

“Being Neighborly”

Leviticus 19:9-18

July 14, 2013

8th Sunday After Pentecost

Despite the fact that we are more closely connected because of the internet, the social media, and many other electronic gadgets and gizmos, many people are still quite lonely. Holed up in our houses with our faces glued to some sort of video screen, we cut ourselves off from real people in order to maintain virtual relationships online. That’s why it’s such a blessing to have good neighbors – real people with whom you can have real relationships. It’s even nice to be a good neighbor to others. Everyone likes the opportunity to be neighborly.

But what does this mean? What is a neighbor? What does it mean to be neighborly? Many people think it means to be nice to those nice people who live nearby. If someone lives too far away, we normally don’t think of them as neighbors. And if someone who lives nearby is nasty or keeps his distance, we don’t feel obligated to be nice to them. However, the Word of God has a much broader view of what a neighbor is and what it means to be neighborly.

“Who is my neighbor?” was the question proposed to Jesus by a lawyer who wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” This man, being religious, thought he knew his responsibilities toward the Lord, but, being a lawyer, he wanted to know exactly to whom he was obligated to love as his neighbor.

Jesus responded with a story which we know as The Good Samaritan. In it, Jesus taught that being a neighbor has nothing to do with close proximity. The man who was beaten by robbers was ignored by those thought to be closest to him – fellow Jews and religious folk - a priest and a Levite - to boot. Being a neighbor had nothing to do with being nice. The one who eventually helped the beaten man was a mortal enemy – a despised Samaritan. In fact, Jesus never defines exactly who a

neighbor is. He speaks only of neighborliness. Being a neighbor is showing mercy to anyone who is in need regardless of who he is, where he lives, or whether is nice to us or not.

Ok, so what does it mean to be neighborly or to show mercy? It's not an occasional kind act or some superficial sympathy. Jesus says (in quoting our text for today), "Love your neighbor as yourself." We know all about loving ourselves. We do it all the time and we do it well. We take care of what we need. We often indulge ourselves in getting what we want. We don't neglect or deprive ourselves. Jesus says, "Treat your neighbor in the exact same way."

Our text for this morning is from the holiness code in Leviticus. It gives a fairly long list of how we are to love our neighbor. We are not to use all of our resources for ourselves. We are to leave some for the poor. We are not to steal from our neighbor or deal dishonestly with him. We are not to lie to each other or to make false promises to our neighbor in the name of the Lord. We are not to oppress our neighbor or take from her what is not ours. We are not to hurt the disabled like the deaf or blind. We are to be honest in court, not partial to the poor or the rich. We are not to slander our neighbor, hate him, take revenge against him, or bear a grudge toward him. The final verse sums it all up in a positive way, "but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This is looking pretty tough – tougher than just being nice to nice people who live near you. To be a neighbor and to be neighborly according to the Word of God in both the Old and New Testaments is to show mercy to anyone and everyone in need. It is to refrain from any sort of dishonesty, oppression, partiality, hate, or revenge towards anyone at any time. We are never to let up in our love toward our neighbor. It is not enough to love our neighbor some of the time, most of the time, or nearly all of the time. The Holiness Code in Leviticus begins by saying, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."

We can come up with all sorts of reasons why this is all impossible and justification for why we can't do it or should be exempt from doing it. We've tried our best and have often been neighborly, but who can do it all the time? We can't afford that. We could be taken advantage of. Some people are undeserving of it. They don't thank us for it or don't return the neighborliness. Nonetheless, that doesn't change the Word of God.

As sinful self-lovers, we often fail as neighbors in the Scriptural sense. In fact, we are in need of a neighbor – someone who will come near to us, show us mercy to us when we are unworthy, serve us when we are in need, and treat us well even when we don't treat others well. We have such a neighbor in Jesus Christ.

We were far away from a holy and perfect God because of our sin – not only all the sinful actions which we do to our neighbor, but also all the good and loving actions which we fail to do for our neighbor. Yet Jesus not only came to be our neighbor by being near to us. He came to be one of us. As St. John says of the Son of God in the first chapter of his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

Jesus became a man so that He could show mercy to mankind. He was a neighbor, not to nice people who did nice things for Him (which none of us were), but for evil people who were His enemies (which all of us are). He came to show us the greatest mercy of all: taking our sin from us to a cross where He endured God's wrath against sin and suffered the punishment of death which that sin deserved from a holy God. He didn't wait for us to be a good neighbor to Him. He became a good neighbor to us. The Good One suffers for the bad. The Holy One suffers for the sinner. Paul explains the paradox and divine neighborliness in Romans where he writes, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:6-8)

But, even more than just removing our failure and sin by dying for them, Jesus fulfilled the good demanded of us in the Law by obeying it in our place. As Paul also writes in Romans, “For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:19) In God's eyes, not only has our sin been removed, but we are declared righteous and holy with Christ's own righteousness and holiness.

This changes how we see the beginning of the Holiness Code in Leviticus. When the Lord says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,” that becomes a promise, rather than a demand. It is a statement of fact. You ARE holy for Jesus’ sake. In our text, when the Lord keeps saying, “I am the Lord”, it is not because the people forgot who He was. It is a shortened form of, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Exodus 20:1) I am the Lord who redeemed you from your old life so that you may have a new life. I am the Lord who rescued you and your neighbor so love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has redeemed us from our old life in sin, death, and hell by dying on the cross. He redeemed us for a new life by rising from the dead. Paul speaks of this in Romans where he says, “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:4) That newness of life is lived out in and for our neighbor.

Martin Luther often said that Christians live outside themselves. They live in Christ by faith and in their neighbor by love. We live in Christ when we are where Christ has specifically promised to be with His gifts. We gather here because this is where we were placed “in Christ” through the waters of Holy Baptism. We gather here because this is where we hear Christ’s voice in His Word read and preached. This is where we receive Christ’s very body and blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This is where we are reconciled to God and to one another.

We go forth and now live through Christ (or, better yet, Christ lives through us) for the benefit and sake of our neighbor. Our confession is the same as Paul’s in Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

Freed from the guilt from our sin, the condemnation for our sin, and burden of our sin and with Christ living in us and through us, we are able to see everyone as our neighbor and are free to serve them as our neighbor. It doesn’t matter where they live, how they feel toward us, or whether they will ever repay us. It may involve risk, disappointment, or loss. Yet we love because He first loved us.

We serve because He first served us. We receive what has been given to us freely by God out of love and give freely to our neighbor in need out of love. We live through Christ because He lives in us. We are neighbors, although we struggle at it imperfectly, because Christ is our perfect Neighbor who has served us perfectly and will continue to do so.

We were talking about this very subject in our Bible Study here last Wednesday evening. The lesson's conclusion serves as our conclusion today. It reads, "Abound in good works! God doesn't need them for Him to love you. But your neighbor needs them to live." So be neighborly as God, in Christ, has been neighborly to you. Amen.