

Back to Basics: Who is My Neighbor?

by The Rev. Dr. Randall Bush, Pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church

Romans 13:7-10

*Presented at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA
August 3, 2008*

All of us find ourselves in the midst of a theological triangle. We are called to love God with our heart, mind and soul, and love our neighbor as ourselves, recognizing how God loves our neighbor as much as God loves us. These three loves are interdependent; they are the core relationships shaping all human life. So we've gone back to basics to ask "Who is God?", "What is Love?" – and today we'll finish the series by asking "Who is My Neighbor?"

The word "neighbor" is a funny word. We commonly modify it with the adjectives "next door" and picture it referring to someone who lives in the house or apartment right next to us: The hapless Mr. Wilson next door to Dennis the Menace; Herb Woodley from whom Dagwood is always borrowing tools; or Ned Flanders the overly-religious neighbor of Homer Simpson. Growing up on a farm, our nearest neighbor was a quarter mile away. When I was young, the most contact we had with some of our neighbors was through the party line phone service we shared with several families. Each family had a specific ring that was for their phone, and if you wanted to make a call, you had to lift the handset quietly and listen to see if the line was clear before dialing. One of our neighbors, Mrs. Dickerson, had a bad habit of listening in when my brother was on the phone with his girlfriend. He knew she was listening because Mrs. Dickerson had pet birds that would chatter in the background and give away the fact that she was eavesdropping again.

When Jesus says, "Love your neighbor", it can sound too parochial, too limited. He truly did not mean to limit that commandment to the families living next door to us. But expanding the definition of neighbor can be challenging. Jesus tells me to "love my neighbor" – okay, I'll include my family, friends, co-workers and, if I must, other Americans in that definition. Even more? Okay, I'll add in people of other races, speakers of other languages, and even people in foreign lands (as long as they're friendly to the U.S.). More? Well, we can include people of other faiths. And yes, we should add in those who are our enemies, who wish us ill. The neighbor of Jesus' commandment refers to all humanity, the world over, and people of all times, past, present, and future.

Some would suggest the focus of this commandment is even broader. About a month ago, the Spanish parliament passed a law ensuring basic rights for chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans – that they should enjoy the right to life, to freedom, and not to be tortured.¹ For some people, the definition of neighbor includes our evolutionary cousins and fellow mammals. For others, the definition goes even farther than that, to include all that has being – all living creatures or components of life, even down to the

water, air, and minerals around us. Suddenly Jesus' words take on a cosmic significance: Love your neighbor means to respect and care for all that has life and breath and makes your life possible.

But if we try to say too much about who our neighbor is, we risk saying too little. While there is a value in this global, environmental perspective, the biblical reference to neighbors is largely restricted to the women, men and children around us. To love them means to care for them, to show compassion, to work for justice. The best list of Christ-like neighborliness is found in Matthew 25: to give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner.

There are also two famous bible stories that demonstrate what it means to show gracious hospitality and to love our neighbor. The first is the Good Samaritan story, in which the righteous, powerful, and religious people walk past a severely-injured crime victim lying on the sidewalk, while a lowly, outcast Samaritan stops to help the man, caring for his needs and generously ensuring his safety. The second is an example of bad hospitality, namely, the Sodom and Gomorrah story. That may seem surprising choice, given the way this story has been warped by many preachers into a morality tale promoting homophobia. But consider this text again. In Genesis 18, Abraham sees three strangers and offers them hospitality. In the heat of the day, he rushed from his tent to provide food, water and refreshment before the three strangers continued on their journey. In response, the angels (for that is what they were) tell him that Sarah will give birth to their first child. Next, in Genesis 19 the men leave Abraham and head to Sodom. There, at the city gates, they meet Lot, Abraham's nephew, who also offers them hospitality, even though they are strangers.

In those days, to force someone to sleep on the streets or go without food and water was considered a serious breach of God's law. (Imagine that.) The citizens of Sodom were guilty of many sins, best embodied in their disregard for God's laws of hospitality and in their willingness to act on these sins through violence and rape. When the unholy mob surrounds Lot's house and demands he surrender the two guests that they might beat them and subjugate them through rape, Lot rightly refuses. So to clear the record, the Sodom passage is about loving, same sex relationships only if you consider examples of napalm bombing of villages to be related to chemotherapy treatment for cancer patients; only if you consider clear-cutting practices inflicted on virgin forests related to tenderly raise an ornamental garden of perennials. Learning to love our neighbors as Christ commanded means not using misinterpretations of bible texts as weapons against our sisters and brothers. And loving our neighbors means showing Christ-like hospitality to all, especially to the strangers and needy in our midst.

Back to basics: Who is God? God is the source of all life for all time, the loving, holy One whose very being is Other-directed, poured out in grace and mercy for you and me. What is love? Love is God's own nature and God's empowering will, poured down into us and then expressed through us in a cruciform movement down from God and out to our neighbors. And who are our neighbors? They are the recipients of this same love, the ones who reflect back love to us so that we can see it at last, even as we receive

and reflect back love to others that they might behold it for themselves. This expression of love is done without precondition, without prenuptial agreements or contracts of guaranteed returns on our emotional investments. It is not restricted to those who will love us back or who love us at all. It is not done because it makes sense. It is done because such is the nature of God revealed in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, and intended for us and for all creation now and forever.

So how do we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves? Both of today's scripture lessons focus on the Ten Commandments given long ago to Moses up on Mount Sinai. The commandments include two positive rules – Honor your father and mother, and rest, observe the Sabbath – as well as eight negative rules – Don't worship other gods, make idols, take God's name in vain; don't kill, commit adultery, lie, steal, or covet. God gives us boundaries and tells us not to trespass them: Don't murder, blaspheme, rape, torture or lie. Doing our best to stay within these moral boundaries is a crucial first step in loving our neighbors. To work so that others will also stay within these boundaries, including those prone to gun violence or elected officials committed to acts of state-sponsored violence, is also part of God's commandment to love our neighbors.

But ultimately this is only part of the equation. Not doing that which is wrong is not the same as fully doing what is right. Staying behind the fences of negative boundaries is not the same as stepping out by faith into the streets of a positive, loving community. However, you'd be surprised how often following the commandment to love our neighbor involves a simple thing. Like washing a child at baptism and picturing how many times we've washed ourselves from dirt, and how often God's Spirit has washed over us, forgiving and cleansing us; and how we are called to dry other's tears and wash their faces and hands so they can function gracefully and proudly in a gritty, inhospitable world. Or like sharing a piece of bread at communion and remembering how many meals we've eaten that have nourished us; and how that basic need must be met for everyone, everywhere. Or the loving way we listen and pray, setting aside our own egos so as to be open to God's ego while we pray for ourselves and for our world.

Yes, loving our neighbors means working to cure AIDS, to stop wars, to protect our children, honor families of all types, and clean up the messes we make in the environment. But we're not able to do all of that right this very second. That's OK; trust me, all those things are in God's in-box, so don't try to tackle them all by yourself. Just for today, remember your baptism. Come join us for a simple sacramental meal. Love yourself, for you are precious, and love your neighbor, for they are precious too. The ways of faith are as basic and simple as that. Step into God's holy triangle and trust in the Lord's love, which is the ultimate reality, the ultimate truth, the ultimate way to eternal life.

AMEN

¹ See article in *Guardian*, June 26, 2008, "Spanish parliament approves 'human rights' for apes.