

I Kings 21: 1-16

The Other Side of the Fence

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Summer is such a precious time of year. That is especially true in New England. We wait all year for summer to arrive and this year we have really enjoyed sunny days. Summer is the time for screen doors flapping as children come and go. It is the time for backyard barbecues, and dinner on the patio. It is the time for bare feet and badminton on the lawn. For most of us it is a prime time to get re-acquainted with our neighbors. People we nodded to as we ran for shelter on colder days are out mowing the lawn, planting perennials, enjoying the sunshine just over the fence. During the summer we overhear their conversations. We take note of their habits. We catch up on the gossip.

During September our worship theme is “Neighbor”. All month we will discuss what it means to be a good neighbor. What do you do if you don’t like your neighbors? What do you do if your neighbors seem to be getting too close? What is the right balance with the people next door? Who are our neighbors in a modern world? What if your neighbor comes from a very different culture, or speaks a different language or worships in a way which is foreign to you? If you have 500 friends on Facebook what are your responsibilities as an online neighbor?

Though the topic of how to be a neighbor seems like a very modern one, the questions of how to treat your neighbor is as old as the Bible. 4000 year ago people worried about how to get along with their neighbors. Jesus talked about loving your neighbors and his disciples

often debated what He meant. Let's take a look at wisdom in scripture and see what the Bible says about neighbors that we can apply to our lives today.

In the first place the Bible says we cannot ignore our neighbors.

I will never forget the summer I was living in the church parsonage on Sargent Street. I looked across the street one warm day and there was my neighbor holding an infant. I had never seen this baby before and could not imagine who it belonged to, and I liked to think of myself as someone who was interested in my neighbors. (My own family accused me of straying toward the nosey side in the neighbor department.) So when I saw a new baby, I assumed my neighbor Anne was watching someone's infant. But this became a curiosity for me, and I kept returning to the window to see whose baby it was. Soon I went outside to make small talk and worked up to asking about the baby. I discovered it was no random baby, but my neighbor's fourth child Kevin. I did not even know Anne was pregnant. All winter she had been bundled up in a big coat. It was a good lesson for me to see how easy it is to ignore our neighbors. We get into our own stuff, our own ideas and ambitions. It is easy to operate oblivious to the things they are doing, or planning or creating all around us.

The Bible pays a lot of attention to neighbors. One of the very first times we see neighbors mentioned is in the Ten Commandments. Five of the 10 give instructions that pertain to the neighbors.

1. You shall not murder.
2. You shall not steal.
3. You shall commit adultery.

4. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
5. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

In this original rules for life, getting along with your neighbors was just as important as worshipping God.

You might wonder why God is so concerned with how the Hebrews get along with their neighbors. They have only been in the dessert for a while at this point. They had barely shaken all the Egyptian sand from their sandals. They did not have many possessions except what they could carry across the Red Sea and they were living in tents, at the time Moses got the 10 Commandments. But apparently lying, stealing, leering and coveting must have been a huge problem. Getting along with the neighbors emerged as such a major issue God had to address this problem in no uncertain terms.

Our scripture lesson today comes from another old story. Ahab was the king of a kingdom of Israel and he looked over the fence at his neighbor's land and spied a vineyard that he wanted. It belonged to his neighbor, but he imagined it would make a good garden, being near to his palace. So Ahab approached his neighbor Naboth and asked him to sell the vineyard. To his surprise Naboth refused because the land had been in his family for generations and to him it was priceless. That vineyard had history. When Naboth walked among the vines he remembered his parents and theirs. He dreamed of passing this land on to his children one day.

Ahab was selfish and set Naboth up to be killed so he could steal this land from him. God was angry at Ahab and cursed the king predicting that he would die in the way that Naboth had. Terrified by God's reaction, Ahab goes into mourning, and the story demonstrates what can happen when we covet our neighbor's property. Innocent people suffer and we all lose out on a friendship that could blossom between neighbors.

The Bible says, our neighbors are a gift.

Sadly Ahab got what he thought he wanted but he lost a good neighbor. He thought a garden was more important than building a relationship with the fine man who lived next door. What utter folly. That garden land never made Ahab happy, and it cost him his integrity. We all talk about being good neighbors, but the proof of our words is in the way we deal with the people we call neighbor.

I live in a neighborhood in Jamaica Plain, where the houses all have small fenced yards, and in the summer your neighbors can seem close. Many times this summer I would roll my eyes on a Saturday afternoon as I listened to my neighbor yell at her granddaughter. Part of me wanted to have nothing to do with this lady. But I could not avoid her when I went to cut the lawn, and we greeted each other. I smiled at her granddaughter and we chatted. She had a habit of pointing out the weeds I had missed. This day was no different so I gritted my teeth and thanked her. Then I asked her if little Leah was going to school soon. She told me she hoped to get her into Metco. That sounded like a great idea to me, and as I brightened she told me that her 3 children had all been in Metco. They were graduates of the Dover Sherborn school system and she hoped to get little Leah in there too. Suddenly some door unlocked in

me and for the first time I understood that all this yelling was just a different way of parenting, and she was hoping to help her granddaughter be prepared for Metco and achieve her dreams for success for her. I also understood that this woman I had been holding somewhat at arm's length respected education as much as I do. Somehow, an invisible fence between us melted a bit, and I had a new appreciation for her. She still points out the weeds I miss whenever she sees them, but such is life with your neighbor, sometimes.