

Matthew 22:36-40

How Do You Love Your Neighbor Today?"

Sunday, September 9, 2012

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This month our worship theme is Neighbor. Each week we will think together about what it means to be a good neighbor. We will ponder questions like – *Who is my neighbor? What do I need from my neighbors? How do I become a good neighbor or a better one? How do I strike the right balance – between intimacy and distance - with my neighbors? Is there such a thing as too much closeness? In multicultural neighborhoods or in our intercontinental travels how do we build a world where we cultivate neighborly relationship with people from every culture, faith and nation?*

At first glance you might think this topic is a no-brainer. We all need to be polite, welcome new neighbors with a smile or a casserole, and all will be well. But relationships with people who live around us can become complex.

A few weeks ago there was a big story in the news about a lawsuit brought by some neighbors in Hull. They were angry at a lady near them who was feeding the birds. She was so enthusiastic about providing for the aviary population that she had many birdfeeders in her yard and hundreds of birds would come to feed. The problem was that they did not stay in her yard, and the number of birds was putting a strain on everybody around her.

Even if you are not dealing with difficult neighbors the people who live next door are just that – next door. There is no ignoring them. They are in your space and you are in theirs. No matter how careful we choose our neighborhood or cultivate good relationships you cannot avoid them. Sometimes

you need them. They may be the ones you turn to in an emergency. They are the most obvious friends for your children growing up. They are the folks you turn to for conversation- when you are gardening or clean out the car. Because they are so close they see you honestly; there is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

Living with the neighbors is part of life. It is a question people have been considering for centuries. That is why the Bible says so much about your relationship with your neighbors. It takes our relationship with our neighbors very seriously. Let look at what the Bible says about how to be a neighbor and see what it means for our lives today.

I see 3 themes in the Bible. Respect. Responsibility. Reverence.

Respect.

There are at least 225 places where the Bible talks about how to live with your neighbors. God was often instructing the people of Israel about how to live in harmony with neighbors far and near. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, Moses brought them down the mountain. The 10 Commandments treat this topic more than any other subject. The first 4 commandments deal with worshipping God. Commandments 6-10 are all about how you get along with other people. #6 Thou shalt not murder. #7 Thou shalt not steal. #8 Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Lest there be no mistake the last 2 commandments specifically use the word **neighbor**. #9 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. #10 – you shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave. You shall not covet your neighbor’s ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor. Last week’s sermon was all about the repercussions of envying your neighbor’s stuff.

God says you cannot be happy if you don't respect the people you live with. You cannot thrive if you are consumed with disputes with them. In the 1860's, two families from Tug Fork on the Big Sandy River that forms the boundary between West Virginia and Kentucky started a feud. The fighting between the Hatfields and the McCoys continued for 30 years and resulted in the brutal torture and death of at least one dozen people. When neighbors start fighting the rivalry consumes the neighborhood. No one respects these people.

Just yesterday there was another story in the Metro section of the Globe about neighbors in Louisville KY. The residents of one upscale neighborhood in Louisville were up in arms about a fence that one man had installed. This Thursday night they all met to discuss the fence. As the discussion heated up, the man with the fence- a 55 year old physician pulled out a handgun and shot the president of the neighborhood association in the head. He was pronounced dead. Neighborhood disputes can get ugly. Nobody wins these disputes. I imagine the neighborhood dispute in Kentucky had been brewing for a while, but somewhere along the line people stopped respecting each other. Now someone is dead and lives are forever changed.

Our relationships with our neighbors rely on us. We model respect to our children. We set the tone across the fence or driveway. We have the ability to resist the temptation to be petty. We can rise above the tendency to take the low road. When things are tense sometimes it only takes one person to make a course correction that ensures peace. When we are respectful of others, people respect us.

Responsibility

The Bible goes further. It tells us that we are responsible for our neighbors. In Deuteronomy the Bible says, "If you see your neighbor's oxen or sheep straying away, don't stand idly by and watch without lending a hand. (Deut. 22:1-4) If you see livestock and you do not know whose they are you should keep

the strays at your house in your barn until you can determine whose animals they are. The Bible says that we cannot be oblivious to the plight of our neighbor.

If you see water pouring out of your neighbor's basement you need to take action. If you see a child fall from a bike and in need of help, need help you need to get involved. By the same token the Bible says, "You are responsible to your neighbors if your cattle get loose in your neighbor's field. The Bible requires you to make restitution. (Exodus 22:5) Very few of us own cattle today, but the point is clear. If a limb from your tree falls on the neighbor's fence while they are down the Cape, you make amends. The issue is not the fence or the money, but the trust you build or forfeit in those telling moments.

You learn who your neighbors are when you are in trouble. When we first moved to Jamaica Plain I did not know about street cleaning. Twice a month in Boston you must move your car from the front of your house for the afternoon when the street cleaners come through. There are signs but I did not read them or remember them. The city sends a tow truck to sweep through before the cleaning trucks. One day I was working in my office when there was a loud frantic banging on the door. My next door neighbor Leila was talking fast in her Caribbean inflections but I caught her meaning right away. I had to move my car immediately because the tow truck was about to move it. I grabbed my keys and ran for the car. When I had it moved it, I returned to find another neighbor chatting up the tow truck operator. I realized then that my neighbors had worked as a team – one got me and another distracted the tow truck driver. As soon as my car was safe my neighbor across the street smiled and waved goodbye to the driver. The tow truck operator turned to put the chains on my car but it was gone. That was when I knew I had moved into a good neighborhood. People feel responsible for one another.

Reverence

It is well known that Jesus said we must love our neighbor as ourselves. A lot of people think this idea was original to Jesus but he was just quoting a very basic tenet of Jewish law. But I believe Jesus took the notion of loving your neighbor to a new level. He taught that we are all children of the same God. So our neighbors aren't strangers we have to learn to get along with for the sake of a peaceful world. They are kin in the family of God. So our obligations to our neighbors are sacred obligations.

In the 1960s a Presbyterian minister named Fred Rogers had this vision for an unusual television ministry to children. Starting in 1968 and going through 2001 Mr. Rogers directed his own daily show using songs, puppets and frank conversations. An Emmy-award winner, Rogers started on WQED on Pittsburgh Public television offering children and their parents a vision of a world with wholesome neighborly values. His songs were a little hokey, but millions of people were affected by his message about how to be a good neighbor, and together build a world where people revere each other. Mr Rogers recognized the revolutionary power of the Jesus' challenge that we love one another like neighbors and dedicated his life to teaching children that the world is a safer place when we see the sacred qualities in our neighbors. He took time to convey a reverence for life, and turned a very hokey television stage and set into a neighborhood and taught people to see that it was a sacred space.

One of the great privileges of my job is that I sit with families when they are planning funerals and memorial services for their loved ones. It is an honor because the stories I hear in those moments are holy prisms through which we all see the life we will be remembering at the service. With love and candor that spills back and forth between tears and laughter, many families have shared cherished neighborhood memories. Again and again, people have remembered sacred times when as children they ran from house to house. They told of games played, food shared and parents who understood it takes a village to really raise a child. So often when we have the service I have seen grown adults in their 30's or

40's fly back to attend these memorial services in this church because someone else's parent in their neighborhood had meant so much to them growing up.

Let us pray....