

Sermon Series: Who Is My Neighbor? Sermon Title: "Was Jesus Serious?"
Leviticus 19:17-19a; Psalm 15; Matthew 22:35-40; Luke 10:25-32; Colossians 3:12-14
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Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

There are ten days left until this contentious presidential election is over. I am not a political expert or analyst. I am a biblical scholar, theologian, and pastor. My job is not to offer political advice. My job is to point the way to Jesus so we can follow him faithfully in the choices we make. For the next few weeks we will be looking at what the scriptures and Jesus say about neighbors. Who is our neighbor? And what is our responsibility to them, if any?

When I was a child we lived in town. The houses were built close to each other. Our backyards were long and narrow. Most of the neighbors were friendly. They would talk to each other across the yards or on the back porches. There was older man who was not. I called him, "The Grouch." If my ball went into his yard, I was not allowed to jump over the flower beds to retrieve it. If I got caught doing so, he would come running out his back door screaming that I was destroying his flowers. If he was working in his vegetable garden, he would not respond to me in any way despite my attempts. I didn't love my neighbor. In fact, I hated him when he would not return my balls. Our family tried many times to make friends with him with no success. I don't think the old grouch ever read the Leviticus passage. He didn't secretly hate his neighbors. He openly hated all of us. He often sought revenge and held grudges.

"To love your neighbor" is a theme in the Bible. God gave this instruction to Moses as part of the Law. "Love your neighbor as yourself. I am God. Keep my decrees." God meant it. There is no refuting these instructions. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Maybe that is why my grouching old neighbor didn't love his neighbors. Maybe he didn't love himself? I don't know what made him so grouchy. Most people do love themselves. We think of ourselves first. We care for ourselves first. We love ourselves and God love us, too. But love doesn't stop with us. God says, "Love your neighbor, too."

This Law of Love is echoed throughout the Bible. In the Gospel of Matthew when an expert on the Law tries to trap Jesus by asking him what the greatest of the commandment is, Jesus answers, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands." Jesus didn't say that one commandment is greater than the other, but that both are the same. The second is like the first. We are to love God as we love our neighbor. The converse is also true. We are to love our neighbor as we love God. Jesus referenced the Law and the Prophets which were the scriptures of Jesus' time. First, the Law points to honoring God and caring for our neighbors. The laws are spelled out with specific intention. The Law offers instruction on how to revere and not revere God. The Law also offers how we are to live so as not harm our neighbors and what they own. This part of the Law offered mercy and upheld justice for neighbors. Second, the Prophets referred to the law as they called people back into relationship with God, and reminded them to care for their neighbors, especially those who live on the margin of the community: the sick, the poor, the widow, the children, and the refugees/immigrants.

In the second Gospel passage, Luke has another Law expert attempting to trap Jesus. This time the question is, "What must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus patiently listens. He hears the cocky tone of the question, but chooses not to answer the question. Instead, Jesus asks a question. Jesus is more likely to ask questions than answer them. Questions make us think. Questions make us dig deep for the answers. This Law expert proudly responds with the correct answer, "Love God and love your neighbor." He's the answer man. But Jesus doesn't say, "Congratulations! You get an 'A'!" but simply says, "You gave the right answer." Then Jesus pushes the expert past what he knows with these instructions: "Do this and live." Jesus is saying, "Match your actions to your words." For Jesus love is not an intellectual exercise. Love is life. The expert didn't quite know what to do with Jesus' response. So he pushes Jesus a little more. He needs to justify himself. He needs to win this debate to preserve perhaps his identity and his reputation as an expert of the law. So he asks Jesus, "So, who is my neighbor?" He really is asking, "Who do I need to love?" Or more importantly, "Who don't I need to love?"

Jesus cleverly tells a story to make his point, as Jesus often did. Here is the retelling of that story. A man was beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Two religious leaders who were also the political leaders of the time didn't stop to help. They walked by. The law expert listening to Jesus' story would have expected these leaders to be the heroes of the story, but they are not. Perhaps they were too busy to stop. They needed to get to the Temple to tend to their duties. Or perhaps they thought if they stopped the robbers might harm them. Jesus intentionally chooses the hero of the story to be a Samaritan. With just the mention of the word, "Samaritan," the listeners would have cringed.

Samaritans were the political adversaries of the day. Samaritans had completely different world views and opinions from the Jews. First, Samaritans were culturally mixed. The Jews prided themselves on being culturally pure. Second, the Samaritans opposed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Instead, they built their own worship site. The two groups hated each other for hundreds of years. The law expert humbling admitted that the person he was taught to hate was the courageous neighbor who offered love, mercy and generosity.

If Jesus was telling this story today, who would he choose to be the leaders who walked around the dying man? And who would he choose to be the hero? Perhaps he would choose Democrats as the ones who ignored the dying man, with a Republican stopping to save the man. Or perhaps he would choose Republicans to walk around the dying man, with a Democrat stopping to offer help. Or perhaps Jesus would have both a Democrat and a Republican walk around the dying man with an illegal immigrant or a Syrian refugee stopping to help the dying man. How do we react to these contemporary scenarios? Do they stir up anger? Shame? Humility? The expert of the Law was humbled. He saw himself as the one who walked around while the person he despised was the one who showed love. Jesus' final words to him are, "Go and do likewise." Jesus pushes the expert past his expertise, his intellect, to the heart of the matter. Go and put your faith into action.

This theme of loving one's neighbor is picked up by the Apostle Paul. In each of his letters to the newly formed churches, he instructs them to love each other. Each letter states it in different ways. Paul believed that if these new churches were to transform the world with Christ's love, they had to first learn to love each other. They had to learn to build community by being compassionate, offering kindness, being humble, gentle, and patient. To accept each other, they needed to be tolerant with each other and, forgive when one was hurt by another. Paul wrote to the Colossian churches that it is love that unifies us.

Today we are still not united. We struggle to allow love to rule us. We don't love our neighbors because we don't know them. We can live for years beside someone and not know their names or even what they look like. We leave our garages in the morning to go to work. Then at the end of the day we return and pull into our garages without ever seeing a neighbor. We might wave to them as we put our garbage out, but that is the extent of our acquaintance. Some of us may not even want to know our neighbors. Yet, in every home there are people who are celebrating new jobs, new babies, birthdays, or other life events. And in every home there are those who are lonely, those who are worried about finances and job layoffs, those who are hurting or frightened. Also, today it is dangerous to stop alongside the road to help someone. It could be a trap. If we stop, we could get robbed or hurt. And besides most of us are too busy so we drive by.

Jesus was very serious about loving our neighbor. He didn't make it up. It was already supposed to be part of everyone who claimed to love God. Two thousand years later, we are still to live this way. A survey was done in Christian churches to see how well we know our neighbors. 10% could name eight neighbors who lived nearby. 3% of these knew something about their neighbors. And less than 1% knew the deeper yearnings of their neighbors. Can you name eight neighbors in your neighborhood? Can you name something about them? Do you know something deeper about them?

Here is a story how one girl decided to get to know her neighbors. A preschool girl got up one morning and announced that today was "Happy Neighbor Day!" She got her paints out and painted pictures for each one of her neighbors. Then she asked her parents to take her to her neighbors so she could deliver her art work. Her parents were hesitant at first. They had lived in this neighborhood for eight years and had never met many of their neighbors. What would their neighbors think if they knocked on their doors? Well, after much persuading they gave into their daughter, knocked on doors, and gave them a picture. Because of this one loving act, relationships in the neighborhood developed. People began talking with each other and helping each other.

Love God and love your neighbor. This "love your neighbor" thing, it is not a political agenda. It is God's agenda. And, yes, Jesus was very serious about it. As followers of Christ we are to adopt God's agenda and put it into action in our lives. So who is our neighbor? Every person on the face of this earth. Our neighbor is the person next door, down the street, south of the border, and half way around the world. Overwhelming? Yes. Challenging? Always. We can make our excuses. I'm busy. I'm afraid. I don't want to take the risk. Let someone else love them. But the instruction is clear. Go and do likewise. Go and put these words into action. Historically Methodists have viewed the right to vote as a way to act on their faith. So as Christians who are citizens of this nation exercise your right to vote. Go vote for the candidate that you best think expresses God's agenda of loving our neighbors. We have nothing to fear. For God works for good to those who love the Lord.

Resources: *The Art of Neighboring* by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, www.cor.org

