9-16/17-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 22: 34-40 Won’t You Be My Neighbor Series

Connecting with our Community (Part 2)

How many neighbors have you lived beside over the course of your life? For those of you who have moved around the country with the military or for work, I imagine that number is higher than those who have lived here all of your life. As I look around this sanctuary many of us are transplants to Springboro. Few of us are still in the houses where we grew up.

I have lived in six houses, not including dorm rooms. I can only remember one house where the neighbors moved in after we did. So if I imagine my house as the center of a nine square tic tac toe board, that is a lot of neighbors. Although one house was beside a school, and one house had a farm field across the road as well as a farm field behind the house. All in all I have been a neighbor to at least 40 different households.

From the Sunday we kicked off this sermon series back in August to now, I have tried to picture those 40 or so neighbors. Some I knew well. Some I never knew. Some were great neighbors to us, helping out when help was needed, watching over the house when we were gone, willing to at least say hi and stop to chat. Yet I still wonder—how much of a neighbor have I been to them?

The six houses I have lived in also represent six different communities. In each community I have found myself connecting with others in different ways. I have been involved with ecumenical shared ministries, a youth center board of directors, and a preschool transition team. In our married years Ken has been involved with scouting at a variety of positions as well as active on a local library board. No matter where we have lived, the opportunities have been almost endless to connect with our neighbors that comprise the wider community, no matter how large or small the town may be.

These past two weeks, in the midst of the news coverage from Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, I have been encouraged by the stories that have been shared of neighbors taking care of neighbors and communities coming together.

One man who rode out the storm in his house on the Keys did so because he spent time helping his elderly neighbors prepare for the storm, many of whom refused to leave, and by the time he got ready to leave it was too late. When asked if he would ever think of staying again and riding out another hurricane he admitted he would if it meant he was still caring for his neighbors before the storm.

Faith UMC in Spring, TX, moved furniture in homes and evacuated neighbors to safety ahead of the floods that inundated their area. Other area churches became shelters or rest areas for emergency personnel. Even some who suffered damage themselves still reached out to check on their neighbors and offer what help they could.

The pastor of First UMC in Vidor, TX is living in a donated camper in the parking lot of the church after the parsonage flooded, while the church transitions its gymnasium from sheltering evacuees to hosting work teams.

For the past month here at First UMC of Springboro, our sermon series has reflected on ways we are called to be Christ-like neighbors as we connect with our neighbors within this congregation, our Bright Beginnings Christian Preschool families, our next door neighbors, then expanding out to our community and our world.

Over this past month from God’s Word we have heard Jesus remind his disciples then and now that we will be known by the love we show to one another within the church. We have heard Jesus remind us that young or young at heart, we are all beloved children of God. We have been reminded that Jesus is the greatest example of God’s love for us. We have been reminded that a neighbor is not defined so much by who we are as much as by what we do, and we are called to be neighbors who show compassion and care to friend and stranger, family and foe.

This weekend, our Scripture once again proclaims Jesus’ mandate to love our God and love our neighbor. What makes Jesus’ words even more profound today is their context within the Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus speaks these words to the religious leaders, the Pharisees, in or near the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples have journeyed into the city from the rural region of Galilee to celebrate the Passover festival later in the week. Yes, *that* Passover festival. This conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders occurs mere days before Jesus will be betrayed and arrested, convicted and killed, buried and resurrected from the dead. Jesus knows his end is near, at least on this earth, yet he continues to teach and to heal. He does not back down from the challenges from the religious leaders.

And according to the Gospel of Matthew, the challenges are many. The religious leaders accept that Jesus is a rabbi from rural Galilee, a teacher of the Law of Moses, yet they do not accept his variations from the teachings handed down for generations. They are concerned that Jesus draws large crowds from all walks of life from all over Galilee and beyond.

So when Jesus enters their turf, followed by a crowd even at the Temple in Jerusalem, the Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes seek to discredit Jesus in the eyes of his followers, and secretly hope to trap him into blasphemy, saying something offensive about God.

So they challenge Jesus on the subject of divorce. They question the source of his authority. They seek to trap him with a question about paying taxes to the Emperor. They question him concerning well known teachings on marital relationships following the resurrection.

In today’s passage, the Sadducees have been silenced. Yet the Pharisees persist, and now seek to trap Jesus with a question of Jewish law. “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

If I were to ask you to list the 10 Commandment given to Moses by God, could you name even 5, let alone get all 10 in order? I confess I would be hard pressed to name them all in order.

The religious leaders, however, were asking a loaded question. They were looking beyond the 10 Commandments. By this time the rabbinical teachers had codified 613 commands in the Torah, the sacred Jewish writings, and believed all 613 were equal, with no added value to one or another. To lift one up as higher than another was to show one’s prejudice for specific parts of the Law. It did not matter that even the Pharisees could not adhere to all 613 laws all of the time. They still expected everyone else to do so.

Yet Jesus, knowing the Law, sees through their trap, and answers wisely.

He knew the basis for all God is and all God does and all God calls us to be is love.

So Jesus responds with a summary of the law, for then and now:

*“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,*

 *and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.*

*And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*

*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (v37-40)*

With such an answer, the Pharisees were silent. They could not argue with what Jesus had said.

*‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,*

*and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’*

This passage is based on Deuteronomy 6:5, which is commonly referred to as the *Shema.* This verse every Jewish child learns at the knees of their parents. This verse is to be recited daily, several times a day, to remind the Jews who and whose they are and how they are to live.

When I think of the daily recitation of the *Shema*, I picture modern day twitter hashtags. I think of football teams who constant mantra is #nextplay or a community resiliently recovering from tragedy such as #houstonstrong or a cancer patient determined to live well in the midst of treatment with #cancerwillnotwin.

..Karl Barth, one of the greatest Protestant theologians of the 20th century, was supposedly asked once what he thought was the most profound of all theological truths. Instead of giving some jargon-laden, academic answer that used words like perichoresis, kenosis, or the insuperable transcendence of God’s prevenient grace as it comes through the vicarious supererogation of the Son, Barth simply said, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” That answer was charming and disarming. Barth said, “The greatest truth is the one you already know, the one all Christians know, the one a three-year old can sing about.” -Scott Hoezee 10-20-14 cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters

The *Shema* for Jews is like “Jesus Loves Me” or John 3:16 for Christians. They all ought to be a reminder of who God is, a reminder to live in relationship with God, and a reminder to live as God’s beloved on a daily basis.

Yet Jesus did not stop there. In addition to reciting Deuteronomy 6, Jesus goes on to recite Leviticus 19:18: *‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*

He recites this verse full well knowing that the religious leaders did not love him, and were already beginning to plot ways to see him dead. Yet Jesus persisted with the truth of God and the truth of God’s word. You shall love the Lord your God and you shall love your neighbor.

One of the primary ways that we can express our love for God is through our love for neighbor. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:12, often referred to as the Golden Rule:

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.” (NRSV)

“Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you.” (CEB)

The ancient rabbis put it in similar terms: "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Law."  --Clayton Schmit 10-23-11 workingpreacher.org

Children are taught this in school year after year. Teachers don’t use the words “love your neighbor”; instead they talk about how not to be a bully.

Through his actions and through his teachings, Jesus had already reminded his followers that a neighbor is any of God’s beloved children, not just those who acted or believed or thought or worshiped like they did. God’s beloved children included religious leaders and unclean outcasts, male and female, adults and children, Jew and Gentile, even the despised Samaritan.

So Jesus summarized the law of God down to its core, a love of God and a love of neighbor. He did not recite the 10 commandments. He did not recite some moral code of conduct. He also did not negate the 613 commands found in the Torah. Instead, Jesus went to the foundation of who God is and who God calls us to be. And that foundation is love.

God’s love is not the love of the world, an emotion that we feel one day and lose the next. God’s love is not the love of the world, that flits from fad to fad or is fickle depending on the person and the situation. God’s love is not the love of the world, that loves shoes and sports and sex and social media all in the same breath.

God’s love is real love, agape love, unconditional love for all God’s beloved children. It is love that chooses to forgive, chooses to reconcile, chooses to reach out time and again even in the face of rejection. The love of God is sacrificial love, best seen through Jesus’ death on the cross and the good news of the resurrection.

God loves us with a love that will never end. Ever. God loves you and there is nothing you can do about it. This is good news for each and every one of us for today and every day.

And Jesus reminds us of God’s love for us when he calls us to respond through love for God and for our neighbors.

I said it before, and I will say it again—the love of God and love of neighbor go hand in hand. They are two sides of the same coin. We cannot claim to love God without loving our neighbors. And we cannot fully and sacrificially love our neighbors without being grounded in our love for God.

As Rev. Clayton Schmit states it:

..We can love with our heart: through generosity to God's people, blessing others as we have been blessed. We can love with our soul: by worshiping God and praying for our neighbors and ourselves. And we can love with our mind: studying God's Word and letting it correct us, enlighten us, and send us out in loving action to the world.

-- adapted from Clayton Schmit 10-23-11 workingpreacher.org

When we are authentic in our relationships with God, growing deeper in love with God each and every day, then God will compel us out into deeper relationships with our neighbors near and far.

I hate to admit the many times when I have seen the church not be the church, Hiding behind walls of fear rather than risk stepping out into the community. Yet we honestly cannot be the church if we are not pushing beyond these walls to our neighbors near and far.

The month of August for our country was the best of times and the worst of times, to quote Charles Dickens. The evening news constantly showed some of the worst of our country as men and women in Charlottesville and others cities were blatant in their racist disregard for others; wind, fire and flood wiped out entire communities; and looting and criticism continued the damage begun by wind and waves.

Yet in the midst of tragedy and in the face of hatred stories of the best of our human race began to emerge: counter protests that swelled to thousands of people; strangers rescuing strangers trapped by high water; neighbors looking out for one another in Texas and Florida; an outpouring of prayers and donations for food and flood buckets.

Here in this congregation, in August our Stephen Ministers hosted a dialogue on the heroin crisis affecting our region, with education being the first step in finding ways to help. In September small groups and individuals have opened their wallets and given to UMCOR to help those with flooded homes.

 This past year our missions team has begun a hard look at the specific ways we as a congregation connect with our community and beyond through financial and physical support of a variety of ministries. Is there a better way to do the Christmas giving tree or Easter meals? How can we get more people engaged with the neighbors struggling to get back on their feet when we host Interfaith Hospitality Network three times a year? Would it be possible to organize an adult mission trip to Houston? How can what we do and give be a practical expression of our love for God and God’s love for us?

I am thankful for the many ways this congregation does connect with our community and beyond, as a church and as individual Christians. Financially we support SCAC and The Pantry, UMCOR and UMVIM, Red Bird Mission and IHN.

Individually you volunteer for SCAC and The Pantry, walk in Relay for Life and feed women and children at the Hope House in Middletown, teach job skills and host accountability groups, and support our youth when they go on a mission trip.

We care for the children of our community by offering our space not only to Bright Beginnings Preschool, but also Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts and Oak Tree Corner grief groups.

In what other ways can we connect with our community, intentionally being Christ-like neighbors? In what other ways can we begin to see the needs of the community around us and respond to those needs in ways that help long term more than a quick fix? I don’t have the answers to these questions.

Yet even after this sermon series is over, God calls us to continue to reach out in practical ways to the community around us, loving our neighbors as a response to God’s love for us. Sometimes loving our neighbor is easy. And sometimes it is a daunting risk.

We may not always like the neighbors we help. We may not always agree with the choices our neighbors make in how they live. We may not always agree on the best resources to use to assist a neighbor in need.

Whether or not we agree, God still calls us to love. And our love is a choice. Our love is a verb. Our love is an intentional action. Our love for neighbors ought to be a response to God’s love to us.

Yet in his book Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis wrote, "Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."

-homileticsonline.com 10-26-14

Look for a moment at one of the crosses on the wall behind me. Like the two beams of the cross, the love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. We are called not only to our vertical relationship with God, but also to our horizontal relationships with other people. One beam without the other makes for an incomplete cross, and therefore an incomplete faith. In the love of one we find the love of the other.

We love because God first loved us. As we leave this service of worship today, as we enjoy the block party and reenter our daily lives, may we continue in intentional ways to love God through worship and praise through service and prayer. May we continue in intentional ways to love our neighbors as individuals, as households, as a congregation.

What is the next step God is calling us to as we connect with our greater community? May we be open to God guiding us into new ways of being Christ-like neighbors to God’s beloved children and our neighbors near and far. This is my prayer and this is my hope.

May it be so. Let us pray.