

summer program for their children. Or maybe they need a community where they can safely share their doubts. Or may they have fallen into the hands of someone who has hurt them and they need their wounds bandaged.

Now – back to that assignment. Next week is Memorial Day weekend and we all have good excuses not to be here: three day weekend, pools opening. But it is also Pentecost Sunday when we will celebrate the Holy Spirit moving the first followers of Jesus to become a community together.

I pray that every single person here will go out and reach out to a neighbor you don't already know this week. Listen to them. Notice them. Serve them in some way. Be their neighbor. We can't love them if we don't know them.

I close with the words of a neighbor, received this week from an email sent to the church office. Some of you may remember that two Fridays ago, in a fit of lavish generosity and craziness, a group of us passed out free Krispy Kreme donuts to commuters right out here on their way into work. Here is the email:

On Friday morning I received a donut from one of your parishioners while on my way to work. It made me smile and relax and think about how good life really is. Thank you for beginning my day with a bit of fun. I am not Presbyterian, but your congregation must be special.

Sometimes, being a good neighbor simply means helping someone remember how good life really is. Now, go. And do likewise.

there was no way to identify him. Maybe he was a Samaritan too. Maybe he was a priest or a Levite.

But what I want to talk about is The Neighbors. Who are they? What do they need? Who are they to us?

We can sit in this room and wonder about those questions. Or we can get out into the world and meet them. If they are extremely busy neighbors, maybe they need rest. If they are new to the Washington, DC area, maybe they need community. If they are frustrated, overwhelmed, hurt, worried, or longing for some meaning in life, maybe we can tell them that we worship a God whose kingdom involves still waters and green pastures, justice, abundance. The God we know came to us just like this Samaritan came to the man who was hurt to provide compassion and care. We worship a God who would not only give up two days' wages; *he would give up his own life for us.*

We worship a God who says, "Go and do likewise." Go out. Meet the neighbors! And love them.

We can't love them if we don't know them.

In preparing for this sermon, my initial idea was to have someone from one of the neighborhood high schools come and tell us about our neighbors – namely the students in their schools who are on the cusp of adulthood. I wanted to hear about the kinds of kids who go to those schools. I hoped we could hear about the things they worry about, care about, live for. But alas, no luck.

First, I talked with a guidance counselor who knows very well what goes on in the private lives of his high school students. But he told me that he wasn't much of a church person himself, and he wasn't very comfortable – as an outsider – coming through our doors and speaking to us.

He recommended that I talk with another counselor who actually was trained as a Mennonite minister years ago. But when I asked that counselor to talk with us, he said that he left the ministry because – sadly – he found that church people don't want to hear about the problems of people who aren't already in their fold.

I found this very sad, but I wondered if these men weren't right in their assessment. I hope they aren't. I would hope that we would welcome and listen to "an outsider" because we might learn something about those who feel like they don't belong with us. I would hope that we would be interested in the lives of people who are not already in our fold.

We cannot merely sit here and feel like we are a part of the neighborhood just because our building sits on this piece of property. Being a neighbor means getting out into the neighborhood and noticing who is there and what they need. Maybe they need a

We would expect the priest to stop and help – because that’s what priests do. But this priest also knew the law and one of the laws of cleanliness made it wrong to touch the body of a dead person. Maybe he assumed the man on the side of the road was dead. And he wouldn’t want to take any chances, would he?⁹ In fact, he made sure he was distant – on the other side of the road – as he passed by.

We would also expect the Levite to stop and help as an officer of the temple. The Levites also knew the law well, and they were given jobs like guarding the temple doors and singing in the choir. If he had touched a dead body, he would be too unclean to perform his temple duties. So he wasn’t willing to take that chance either.

Clearly both of these men chose convenience over compassion. The ones we would expect to show compassion were more concerned about themselves than displaying the love of God to their neighbor.

“Neighbor” here is literally “the one who comes near.” It is the one who has gone out to someone else, the one who has come close.¹⁰ And while it is shocking that the priest and the Levite were not compassionate, this is not all that shocking in this day and age. Unfortunately, we are all familiar with religious leaders who are hypocritical.

No, the shocking part comes when the most neighborly person of all is a Samaritan. For a First Century Jew, “Good Samaritan” would have been an oxymoron.

During an ancient war between Israel and Samaria, many Jews had been killed or captured by the Samaritans. Some of those captured were considered unworthy to return to Israel after the war, and so they had stayed with the Samaritans and inter-married with them. And in the eyes of “real Jews” they had perverted their bloodlines and their faith.

For Jesus to make the Samaritan the hero would have bothered his hearers tremendously. In fact, notice that the lawyer can’t bring himself to use the words “Good Samaritan” when asked “Who is my neighbor?” He simply says, “The one who showed mercy.”

It would be as if one of us was helped lavishly by a member of the Taliban or Al Qaeda. Imagine if Jesus told us a story called “The Good Iraqi Insurgent” who helped the American on the side of the road while an Army chaplain and a Marine kept walking. This is comparable to what Jesus told the lawyer.

We could study this parable for weeks and still have more to study. We could talk about the Greek word for compassion: *splagnitzomai* which means “love from the guts.” Or we could focus on the man in the ditch. Since he was stripped of his clothing,

⁹ See Numbers 19:11

¹⁰ The robbers did not “go out” or “come out” to the man on the road. The Greek says that the robbers “fell upon” the traveler. (Clearly the robbers were not his neighbor.)

Jesus thanked God for their “missional work” and as he was speaking with his closest disciples, a lawyer approached Jesus and asked what looks like a fairly selfish question. [Jesus had just made the point that his followers are supposed to go out into the streets and show people what God’s Kingdom looks like. It’s not about them; it’s about expanding the realm of God!]

But here’s a lawyer who is all about his own salvation. His religious concern is entirely selfish. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asked.

And Jesus, in true rabbinic fashion, followed the lawyer’s question with another question: “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

Of course any good Jewish lawyer would know Jewish law very well. And this lawyer went straight for the heart of the law – the most important commandment. It’s called the Shema⁵ and every faithful Jew recited this twice daily:

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad⁶
Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto Leolam Vaed*

Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

It goes on to say:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your might.⁷*

And the lawyer also included the law from the book of Leviticus:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.⁸

This man knew the law of God very well.

Jesus gave the lawyer his approval, and was ready to move, but the lawyer wanted specifics: Exactly who is my neighbor? (It’s as if he didn’t want to be responsible for more than what was absolutely necessary.) The lawyer was willing to follow the law, but he mostly wanted to cover the basics. It was still about him.

In order to explain to this man the true meaning of “neighbor” Jesus told a parable, and with all parables, Jesus intended for this to be a shocking story. And it is.

⁵ “*Shema*” in Hebrew literally means, “Hear” as in “Hear, O Israel . . .” which is the first word of this commandment. Deuteronomy 6:4-5

⁶ If we were really reading this in Hebrew, we’d be reading from right to left.

⁷ Notice that the lawyer adds “with all your mind.” Although this is omitted in Deuteronomy, Mark (12:29) includes this too. Matthew 22:37 doesn’t include “strength.”

⁸ Leviticus 19:18; Although these two Great Commandments are included together in the Synoptic Gospels, they were not paired prior to Jesus according to Brian Stoffregan. See: <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke10x25.htm>

Last Monday, our Presbytery offered a demographics workshop to show those of us serving area churches. And news was good. We live in a growing area that is projected to grow another 7.3% in population in the next five years.² Our highest growth demographic is – not surprisingly – young adults with no children (which is different from the demographic 50 years ago.)

Our neighborhood can expect more immigrant growth, although it is moderate compared to some other areas of Northern Virginia.³

The word “missional” is hot right now in Christian circles, and it doesn’t mean the same thing as “mission.” We as a congregation are engaged in “mission” – we teach low-income adults computer skills, we feed the homeless, we have rummage sales to fund work groups to Mississippi, we send money to schools and hospitals. We engage in “mission.”

But to be “missional” means that we become one with our neighbors. We know them. We support them. We serve them.

If we were located in a neighborhood filled with motorcycles gangs, we would need to be a church that could reach out to motorcycle gangs, if we hoped to be a missional congregation.

Our neighborhood is dominated by young adults who do not have children. According to the most current statistics, that is our largest neighborhood demographic. The second largest is other adults whose children have grown up and left the house. This is not to say that we don’t also want to reach out to families with young children, or families with teenagers, but we need to be aware of who our neighbors really are and be prepared to reach out to them where they are.

A missional church doesn’t wait for the neighbors to come calling; we reach out to them, much like when Jesus went out into the villages, by the wells, and into the homes of people who were his neighbors.

Just before telling this parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus sent 70 followers to go ahead of him into all the towns he would soon be visiting. He told them to stay in the homes of their hosts, eating and drinking with them, curing them of their illnesses, and showing them what the Kingdom of God looks like through their own kindness and service.⁴

According to the story just before this parable, the 70 returned to Jesus and told him what they had seen: demons had been cast away and other amazing things happened.

² Statistics from Visions-Decisions in Atlanta, GA. See www.vision-decisions.com.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See Luke 10:1-9

“Wait a minute!” the mother said. “That’s it? Why did we have to spend the week in this strange city? And why did we have to wait to receive such a simple word from you? Why couldn’t you have told my son this yesterday?”

And Gandhi said, very earnestly to the mother: “I could not say this to your son yesterday because I had not been drinking my milk.”

I share this story with you because this sermon comes with homework. My hope is that all sermons come with “homework” in that you take what is heard from God’s word every Sunday and you go home and do something differently.

But especially this week, I have a specific assignment for each of you. And I could not ask you to do this assignment unless I had already finished the assignment myself. And here it is:

I want you to stop your busy schedule this week and reach out to a neighbor that you do not already know.

Chances are that you do not know everyone who lives on your floor or in your court or on your block. You don’t have to bandage their wounds or pour oil on them or cover a night’s lodging at the Embassy Suites. You do not have to spend two days’ salary – which is what the Good Samaritan spent: two denarii or two days’ salary.

All you have to do is make a friendly gesture. I baked brownies for our new neighbors on the west side of our house. I’d seen them get in and out of their car. Our houses are so close that they can sit in their bedroom and watch our television. We know they have a cat because we’ve seen it in the window. But I didn’t know them . . . until I made myself meet them, so that I could also ask you to meet your neighbors.

A couple of years ago – actually it was maybe as many as ten – a long-time member approached me after worship. We had received several new members that day, and instead of being happy about it, he was a little disturbed. “Where are these people driving in from?” he asked. “What do you mean?” I asked. (He made it sound like they weren’t from around here.)

“Where do they live?” he said. “Are they from this neighborhood?”

“Well,” I said, “One lives in the Brad-lee Apartments right over there. And another lives in S. Arlington near the church family that brought them here. And another lives over in Shirlington. Yes, they are from this neighborhood.” (Actually, they lived closer to the church building than he did.) He hadn’t realized that the neighborhood had changed since he’d moved to the area some 30 years ago.

“Meet the Neighbors”

Luke 10:25-37

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

Fairlington Presbyterian Church – May 20, 2007

Note: The story of The Good Samaritan is one of Jesus’ parables, which means he told this story to share some great teaching. In this case, Jesus told this story in order to clarify the law to a lawyer who wanted to justify himself and his way of life. The actual story itself never happened. But regardless, this story is true.

I’d like to start with another story that may seem to have little to do with The Good Samaritan, but stay with me. Perhaps this too is a parable, and it never really happened. But still, the story is true.

There was a young boy in India in the 1930s who adored Mahatma¹ Gandhi. He studied his life and teachings and he wanted very much to be just like him. But he was just a boy and he had much to learn before going off to join Gandhi’s ashram. For one thing, he did not eat well. He would not even drink his milk.

Throwing up her hands, one day his mother said, “What if Gandhi himself told you to drink your milk? Then would you drink it?”

“Of course,” said the boy. So the mother packed up her son and a few supplies and traveled to Gujarat to see the great Mahatma himself.

Once they arrived, they had to wait a bit to see the great Gandhi, but they did indeed receive an audience with him. And the mother told him her plight:

“My son adores you. He will listen to whatever you say. But he does not eat healthy food, and he will not even drink his milk. Please, sir. Tell my son to drink his milk.”

Gandhi listened very carefully. And after some time passed, he said this to the mother: “Take your son away from here for one week. And then come back to me and I will tell you what to do.”

This was a great hardship for the mother. She took her son out into the strange city and found lodging for the week, and then – seven days later – she returned to the ashram for the wise words that Gandhi would give her son. After a long wait, Gandhi finally called her and her son in to see him. He looked the boy in the eye and simply said, “Boy, drink your milk.”

“Yes, I will,” said the boy dutifully.

¹ “Mahatma” means “Great Soul” in Sanskrit.