

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

7th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: Luke 10:1-10/Matthew 17:1-9

Title: “The Art of Neighboring: Open Doors”

Next Sunday we will conclude this series on The Art of Neighboring. As I’ve been preparing each week, memories of past and present relationships have come to me and given me time to reflect on them as we’ve walked through the various scriptures relating to loving our neighbors. One in particular came to mind this last week as I thought about open doors and Jesus sending of the 72 and the fact that Jesus in the passage just read seemed to favor some disciples over others in the vital moments of his life, one of them being the transfiguration.

The relationship I’ve been remembering this last week was with a family in Essexville. Our sons were on the same basketball team. Both of them second stringers. We’d sit with each other at the games, made small talk, getting to know each other, and at one point I thought this relationship could go somewhere, so we invited them out for coffee. The wife seemed eager but her husband shared some reason they just couldn’t make it that day.

At the next game, we did the usual. Sat next to each other. Had a good time. After the game we stood and talked for a while. Again, I asked if they wanted to go out for coffee or something. The wife looked at the husband, and he had another reason they just couldn’t make it that day.

The next invitation we made was for dinner. Tried to schedule it ahead of time, but again the husband just couldn’t make it on the dates we were suggesting.

When trying to love our neighbors, there are times when--try as we might, it just doesn’t take. There might also be times when loving our neighbor leads to someone taking advantage or crossing boundaries that are inappropriate and very uncomfortable. This loving our neighbor thing might sound simple—and it is—but it’s not always easy. It’s not always comfortable. It can get messy. It can even hurt. So why even try? Why even think about adding to the comfortable relationships we already have when we really don’t need any more?

Jesus has an answer. Jesus collected a group of 12 as his closest disciples. These form the core of his relationships. They are on the inside with Jesus. There is an intimacy he shares with them that others do not experience. They are close. They travel together, eat together, work together, sweat together. But even among the 12, Jesus appears to be closer to a few among them. When he hikes up the mountain and experiences the transfiguration, a moment when it becomes so very clear—once again—that he is the Son of God, only three disciples are

with him—Peter, James & John. Only they hear the voice of God: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” These three also were the same three he invited to follow him to his place of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was arrested. Jesus had his core group among a core group with whom he had a treasured relationship. He held them close and shared the most vital moments of his life with them and them alone. So in this way, he was a bit exclusive in the way in which he related to people.

Yet, he did not cloister himself. He did not restrict himself to those relationships alone. He cast himself far and wide as he traveled from place to place sharing the good news that God’s kingdom is near, the realm of God is present, alive and real. In word and in deed, Jesus proclaimed the reality of God’s nearness, and when it came time to recognize that this message would paradoxically lead to his death, he began to send others out to share the same message. The version read this morning says he sent 70 disciples. Other ancient manuscripts indicate the number was 72. Whatever the number, it becomes abundantly clear that the message of the nearness of God’s kingdom was not to be privately held, not to be contained within the confines of a group of three of his favorites nor among the closest 12 nor even among 70 or 72 of a larger group of chosen ones. The gospel message is to be cast far and wide, never to be restricted to just those in our respective comfort zones.

As he prepares the 70 or 72, he sends them out to do fairly simple things like talk with people, eat with them, receive their hospitality with grace and gratitude, take care of people through healing, and--when they did these things--to share the reality that God’s kingdom has come near. In their expressions of God’s care, God’s realm is made real, noticeable.

Friday night, a group of 7 people sat out in front yard of this church building just off the sidewalk. From 11 p.m. – 12:30 a.m., someone was there under a portable pop-up. Rope lights hanging around the perimeter. The mission was to be there and offer coffee and fresh donut holes to people walking from the CornFest festivities at the park to their cars or the bars. I was there until about midnight, and for the most part, when people walked by and one of the group members offered what we had, people weren’t very receptive to receiving them. There was a group of high school students from Valley Lutheran School that were the first willing consumers. Then a couple walked by and we offered what we had once again. The man took one. When I was there no one took coffee. And of those who decided not to accept the gift being offered, most were gracious and simply said “No thanks.” A few said, “Thanks for doing what you’re doing.” Maybe 30 people came by that night. Last night the same attempt was made to offer a free gift to our neighbors. I have no idea if anything will come of offering people God’s peace through coffee and donuts, but simply being there in our front yard offering a gift without cost on both nights was a proclamation of the nearness of God’s kingdom. It was a simple thing like eating and talking with people but we may never know what God might do with those simple acts of openness.

Here’s a clip of neighbors who have worked at being open to their neighbors by moving to their front yard.

(Show video clip.)

Not everyone has open hearts, however, like these folks. Like our attempts to form a deeper relationship with the couple I mentioned earlier, sometimes our efforts fall flat. What happens when we have attempted to share the good news of God’s kingdom presence by loving

our neighbors and it just doesn't work?

Well, Jesus has a way of dealing with that, too. He sent the 70 out prepared for failure as well as success. Success comes when you offer the peace of a relationship to someone and that peace is returned. It's reciprocated. A connection is made, shared and appreciated on both sides. God is in that sharing. But when it doesn't happen--when the connection isn't made for whatever reason, then, in the words of Jesus "shake the dust from your shoes" and move on. Or in the words of Taylor Swift, "Shake it off! Shake it off!" Don't get hung up on it as a failure when a deeper relationship doesn't materialize as we might have hoped. Don't blame ourselves or other people. No grudges. Just shake it off and move on. Don't give up either. Keep proclaiming. Keep sharing the good news of God's nearness by being a healing presence, offering God's peace, receiving gracious hospitality, entering new relationships. Continue to be open and God will open doors.

I will never forget a period when I was in seminary and working on the seminary maintenance crew. There I came to know Gene because he worked full-time in the maintenance department. It was how he made a living. He was from southern Ohio and had the twang of the hills in his voice. Gene was funny, hard working. He was also just the right combination of nonsense and practical joker. He played a few on me as I did on him. I was a bit thinner in those days and once took a rope and tied the doors of his Ford Ranger pickup together from the inside. Crawled out the little back window and closed it. He couldn't open the doors.

Then, one night Lynn and I came out of the library after studying until it closed. Ours was the only car in the lot left that night. It was late and we were both tired. We got in. I started it up, put it in gear and we weren't moving. I revved up the engine. Still nothing. I started thinking the transmission was gone, but that didn't make any sense. It wasn't giving us any trouble. I got out of the car to see if there was an oil leak or something. What I found were cement blocks. They were just the right height to keep the car from going anywhere but not high enough that we'd notice. Gene!

After the first 2 years of seminary work, I took a student appointment to two small churches about 65 miles away. We were going to need some on-campus housing and started looking at the small apartments the school had for rent. We didn't have much money, and I really was fretting about how this was going to work. Prayed about it, asking for a solution. We happened to be at the Vests for dinner one night. They asked us about how we were going to deal with the commute and so on. I shared the possibilities we were considering, and they said, "Well, why don't you just stay with us? We have an extra room." So we did. For a year and a half Gene and Jan opened their home to us and I count it a gift of God for which I will always be grateful. God opened a door through our friends, and we were the benefactors of their gracious hospitality.

Unlike the relationship with the basketball couple, Gene and Jan returned the peace we offered and a deep relationship was established. God was in the midst of that relationship.

Jesus was so very clear that the gospel message isn't to be kept to ourselves. It isn't the kind of message that can be held tightly by a small core group of people or even a bit larger group of friends. It's a message of peace, grace, healing to be shared widely. Even though you and I may not always be successful in building a relationship with a particular person or persons, Jesus' instruction is to "shake it off" and just keep going, keep sharing God's peace, God's

healing, God's love.

So this week's challenge is for you to consider this: outside of your church friends who do you find are persons of peace in your neighborhood, someone open to a relationship? Invite them to dinner in the next two weeks and get to know them better.

We may never know what doors might open when we make the attempt to love our neighbors. But when we are faithful in continuing to offer God's peace, when we put ourselves out there and get out of our comfort zones in order to connect with people beyond our core group of friends on whom we rely for strength and comfort and joy, God can do amazing things, and the gift for us is that we gain new friendships in which God's Spirit is active and alive. We, too, receive life that really is life.