

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: Luke 10:25-37

Title: “The Art of Neighboring: The Call to Neighboring”

Many of you are aware that a small group has been meeting at the Auburn Hotel over the last few weeks exploring the book, “The Art of Neighboring”. It was quite a stretch for me to go and ask permission from the manager of the bar to hold a small group study there, but it’s been rewarding. For one thing, I learned that Tuesday Taco night is a bargain. You can get a taco supreme and a pop and get out of there for under five bucks! And it’s good!

But for another thing--something more serious and more important, I learned again that I like to stay in my comfort zone even when it comes to neighbors. I was uncomfortable going to Mary William’s establishment and meeting her even though she is right next door. And I came to clearly recognize that I do the same thing with some of my neighbors who live near me. It takes an intentional effort to overcome my discomfort and cross the boundaries I’ve somehow drawn in myself and go meet someone next door or just a few houses down the block.

I expect I’m not alone in this habit of keeping to myself out of comfort. According to those who’ve been meeting with me at Mary’s place, all of us have people who live near us that we do not know—even just their names. And apparently, it’s occurring across the country. According to a study reported in “Psychology Today”, people who trust their neighbors are generally healthier people. Yet, according to the report,

Despite the proven benefits, social trust is on the decline. The number of Americans who believed others could be trusted most or all of the time fell from 55% in 1960 to 30% in 1998, according to the Saguro Seminar on Civic Engagement in America at Harvard University.

(Trusting Your Neighbor Linked To Better Health: Study found at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/minding-the-body/201109/trust-your-neighbor-boost-your-health>).

One of the best known analysis of Americans' loss of trust comes from Mr. Robert Putnam, author of Bowling Alone. Putnam spent nearly 20 years studying the United States' declining "social capital," including trust. According to his findings, he says that

...Americans have abandoned their bowling leagues and Elks lodges to stay home and watch TV. Less socializing and fewer community meetings make people less trustful than the "long civic generation" that came of age during the Great Depression and World War II.

Granted the studies are dated, but it doesn't take a Harvard Study or a book to reveal that neighboring is different today than it once was. Trust levels have shifted. In my lifetime alone, children are not as free as I was when I was a child. I could be gone for hours on end without parents being aware of exactly where I was, but we would never allow that to happen with our own son. We had to know where he was at all times. Something has happened to basic social trust.

Therefore, over the next six weeks we will exploring this issue because it is at the core of Jesus' teaching. The six themes on which we will spend time are:

1. The Call to Neighboring
2. Overcoming the Barriers
3. Moving Up the Line, a practical way to be a better neighbor
4. Posture is Everything: the motives for being a better neighbor matter.
5. Open Doors
6. A United Front

What difference does it make in your life and mine, then, to consider being intentional about being a better neighbor? Does it really have anything to do with our walk with Christ?

The well-known story of the Good Samaritan speaks to these questions. Jesus is once again being challenged by religious authorities as he continues his work to reveal the God of grace, mercy, forgiveness & healing. And as he continues that work in Luke's Gospel, an authority on the religious law asks him how can he inherit eternal life? Jesus doesn't answer him directly but responds in kind asking the man two questions of his own:

1. What is written in the law?
2. How do you read there?

Jesus sends the man back to scripture but he also asks him for his interpretation which happens every time we read scripture: we interpret what is written. So with this lawyer. He reports what is written:

"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." 28 And he said to him, "You have given the right

answer; do this, and you will live.”

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus affirms that “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” and “there is no commandment greater than these”.

Jesus confirms that eternal life is inherited through love of God AND neighbor and that there is no commandment greater than these. They are above all other commandments, and they are one in the same. To love God is to love neighbor. To love neighbor is to love God.

But that wasn't quite enough for this lawyer. He wasn't finished testing Jesus quite yet, and so perhaps thinking he could decide himself who his neighbor was and who wasn't, who he was called to love and who was excluded from this commandment, he asks Jesus, “who is my neighbor?”, as if he didn't know.

How many of us have lived as if we did not know the answer to this question? How many of us have excluded someone from this commandment to love, thinking perhaps that this person really isn't included in Jesus' commandment? Not really my neighbor. Jesus couldn't mean THAT person or THOSE people! Or maybe we don't think about what it means to love neighbor at all. Maybe we've become numb to this commandment. We've heard it and know it as people who seek to follow Christ, but our behaviors may reveal that we're not living it out. How many of us have excused ourselves from the call to know and love our literal neighbors, the people who live closest to us? Yet, what if Jesus is calling us to love our actual neighbors? I don't even know the names of some of my closest neighbors! How can I love them when I don't even know their names?

So Jesus tells this beautiful story, a well-loved story, that even people who don't claim the name Christian know and appreciate. The story of a man who becomes the victim of robbery, is beaten and left in the ditch to die. Two religious leaders—one at a time—come by, see the man. We expect them to do the religious thing and care for this poor man but that's not what happens. They are preoccupied with their own agenda or maybe afraid they'd be next or didn't want to take a chance on becoming unclean by touching what looked to them perhaps to be a dead body. Whatever their reasons, they avoid the victim and keep walking.

Then along comes a Samaritan, a man who was the least likely to help, a man Jesus' audience would have considered an enemy. Liken him to an extremist or terrorist, maybe a right-wing Republican if you're a liberal Democrat or a liberal Democrat if you're a right-wing Republican, or maybe a fundamentalist Christian if you're a liberal progressive Christian or vice-versa. You get the idea: Jews and Samaritans were not friends. They did not like each other, tried to avoid each other.

But along he comes, the unlikely rescuer, making his way to Jericho, and he sees the victim. He doesn't think about his agenda, doesn't worry about being clean or unclean. Apparently all he sees is a human being in trouble and he acts by extending mercy, God's mercy for the fallen one. He tends to the man's wounds, cares for him by transporting him to a place in which he can recover and even pays out of his own pocket for his care.

It's a great story, one with which even those who aren't Christian can identify. It's the way we would hope life would be, that in an ideal world we would love one another in this way, that we would be able to overcome our suspicions and lack of trust in other people in order to be

merciful to someone who hurts in spite of the divisions we draw. It's the way we would hope to be treated ourselves if we found ourselves in the ditch as a victim of someone else's cruelty.

And Jesus, the master story teller, uses it to remind us that the definition of neighbor is broad, bigger than just our actual neighbors. Our neighbors include co-workers, the parents of the other children on your kids' team, the people being served in Saginaw this week at One Week/One Street. Jesus blows the definition of neighbor wide open, but not so wide as to allow us wiggle room to escape the fact that our literal neighbors-- the people who live near us--are also included. It's not just the metaphorical neighbor out there somewhere Jesus calls us to love, but the people who live around us, and some of them may be Samaritans to us. Unliked. People we may not trust very much. They are not exempt from Jesus' call to love.

In all of this, maybe we are being called to get back to the basics before we move on to the graduate level call to neighboring. Or maybe we are being called to **relearn the basics** thinking we have moved on to the graduate level. That is not to dismiss loving neighbors more broadly at all.

I remember my neighbor Peter Lebauex of Slidell, Louisiana, who our Volunteers in Mission team served after Hurricane Katrina flooded his home. I remember the two families in Rio Bravo, Mexico who have new homes and the anonymous faces of those served at the medical clinic and the children of the vacation Bible school who were served by those who traveled there from this congregation. They are my neighbors, too,--and yours--but when I leave those places, perhaps never to see them again, the call of Jesus to love my actual neighbors remains. I cannot escape it. I believe Jesus is quite clear about its importance.

A week or so after I asked Mary for permission to meet at her bar, somehow she connected with Tamara Klida and told her that she would like to collaborate with us and have a fundraiser for the food pantry we house here. We would set a mutually agreeable date, as I understand it, and she would contribute 10% of the day's proceeds to the food pantry. I'm going to be recommending any day but Tuesday, because Tuesday Taco Night is too cheap! But I can't help but think that the Spirit of God is already active and moving in this simple, yet powerful, act of being intentional about loving our neighbors. It really is very simple. It's just not always easy or comfortable. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

In your bulletin you have a tool for loving neighbor. It's called a block map. It's a simple way to think about and be intentional about getting to know our neighbors. In the center is your home and around your home are the homes of 8 others who live nearest to you. For some, it might be nice and neat like the configuration on the map. You literally have 8 houses surrounding yours. For others who live in the country, it's nothing like this. Neighbors are spread far and wide. The idea is not to force this configuration on anyone but just to consider the people who live nearest to you. Write your name in the middle block and try to name those living nearest to you.

Let me share our block map with you and tell you a little about where we are in this exercise.

Share our map.

I believe the Spirit is calling us to be more intentional about meeting people outside the walls of the church and our homes. I believe that like the Pentecost Apostles, the Holy Spirit is

blowing us out of the building and into the world more than we have been before. We just don't neighbor like we used to do. What if Jesus was calling all of us not just to get people's names but what if Jesus was calling us to love our actual neighbors, the people who live near us? What if this simple command to love God and love neighbor was something we actually did? What might our communities look like? How might they change? How might we change?

I can tell you it has already changed how I relate to my neighbors, and as I continue to slowly work on this, I believe and trust that God's Spirit is in this and that good things will come as a result.

So I want to give you a few moments to fill out your map. As you do so we have a clip to share and some music, too, if you need more time.

Litany/Reading:

[Using *THE FAITH WE SING*, p. 2130, “*The Summons*”, offer the following reading]

Choir: singing verse 1 of “The Summons” p. 2130

L: Well, are you ready? I am calling your name. I need you go and work for me.

P: Where are we going? How will we get there? Who’s going with us? What is the pay scale?

L: I’ll let you know when I am ready. Just trust in me. Your payment is always to live in my love.

P: Well, we don’t know. It sounds too risky. We might need more convincing.

Voice: And so they hesitated, wanting reassurance, finding it hard to trust in God.

Choir: singing verse 2 of “The Summons” p. 2130

L: There are lots of people in need who cry out in pain. Some of these people are not very nice, others are lost and lonely. You might not be welcome, and your friends may think that you are crazy for wanting to help. Are you ready to come?

P: Oh, you didn’t mention that we would have to work with “undesirables”. We aren’t sure that we are prepared for that, after all we have other lives to lead.

L: They have prayed long and hard, and I am sending you with my compassionate love to them.

P: This is getting more difficult. At first it just sounded like an adventure, now it is work.

Voice: And so they wondered if they could do this. They waited and wondered.

Choir: singing verse 4 of “The Summons” p. 2130

L: Let go of your fear. I am calling you and will be with you. Place your trust in me.

P: It’s not that easy, Lord. There are so many things that could happen.

L: That’s right! Love, Healing, Hope, Faith, Peace...all these things can happen if you are willing to listen for my call and go in my name.

P: singing verse 5 of “The Summons” p. 2130