

WHO IS YOUR NEIGHBOR

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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LUKE 10:25-37

Before Polly and I came to Marianna last November, we lived in the same town for twenty seven years, twenty six on the same corner. Some of the folks whose houses we could see from that manse had lived there longer than we did.

The people who live in those houses might well be described as neighbors.

I waved to them when we passed, I spoke to them, carried on a conversation with them, but did I really know them? Did they really know me?

Over the years I can think of several acts of kindness my neighbors did for me. Perhaps they can think of a few that I have done for them. But are they really my neighbors? Was I really been a good neighbor to them?

Here in Marianna, I seldom see the folks who live on either side of the manse, but we wave as we pass, and if we are out in the yard at the same time, we speak. But are we neighbors?

I remember my childhood, and the neighbors we had then. It was different.

We knew our neighbors, and spent time visiting in the evenings with them. We often stopped to talk in our daily routines. But something, or some things, have changed.

I can tell you a few things that have changed the way neighbors relate. One of them is air conditioning. We all want to get inside where it is cool. In our vehicles, we drive with the windows rolled up, so the cool air won't escape.

I didn't used to be like that. I remember sitting on the porch swing, drinking lemonade, in the evening, trying to keep cool. We would visit with the neighbors walking by. And I remember mothers of my childhood friends leaning out the window that was open for ventilation, to see what was going on with the children. And when one rolled around the corner in an automobile with the windows rolled down, it was easier to stop and say "hello."

Television changed the way we relate to each other as neighbors. We hurry inside so that we don't miss our program. Or we focus on the screen instead of out the window.

Every home having an electric clothes dryer made a change, as well. Women used to stand in the back yards and talk as they hung out the laundry, or took it down. One of the real acts of kindness a neighbor could perform was to take down the laundry that had dried in the sun if a rain storm was threatening, and put it on the porch of the neighbor who was off at work or shopping.

There are children today who have never smelled the smell of a sun-dried sheet or towel!

Lawn care services have made a difference. When we worked in our own yards, weeding our own flower beds, edging our own sidewalks, mowing our own grass, we would stop and visit with our neighbors who were doing the same kind of chores. Of course, the power lawn mower with its roar, and the weed eater and leaf blower that followed, make such conversations next to impossible any way.

Most of our conversations take place on telephones, or on social media. Facebook and Twitter have replaced the front porch and the back-yard fence.

I have “friends” I’ve never met, nor seen, and probably never will, as far away as the mountains of Alberta, Canada. But I can’t say that I know my neighbors.

If we do not know our neighbors, how can we be neighbors to strangers we pass? How can we respond to the need of the stranger by the roadside?

Do you know what has made the biggest difference? It is fear, plain and simple fear.

We’re afraid. We’re afraid to get involved. We’re afraid to take a risk. We’re afraid of what might happen.

We read of car-jackings, of kidnappings, of robberies, and we see the stories on the television news. And so we are afraid to stop by the side of the road to help someone in need.

My old friend, Wilson Mathis, who died nineteen years ago this month, had something happen to him in the last few months of his life that defied this fear.

He had been to the county dump, to the land fill, with a load of trash on a Friday afternoon. As he was headed home, he saw a pick-up truck by the side of the road, with the hood up. He stopped. The driver, who was working on the motor, spoke little English. Wilson spoke no Spanish. But Wilson recognized what the problem was, pointed it out to the man, and in some way let him know that he would take him to where he could get the part needed to fix the truck. And he did. Drove the man to the closest auto parts store, and back to the roadside, and waited until the part was installed and the truck started up and running. When the man wanted to pay him, Wilson wouldn’t take his money.

Just his thanks, his “muchos gracias.” The man did have a couple of watermelons in the back of the truck, and Wilson accepted one of them.

I helped him eat the melon.

Wilson didn’t even know the man’s name, probably couldn’t have pronounced it if he had, but he was his neighbor.

I can’t remember the last time I stopped to help someone beside the road. Can you?

I can remember a time someone stopped to help me.

I was standing by the car with a wrench in my hand, trying to figure out how to get the wheel center/hub cap off in order to get to the lug nuts I knew were underneath it. Had on a white shirt and tie. Two fellows stopped. They got the hubcap off, the tire changed in no time flat, and didn’t really want the money I forced on them. One said, “Shoot, we change truck tires all day for a living... This was a piece of cake!”

By the way, they cautioned me to not go on to my destination, but to go home, because the “doughnut” as they called the temporary spare tire, might fail me, and they said that it wasn’t safe to be stranded beside the highway after dark.

I’ve never seen those men before, and will probably never see them again, but they were better neighbors to me than anybody else had been in a long time.

We call people like that Good Samaritans, after the parable of Jesus that is our text this morning.

Note that the two who passed by, a priest and a Levite, were religious, holy, men.

No doubt they were afraid. They might have been afraid of being waylaid by robbers. They might have been afraid of being defiled by touching a dead man, or by getting blood on their hands, or by touching someone not of their faith. But the Samaritan, the despised “distant cousin” of the Jews, with whom an Orthodox Jew of that day would have had no contact, stopped, helped, paid for future care.

He was the neighbor, for he showed kindness, mercy, the grace of God, to one in need.

I don't think that God expects us to take unnecessary risks, but I do think God wants us to show compassion, mercy, concern, for the needs of the world around us.

John Knox writes of the story: “The good Samaritan is not trying to do his duty. The point is that he is not aware of *duty* at all—any more than we are aware of duty when we act generously to ourselves. We act so towards ourselves because we want to; so this Samaritan acts towards the stranger. He loves his neighbor as he loves himself.” *The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, Page 196*

And that is the point of the story. We are to love our God with all our being, and our neighbor no less than we love ourselves.

Let us pray.

O God of love, you loved us enough to give us Jesus Christ not only as an example, but as a sacrifice for our sins. Help us to show that love to others, being willing to risk all to help all whose needs are great. Keep us safe in our journeys, until we reach your kingdom, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.