

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

8th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

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Text: Romans 12:1-9/John 17:20-26

Title: “The Art of Neighboring: Forgiveness and Unity”

British author and journalist G.K. Chesterton once wrote: “The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.”

I have often remembered those words when thinking about friends and neighbors because whenever one or more people are living in close proximity to one another, there will be disagreement. There will be conflict.

When Lynn and I moved to Delaware, Ohio in an apartment on the seminary campus I remember imagining how nice it would be to live on a sedate seminary campus as opposed to the rowdy apartment complex we lived in Marquette at NMU where people were loud and inconsiderate of neighbors. It was so exciting to move in, put our stuff in order, sit in the quiet of the living room on this country campus of the Methodist Theological School in Ohio. A prayerful place. A peaceful place.

Then, our neighbor came home from his clinical pastoral education practicum from a Columbus hospital. He walked in the door, turned on his stereo and let it fly. Boom! Boom! Boom! It was Toby Mac all over again! I had hung a shelf on a wall shared with these neighbors and things were rattling on that shelf. We waited for him to turn it down, but finally I couldn't take it anymore. I walked through the shared laundry room and knocked on the door. Had to knock twice because he couldn't hear it the first time.

He came to the door and I asked him to please turn the music down, told him his music was rattling the stuff on our shelves. The conversation wasn't lengthy. He gave me a sort of rolled eye expression and said he would. And he did, at least low enough so our stuff wasn't rattling anymore, but it was still louder than the silence I would have preferred.

Loving neighbors, as has been repeated throughout this series, is something we are commanded to do because it leads to life when it's coupled with loving God with all that we have and all that we are, but it's not always easy. When it becomes messy I think of Chesterton's observation. When a neighbor becomes an enemy as a result of a conflict, what then?

The Apostle Paul has some clear directives to offer when it comes to relationships with other people that have a direct bearing on neighboring. As he writes to the Christians in Rome, he advises them to

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one

another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Children, here's where that simplified list I gave you comes in.

Love one another.
Do not think you are way smart and way better than others.
Forget about getting even.
Treat with respect everyone you meet.
Be kind - even to those who are not kind to you.
Pay attention to the feelings of others. Care about them.

Now this sounds like great teaching, a great way to live...until your neighbor crosses a line and a conflict ensues. Then the internal battle begins, the battle between what we feel in response to an offense and what Christ calls us to do in loving our neighbors. To make matters worse, Jesus doesn't just stop with neighbors. Jesus takes it up a notch when he preaches the Sermon on the Mount, saying,

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ... (Matthew 5:43-48)

Okay Jesus, it's one thing to love my neighbor, but now I'm to love my enemy, too? Seriously? How many of us actually pull this off? How many times have I failed to live up to this seemingly impossible way of life that we who are followers of Jesus are called to live?

There is a caveat that needs to be offered here, though. It's one thing to forgive someone for turning up his stereo too loud. It's quite another to ignore all precautions with your kids when you know someone convicted of pedophilia lives next door. Loving neighbor and enemy isn't about being complacent when life-threatening or serious legal issues are involved. If you discover that your neighbor is a drug dealer, maybe the most loving thing you can do is call the authorities and pray for that person. You know what I mean? I don't think Jesus meant that to love a neighbor and an enemy is about excusing harmful behaviors that hurt other people. Maybe I'm wrong but I just don't think that is in keeping with God's will and way.

Having said that, I've come to realize more deeply over the years that without forgiveness, life is quite isolating. If we refuse to forgive, we can end up quite lonely and angry with the world, maybe even with life in general. Without forgiveness how many of us would have any friendships at all? Without

forgiveness how many of us would be married? It's been said that a marriage without forgiveness is no marriage at all. The same can be said for relationships with our neighbors. Without forgiveness there is little chance we will be able to love our neighbor with any authenticity, little chance that our neighbors will be able to experience the Jesus we follow who after they nailed him to the cross in the Gospel According to Luke prayed: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Jesus, who returned to his disciples--all of whom abandoned him in his darkest hour--and to Peter who denied even knowing him not once but three times. He came back to them and said, "Peace be with you" and "Do not be afraid." This is the way of God when dealing with prodigal disciples. Thank God! Not only does Jesus forgive enemies but also his friends.

Take a listen to a neighbor who was faced with making a decision about how to handle a conflict with someone living next door.

(show video clip)

"Is it something we do to just check off the list or is it something we really want to do to be used by God?" That's a good question for all of us. And it's not just about the people who actually live near us when it comes to loving God and our neighbors, but the same goes for relationships in the church.

When we moved through the first part of the Vital Church Initiative program, some of you may remember the study everyone was inviting to join in: "Does your church have a prayer?" The focus of that study was on the prayer of Jesus in John 17 read this morning. As he is preparing his disciples for his death, Jesus asks God to make them One with him as Jesus is one with God. A friend of mine posted a version of this unity of God on Facebook this week that was written by the Christian mystic, Meister Eckhardt:

"The Father laughs with the Son; the Son laughs with the Father. The Father likes the Son; the Son likes the Father. The Father delights in the Son; the Son delights in the Father. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father. This laughter, liking, delighting, loving is the Holy Spirit!"

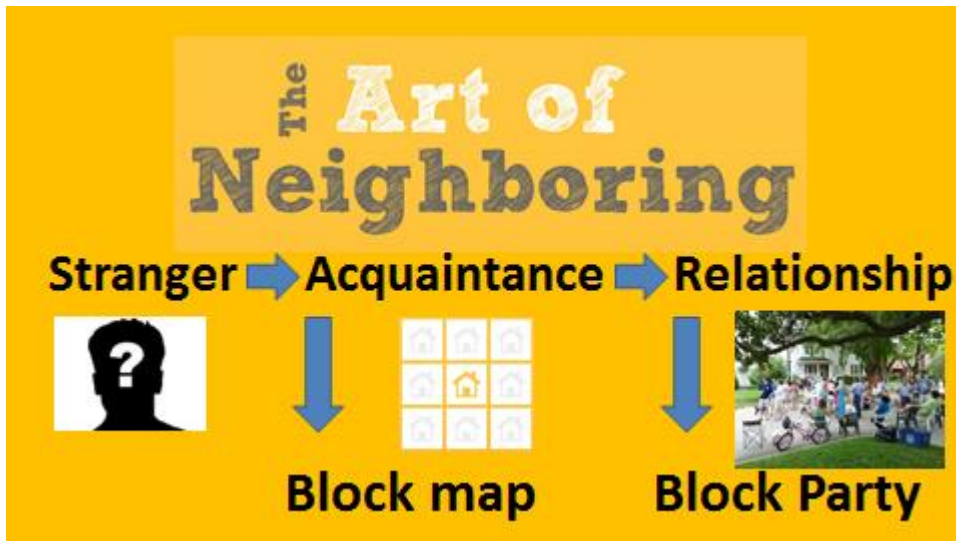
It's this kind of "laughter, liking, delighting and loving" that Jesus asks for his disciples when it comes to their relationships with him and with God, but then he goes further as he prays:

²⁰ "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus prays for those who will believe in him through the word of those original followers. He prays for us. That prayer is for unity, that prayer is for the "laughter, liking, delighting and loving" to be experienced and expressed in people like us.

As we bring this series of The Art of Neighboring to a close, I wonder if there is someone in the

congregation you may need to forgive in order to bring unity? As we bring this series to a close, will you commit yourself, as the next slide reminds us, to the process of moving from being a stranger to an acquaintance by using the block map and getting the names of your neighbors who live near you and then move from being an acquaintance to establishing a deeper relationship by joining together with someone to throw a block party in order to build those relationships further?



Will you keep the challenges printed in the insert—and on the next several slides-- before you and really be intentional about loving neighbors near you and in this congregation? As an aside, I've been hearing stories about the fact that many of you in this congregation have known each other for years but have never been in each other's homes. Some of these challenges can apply to our relationships here, too. How well do you really know one another? I expect as Jaye Reisinger begins to help us with the small group ministry that you will be invited to join in groups that will strengthen relationships in this congregation. I hope you will take advantage of those opportunities and use some of these challenges to build relationships with people here, too. Also, a 6-week class will be offered in the fall to allow you to dig deeper in The Art of Neighboring.

Let's review the challenges:

Weekly challenges:

1. Complete the block map: get names.
2. Spend an hour in the front yard and look for opportunities to connect with a neighbor.
3. Move from being a stranger to an acquaintance to relationship by throwing a block party.

Weekly challenges:

4. Think of at least one neighbor you do not know and pray for them all week without feeling pressured to convert or thinking you are supposed to witness to them. Just pray for them, that God will be with them.

Weekly challenges:

5. 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.

Today's Challenges:

Is there is anyone in your neighborhood you may need to forgive?

**The Art of
Neighboring**

Walk around your block or drive down your street and ask God to give you a vision of what God wants your neighborhood to be like.

**The Art of
Neighboring**

Share neighboring stories and encourage friends to take the Great Commandment literally and reach out to their neighbors.

**The Art of
Neighboring**

Can you imagine what it might be like if every Christ follower did these things? How would our

neighborhoods be different? How would our cities change? I wonder if the hate-filled expressions of Islam would even have a chance to penetrate the mind of another terrorist shooter if every follower of Jesus loved our neighbors and our enemies as the Great Commandment of Jesus calls us to do. Because when we are able to love as Jesus loves, that is “life that really is life”. This loving as Jesus loves is the way to God, this “laughter, liking, delighting, and loving.” May this kind of uniting love be yours this morning—and OURS.