop off times.

Wherever you live, there is a chance that you know at least one neighbor from this congregation.

Yet how well do you know your immediate neighbors, the households closest to you? Picture a tic tac board or Hollywood Squares or the opening image from the Brady Bunch. You live in the center square.

How well do you know the neighbors who live on each side of you, or the three houses across the street, or the three houses behind you? Do you know their names, their habits, whether they work, stay at home or are retired? Do you see your neighbors often or rarely? Do you have neighbors you have never met? I do realize that some of you live very close to your neighbors, and others may have neighbors that are a ½ mile or more down the road. Yet near or far, how well do we know our neighbors? And if we don’t know them, what keeps us from getting to know them?

I confess that Ken has had more interactions with our immediate neighbors than I have. Working in our back yard he has been able to talk with the master gardeners beside us. On the day of the eclipse the woman in the house across and down the street brought Rachel a real pair of eclipse glasses, having seen them outside with our homemade cereal box mirror. Yet seldom are we outside as a family in ways that we become visible to our neighbors and our neighbors become visible to us.

Several years ago in a church conference video Bishop Palmer lamented the fact that few houses are built nowadays with large front porches, and fewer still sit on a front porch large or small.

Some of you remember before air conditioning when neighbors would sit on front porches and neighborhood kids would play outside together. On the front porch was where you got to know your neighbors, and together you helped to raise all of the neighborhood kids.

Although I grew up in rural Hunter without a real front porch, I can remember playing with the neighborhood kids in one yard or another, and we knew well the neighbors on both sides of our house. In the 70s few houses had fenced in back yards, so it was easy to cut across yards to friends the next street over. Nowadays my mom still lives in the same house I grew up in. Yet now her back yard is bordered on three sides by fences that the neighbors have each put in.

Whereas we used to know almost everyone on the street, now Mom is lucky if she knows the neighbors who live on each side of her.

Over the decades as a society we have moved from front porches to elaborate back decks to staying inside, tied to technology and air conditioning and our fears of one another. We now have to be extremely intentional to get to know our neighbors.

Amid our struggles to know or even want to know our neighbors, Jesus’ call to love God and love neighbor is a challenge to us today.

How much effort do we really want to exert in order to know our neighbors? How often are we fearful of getting to know our neighbors? How often do we simply not have time to connect with the community around us?

Yes, I too, have used these questions as excuses not to get to know someone else. Cultivating relationships takes, time, honesty, vulnerability, flexibility, and effort. I have to walk away from my technology. I have to share some of who I am. I have to be open to someone with different beliefs and convictions, different lifestyles and different questions. Who really has the time or the energy to do that? Yet what are we missing out on when we are not open to getting to know the neighbors around us?

As Christians, when we fail to know our neighbors, we also fail to know their needs, their hurts, their yearnings, their hopes. And when we fail to know their needs and hurts, then as a congregation we fail to find effective ways to serve for and with them in their hours of need.

..A minister riding the subway noticed an old woman shuffled into the subway wearing only ragged clothes to protect her from the bitter Chicago winter wind. Her white, cracked, bony hands clutched a worn shawl tightly around her. The minister watched with wonder and pity.

At the next stop, an energetic young man strode confidently onto the train. His warm, high-fashion clothes offered a stark contrast to the rider from the last stop. As he made his way to his seat, his eyes lingered just a moment on the old woman. Three stops later, as the train slowed, he glided by her to the other door and disappeared into the tunnel. On the woman’s lap lay his brown leather gloves.   
The minister observed, “I don’t know if he was a believer in Christ or not. But I do know this: He saw her need and responded with compassion — while I just sat there. It never occurred to me to give her my gloves. That young man showed compassion in a way I’ll never forget.”

--Our Daily Bread, February 6, 1997; quoted in Homiletics 7-15-07

Our scripture lesson today reminds us not only of who is our neighbor, but more importantly encourages us to be good neighbors, full of compassion, to all who are in need.

A student of the Law of Moses tried to test Jesus’ knowledge of the holy scriptures. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” What must I do to get into heaven? What is the checklist that I must follow to get on God’s approved disciples list? What is the minimum I can do to live out my faith? What are the boundaries that determine who inherits eternal life?

Jesus answered the student’s question with a question. “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” What does God’s word say about eternal life? You’re a smart young man who has studied the Law. You know the answer already, so tell me what the Law says.

So the student answered Jesus with the appropriate faithful scholarly response, combining Deuteronomy 6:8 and Leviticus 19:18 in words that other gospels have Jesus’ proclaiming with his own lips. “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.”

Then Jesus affirmed the student. “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

Wanting to prove himself, the student pressed on. He was more concerned here with right words than proper action. He really did not want to be told, “go and do.” How many times would we rather live by faith that is more intellectual than practical, more head and heart than hands?

The student now asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Implied is the question, “And who is not my neighbor?” If Jesus were to give a laundry list of boundaries, the student could argue for the pros and cons of certain groups of individuals listed or not listed as neighbors. If Jesus were to justify the tribal mentality of the time, stating that neighbors were only faithful Jews, then Gentiles and Romans and the unclean and the poor could be excluded.

Frederick Beuchner once wrote:

..When Jesus said to love your neighbor, a lawyer who was present asked him to clarify what he meant by *neighbor*. He wanted a legal definition he could refer to in case the question of loving one ever happened to come up. He presumably wanted something on the order of: "A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever."

Instead, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the point of which seems to be that your neighbor is to be construed as meaning anybody who needs you. The lawyer's response is left unrecorded.

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Frederickbuechner.com 5-21-16 (LK 10)

Jesus refused to answer in words who a neighbor would be for the young man. Yet when we reflect on Jesus’ actions during his ministry, we can infer that Jesus would argue for any and all of God’s children to be neighbors. Jesus shared God’s word, showed compassion, and broke bread with men and women, rich and poor, children and elders, no matter whether or not they were ritually clean, no matter whether or not they were well versed in the Scriptures, no matter whether or not they were of his tribe. Jesus cared for all God’s beloved children.

And so must we.

Instead of defining a neighbor for the young student, Jesus flipped the question around from “who is my neighbor” to “what kind of neighbor are you” by telling a story that we know as the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

On the treacherous, winding 17 mile road between Jerusalem and Jericho, a man is beaten, robbed and left for dead. This was a common occurrence and a common risk for anyone who journeyed this winding highway. Along the highway came several other travelers. First a Jewish priest traveled the road, and upon seeing a bloody and beaten fellow Jew, decided to cross to the other side of the road and walk on by. Next came a Jewish Levite, who acted in the same way as the priest. Here both men were holy, upright, religious men who knew the power of God’s Word, yet neither stopped to care for their fellow sojourner, even if they determined he was a Jew. Maybe they were afraid of ritual contamination with an almost dead body. Maybe they were afraid that if they stopped, they too would be robbed and beaten. Maybe they simply did not want to get involved.

Jesus’ audience would by this time be gloating over Jesus’ condemnation of the religious authorities, agreeing with him concerning their hypocrisy. How quickly the grins turned to looks of horror, however, when instead of following the typical parable pattern and making the hero an ordinary Jew, a common man like many of those listening to Jesus, Jesus scandalized his hearers by making the hero of the story a despised Samaritan.

The Jews refused to even acknowledge the Samaritans right to life, let alone associate with them in any way. To come in contact with the shadow of a Samaritan was enough to send a faithful Jew to be purified. Samaritans were the OTHER. They were the enemy. They were the shunned. If you were a faithful Jew lying beaten and robbed in a ditch, a Samaritan would have been the last person you would have wanted to offer you help. It would be like a French soldier during WW2 accepting help from a Nazi. It would be like a Neo-Nazi accepting protection from an African-American policeman.

When Jesus finished his parable and asked the student which of the three was a neighbor, he had to admit, “The one who showed mercy.” The one who lived by compassion. The one who was moved enough by the needs of another to do something about it.

And once again Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

Go and do likewise. Go and connect with your neighbors, near and far. Go and be a neighbor to another, living by love and hope and compassion. Go and do likewise.

This is our challenge and calling as well. To be a neighbor to all our neighbors. So how do we begin?

The first step to connecting with our neighbors is to see them. To see them as real people with real joys and struggles, real pains and hopes, beyond a cursory glance or stereotype.

The next step to connecting with our neighbors to is draw near to them. We cannot get to know them when we keep others at arm’s length. We may not always agree with those who live around us. They may act differently than we do, or like different foods, or have different opinions about politics, global warming and immigration. Yet in order to connect with our neighbors, once we see them for who they are, and recognize the beloved child of God within each one, then we are to begin to draw near to them, to not be afraid to engage them in conversation and maybe even find a way to connect with them around the Buckeyes or work or background or parenting.

The next step to connecting with our neighbors is to be authentic with them. Especially the younger generations living around us today—they can spot a phony anywhere within 50 feet of them. If you are simply trying to engage them in order to “save” them, they will know that you are not authentic. If you are simply trying to live out your Christian duty to them, they would rather be ignored than seen as less than and in need of rescuing.

In our hyper connected techy society, we are less connected through authentic relationships.

So what would happen if we reached across generations, to get to know what we have in common as well as how we can assist each other? What could we learn from intergenerational cooperation in mission and service, in conversation and study? What would happen if we were open with our struggles and our successes, open with our doubts and our faith journeys?

Only when we connect with our community by seeing the real people who live around us, drawing near to them in authentic relationships can we ever begin to share and receive compassion, grace and love.

If you still struggle with where to begin, start in prayer. Pray for the eight houses that live around you. Pray for the eight people you interact with most on Facebook. Pray for the eight people you see most throughout the week, beyond your family. Pray for openness to God’s next step as you seek to love God and love neighbor.

Then live out what God reveals to you through prayer. The more we get to know our neighbors, through seeing them, drawing near to them and growing in authentic relationship with them,

the more specific our prayers may become. And the more specific our prayers, the more real the ways we live as neighbors, offering and receiving compassion.

To love our neighbors means to be good neighbors. Are you willing to risk yourself this week, this month, this year, to listen to how God calls you to be a compassionate, caring neighbor?

Jesus says to all of us, “Go and do likewise.”

Show mercy. Love God. Love Neighbor. Do this and you will live.

May we do so, led by God’s grace.

May it be so. Let us pray.