

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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June 28, 2015

Text: Luke 5:27-32

Title: “The Art of Neighboring: Moving Down the Line”

We’ve been talking these last few weeks about “The Art of Neighboring”. The first week I shared the block map and the fact that I have work to do because I cannot give you the names of two of our eight neighbors that live near to us. I also challenged you to begin filling it out for yourselves, acknowledging that for some of you who don’t live in a neighborhood with the neat grid laid out in the block map, the idea is not to get hung up on having to fit the rubric but rather just to identify the people you don’t know who live nearest you and find ways of simply introducing yourself and getting their names.

Last Sunday, we explored the barriers to getting to know our neighbors better. And I shared the story of my cluttered shop and how I just get stuck sometimes not knowing where to begin so I don’t. It sometimes takes my wife’s prodding and support to get me down there to get something done. We also heard from Jesus as he spent time with Martha and Mary, and we explored the fact that we can get distracted by many things, and those preoccupations can be a barrier to walking across the street to initiate a conversation with a neighbor. There are other barriers too, of course: fear, distrust, our own personality styles, and others that can keep us from knowing where to get started when it comes to loving our neighbors who live nearest to us. We sometimes get distracted from the one thing needful, focusing on loving God and loving neighbor as Jesus commanded.

The more this loving God and neighbor commandment rests in my mind and soul as we’ve been exploring what this means and how we can grow in such love, the more I am convinced that Jesus really meant it. That is, Jesus meant for us to love our actual neighbors not just those who live out of sight, in another city or country or continent, but the people near us and the people sitting next to us or down the pew from us as well as those human beings who live out of our sight. And in a world in which a young man in Charleston, SC can freely walk into a church, receive a warm welcome at a bible study, and then proceed to demonstrate ignorance and hatred based on differences beyond anyone’s control, it cannot be more fitting than to continue to grow and deepen what it means for all of us to love our neighbors with the love of Jesus, can it? Surely acts of terror and hatred are anti-Christ. They are against Christ. What can you and I do to show the world a better way, God’s way? How can we live our lives in ways that reveal God in Jesus as a better way, the only way, to love?

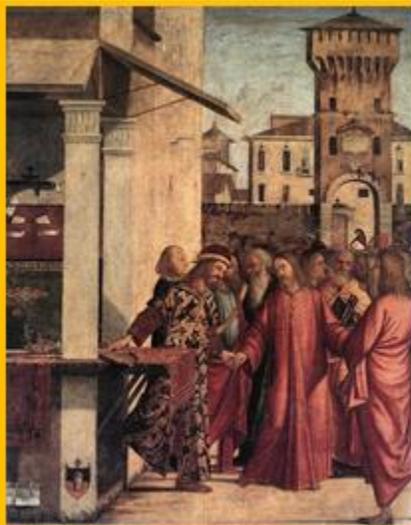
Perhaps it starts with this story from Luke’s Gospel this morning. The calling of Levi is told in Matthew, Mark and Luke but omitted in John’s Gospel. Levi is sitting in his tax booth practicing his profession of fleecing people. At least that’s how the people thought of tax collectors. However they managed to acquire this reputation is up for dispute, at least in terms of the details. But their job was to

collect tariffs on goods brought into Roman territory. Some sources indicate they paid for the privilege to collect those tolls which gave them the authority to set their own rates as long as they paid the Roman government what was due the government. Anything above that was theirs to keep, so they could in effect set their own rates. Other sources say that just having any taxation at all was troublesome to the Jewish people. The amount didn't matter. Just the fact of being taxed in and of itself was enough to raise the resentment of those forced to pay the tax.

However the tax collectors did their work, it's clear in Matthew, Mark and Luke that tax collectors were not well liked. Lumped in with prostitutes and sinners, they were held with disdain by their neighbors.

But then Jesus comes along and begins to collect a group of followers. As he is doing so, he comes upon Levi's office, his toll booth. (In Matthew's Gospel, his name is Matthew.) I like the painting by Venetian artist Schiavoni shown in this slide which was painted in 1502. You can see that Levi is very well dressed compared to Jesus and those following him. This isn't the architecture of the Galilee area of the first century but of the artist's Venetian mainland in the 16th century. The receipts on the work table indicate Levi was doing his job when Jesus tells him, "Follow me". I like this painting because it reflects Jesus' care for the man as he holds Levi's hand as he calls him to follow. In spite of the disdain Levi would have experienced by his neighbors—and maybe deservedly so—Jesus takes his hand and calls him to follow him.

The Call of Levi



1502

Tempera on canvas, 141 x 115 cm

Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice

What does Levi do with this invitation to follow? He leaves everything and throws a party--a house full. But it's not much of a mix of people. It's not all his neighbors who are there. It's a large group of tax collectors who are there along with some others and the disciples and Jesus, probably because his neighbors wouldn't have come. They didn't like him. He was a tax collector after all. Friend of the Romans. Fleecing the people as he collected from them and gave to the foreign government.

Jesus is crossing a line here by partying with tax collectors, not just Levi, but with a large crowd of them. It's really not acceptable and the religious leaders--the Pharisees and the scribes--make a point of the unacceptability of this behavior by asking Jesus' disciples why he is behaving this way? Why is he eating and drinking with such people who don't conform to God's laws? They are sinners after all.

Jesus' response reveals who he is as God's Son: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance."

What good really is a physician who will only treat people who are well? How helpful is such a physician to the good of the world? How helpful is a Savior who will only relate to those who already know God's grace and love? How helpful are followers of Jesus who only relate to other followers of Jesus?

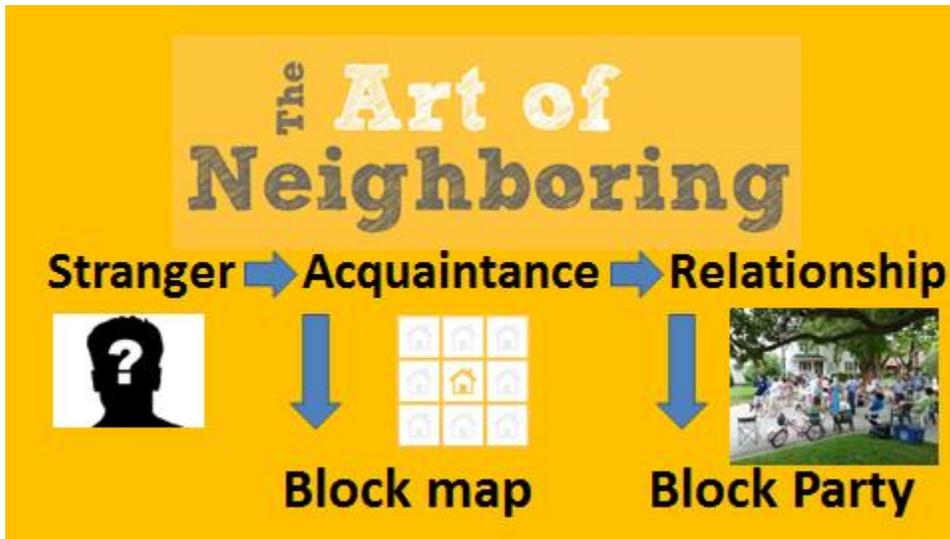
Jesus tears down the walls that separate the righteous from the sinner in order to extend God's grace, mercy and love to everyone even if it means challenging those who already know God's saving grace to step out of their comfort zones and build relationships with those outside their community, even with people they may not like very much—and maybe for good reason. Yet Jesus uses this opportunity to relate to a group of people he might not otherwise have had the opportunity to get to know. It's done in the context of a party, and it probably wasn't the kind that served pizza and Coke. As such Jesus' table fellowship—his behavior—is called into question.

He could have backed down. He could have apologized. He could have said, "I know I shouldn't be here but there's a higher purpose involved." But that's not the tone of Jesus' response. Instead he simply defends his right to be there and boldly reveals God's purpose is to bring healing to all people, not just to those who think they are already healed and have no need of a physician.

In all of this, I wonder about Levi. I wonder if he was lonely. I wonder if he felt the disdain of his neighbors and felt ostracized in spite of the fact that he undoubtedly knew and understood why he was held with disdain and chose not to change his career. I wonder if when Jesus called him he was so shocked by the invitation, so altered by someone wanting him to be part of their community--part of their family--that he simply could not resist the power of God at work in such an invitation. In spite of who he was and what he did, Jesus wanted him—HIM! I wonder if the recognition of God's embrace of him brought such joy that all he could think to do was to celebrate by throwing a party for Jesus and his friends? I wonder if he knew the same unexpected joy of the wayward son whose father threw a party for him when he returned home after taking advantage of his father's generosity.

I wonder if we are called to do the same for our neighbors. Does Jesus call us to follow him in loving God and neighbor by crossing barriers that keep us from being in relationship with people we don't know, people outside our Christian community?

It has become clear to me that most of us have people who live near us whom we do not know. They are a stranger to us which is reflected in the next slide.



The first step in changing that is to become an acquaintance by getting to know their names. The block map is one tool for helping us do just that. By completing the block map and writing the names of the people who live in the eight households that live closest to us, we can take the first step in loving our actual neighbors.

The next step is to move down the line from being an acquaintance to being in relationship with people on a deeper level. Now that can be done in many ways but one of the tools for building relationships is to throw a block party. The idea is to invite people on your street, around your block—the people in your surrounding area—to come together for a few hours or an afternoon or whatever to spend some time together getting to know one another. However, you do it, the idea is to take small steps and move from stranger to acquaintance to being in relationship with your neighbors. Maybe you know someone who is a much better planner than you are, someone who does parties well. Maybe you're not that good at it or you're a real introvert who has difficulty with such gatherings. Then consider partnering with someone else and doing it together. Maybe you live in a rural area and a block party doesn't make sense. Then how about inviting several families over for an afternoon barbeque get together? The main thing is to take a step out of our comfort zones in order to build relationships with people we don't know well in order to get to know them better as a way of loving our actual neighbors.

Listen to a video clip of a couple who decided to do this in their neighborhood.

(show video clip)

There are some resources available to help with thinking about how to do a block party. There is a website on the next slide to which you can go and there's a block party kit available that provides some guidance or you can pick up a hard copy at the Welcome Center on your way out the door today.



However we decide to move down the line, in a world in which hatred so often gets the headlines, Jesus calls us still to be witnesses to God’s will and way: *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.* In this, we are called to reflect what Ethel Lance was known for according to her grandson, Brandon Risher, who said at her funeral on Thursday in Charleston, S.C.:

“She has to represent something we all know is there — love. She is a victim of hate, but she can be a symbol for love. That is what she was in life. Hate is powerful but love is more powerful.”

And the source of that love is God. As the first letter of John has it:

¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4)