

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Year B

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Text: Luke 7:36-50/Matthew 5:14-16

Title: “The Art of Neighboring: Posture is Everything”

One summer when our son, Josh, was in high school, I was anxious for him to get a job. He didn't seem very motivated, and I was quite frustrated by that. He did make some effort, but for some reason—or reasons—work was just hard to come by for teenagers that year. He went to apply for jobs that interested him but nothing stuck. But then feeling the pressure from his parents, he finally found something he thought he could do: sell Cutco knives. Apparently, he found an ad somewhere promising great profits, flexible hours, “ya-da-ya-da-ya-da”. I was skeptical but happy that he found something. He had to go somewhere for training and then he'd be selling these high quality knife sets.

So, he went to the training. Came home and promptly told us he was supposed to use his parents as a trial run before he actually hit the road. We were delighted. On the appointed day and time, he brought his kit to our kitchen table. Very impressive. Nice quality materials. He gave his pitch and demonstrated the cutting ability of these wonderful knives, described the superior qualities of these knives relative to all the other inferior products out there. He did a great job!

But then the other shoe dropped. The price was outlandish, but we wanted to support him in his efforts and wanted him to be successful, so we found a way to purchase a mid-sized set of knives. Since we both enjoy cooking we knew we would use them frequently.

Then another shoe dropped. We were then to supply him with the names of 10 people—friends, family, acquaintances—that he could call on to ask if he could give them a demonstration. We were assured that no one had to buy anything but that he received a demonstration payment of \$25-- if I remember right--just for showing people the knives. We gave him 10 names.

This was the company's strategy for gaining customers. Every demonstration ended with 10 more names, so the salesperson should have a never ending stream of potential customers.

Well, Josh did pretty well at the beginning of the summer, but then he stopped calling people. His motivation just died. Again, I was frustrated by his lack of drive, and kept nudging him to make his calls. But after some time I stopped pushing. Let him be, and in a moment of reflection asked him what happened? Why had he lost his interest? He said, “Dad, because it finally dawned on me that this way of selling things takes advantage of relationships. That's how the company makes money, by taking advantage of relationships and selling people expensive knives some of them can't afford or shouldn't afford because they want to support the

person selling them.”

Ouch! How could I argue with that? He was right.

When it comes to being sold something, most of us are very suspicious—and for good reason. We’ve been burned before and question peoples’ motives when they try to get too close too fast. They might begin asking questions about us as a way to warm us up for the kill of a sale or to gain information for the person’s own agenda. We hate those telemarketer calls and the fast-talking attempts to sell us something we may not need and maybe can’t really afford.

Unfortunately, that’s not unlike the approach some take to sharing the Christian faith. It’s often more manipulation than genuine sharing of trust in Jesus. People will use fear like asking “If you were to die today, would you go to heaven or hell?” It’s an approach not unlike an unknown salesman trying to sell you something the first time he or she meets us. Or a knock on our door results in being handed a pamphlet about the last days and “you better get your act together with God or else”. Or someone we meet for the first time doesn’t take very long to convince us that we need to give our lives to Jesus maybe before they even know our name. Most of us don’t respond well to these tactics, even from well-meaning Christians.

Then, how are we to invite people to become disciples of Jesus as we are commanded to do? How are we to invite people into a relationship with Christ that is authentic and real without coming off as a high pressure salesman or fear-mongering evangelist?

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus teaches and preaches about what it means to be a person connected with God, a person who seeks to live a “faith—FULL” life. He starts off with the Beatitudes describing the attributes of those who are blessed: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and so on. These are the blessed, according to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew.

And then Jesus shifts to two images of what it means to be a person of God: salt and light. With salt, it doesn’t take very much to notice whether or not it’s present. Just a little makes a big difference. I notice whether or not my baked potato is salted. Just a little is all I need. Too much is overpowering, but without it, it’s pretty bland.

But what if salt was tasteless? Looks like salt, shakes and pours like salt, but doesn’t melt ice or add flavor to food. Burns like salt on a wound or sore throat but doesn’t heal. That kind of salt really isn’t very helpful, doesn’t add much to life, does it?

Can the same be said for those who claim to be Christian but do nothing to help those who are hurting or are those who spread bitter feelings rather than happy ones or who talk **about** those with whom they are in conflict rather than **to** them?

The pastors who wrote the book, [The Art of Neighboring](#), had been meeting with their colleagues in Colorado working on ways the churches could engage in better neighboring in order to make their city a better place to live. In one of their meetings, the assistant city manager was present and she told the pastors, “From the city’s perspective, there isn’t a noticeable difference in how Christians and non-Christians neighbor in our community” (AON, p. 20).

Whether we like to hear such things or not, I wonder if we haven’t lost some of our saltiness when it comes to neighboring. Do our neighbors look at us and say “see how they love each other, how they love even their enemies, how they demonstrate compassion for the hurting and care for the vulnerable and those ignored by the powerful”? Or do they say something else?

We who follow Jesus, the Christ, are being called to fulfill Jesus’ commandment to love

God with all that we are and our neighbors as ourselves. It's a call to be salt in the world, a little bit makes a difference. So like salt on snow, we work on "melting" the hatred and similar attitudes toward people who are different than we are which makes the world so dangerous, rather than spew bitter words against them. As salt makes popcorn taste so good, we can make life happier by offering small kindnesses or genuine affirmations of other people. As salt is used to make delicious ice cream, we can work to provide some of the good things people need in life in order to enjoy life. We can do this because God wants people to enjoy life and as God's salt, we are to live our lives in ways that demonstrate Jesus' Great Commandment above all else.

The other image Jesus uses is light. To be the light means simply to be God's presence in the world, to love our neighbor period, without manipulative sales tactics or use of fear to get what we want. Light has no motive other than to be what it is. It illuminates, guides, and warms. In the darkness it provides comfort and can ease fears.

Is it possible that to be God's light might be as simple as loving our neighbors? I said simple but not always easy. Check out this video clip about being in relationship with people who are different than we are:

(Video clip)

Some of what I heard in this clip gave me pause:

Fear can kick in on both sides when dealing with people who are different from us. Loving neighbors is hard but worthwhile.

"I think that's what God is calling us to, to be friendly with everybody, to reach out and be good neighbors with all the people."

"Slow down, Tim. You don't have to come in and hammer her with the truth. Just take a little bit to kind of absorb what she's talking about. Get to know her a little bit, and maybe you'll find out how God is moving in her life. And maybe there will be a door opened to be able to share a little about her experience of God and my experience of God."

"I am learning that building bridges takes time."

"God loves my neighbors."

"We are trying to not be drawn toward just those people that are like us."

Thinking of people who are not like us, I love the story from Luke's Gospel in which Jesus is invited to a Pharisee's house for dinner. This is one of the unusual stories in which a Pharisee doesn't seem to be out to get Jesus by testing him with difficult questions designed to entrap him. There isn't a hint of animosity toward Jesus by this particular Pharisee. They were reclined in the custom of Middle Eastern dining, around the low table, lying on their sides with one elbow buried in the soft cushions. Talking. Eating. She came in uninvited. When she saw Jesus, tears came to her eyes, not the kind that merely fill the eye but never spill out, but the kind of weeping that empties the eyes, the kind of weeping that forces the shoulders to heave. (It was the kind of weeping I saw in my friend's wife when she was told her husband was going to die soon.) Uncontrollable. Involuntary. Except in the case of this woman, the tears were not brought on by grief, but by joy and gratitude.

As those tears began to pour from her eyes she bowed to Jesus' feet. She took the faintly yellowed stone flask and poured its perfumed contents on his feet and massaged the ointment into the skin until the whole room was filled with its scent, like walking into a scented candle shop.

Jesus was able to see what was genuine and authentic in people and celebrate the good in people. He didn't get stuck on the rumored sin of a woman or even the hard heart of a faithful religious man. The living Christ of God holds all of us in higher esteem, knows the good and celebrates that.

Seeing the way he does, valuing people the way he does, Jesus allows this woman of sin to offer him a gift. Jesus is willing to receive just as he is willing to give, even when others think it might be inappropriate.

When it comes to loving our neighbors, is Jesus' willingness to receive such a gift a reminder that we, too, need to be open to receiving from those others might think are inappropriate givers? Are we called to see and love our neighbors more deeply than what we think we might know about them?

When it comes to loving our neighbors, posture is everything. Approach them with a hidden agenda in mind and we lose authenticity, like a salesman trying to learn more about you in order to sell you something you may not need and maybe can't really afford. We've all probably been burned by such tactics and know that such an approach has nothing to do with love and everything to do with manipulation and self-interest. But loving as Jesus loves is pure and authentic. We are to love our neighbors period, and if a moment comes when we are able to share in an authentic way how God is moving in our lives, how following Christ makes a difference in our lives, then we can respond and do so after having loved them first and built a relationship first. To quote The Art of Neighboring authors, "We don't love our neighbors in order to convert them. We love them because we are converted."

Throughout this series you have been invited to consider acting to love your actual neighbors in several ways. The challenges you have received were...

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 a relationship by throwing a block party.

This week's challenge:

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.

Loving God. Loving neighbor: it's what we are called to do first, above all else. Nothing is more important according to Jesus. When we are able to overcome the barriers that keep us from doing so, amazing things can happen. Lives can be saved simply—though not always easily—by loving someone. As Jesus preaches in Matthew:

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.