

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Based on Proverbs 3:27-30, 25:17, 27:10 | Applying Wisdom: Neighboring
"Better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away." — Proverbs 27:10

SERMON SUMMARY

This sermon continued the summer Proverbs series into its sixth area of application. Having laid the foundation and then applied wisdom to work, words, wealth, and wine, the series now turns to neighboring. This week and next form a pair on community: this week, wisdom and neighboring — the breadth of our relationships; next week, wisdom and friendship — the depth of our relationships. Together they ask what God's wisdom says about how we live with one another. And underneath it all runs the series' deepest question: how do we live as Christ, who is the wisdom of God?

Mr. Rogers and the Hebrew Word Rea

The sermon opened with the 25th anniversary of the final episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Fred Rogers, famously, was not merely a television host but an ordained Presbyterian minister — ordained specifically to minister through that program, his "parish" being children and their parents. His whole focus was neighboring, captured in the song he sang every episode: "Won't you be my neighbor?"

Solomon shared that concern. Running through the whole book of Proverbs is the Hebrew word *rea* — translatable, depending on context, as neighbor, friend, or companion — which appears 31 times. For a book of wisdom about how to live, that makes sense: we need to know how to live with those around us. The sermon drew out three of those proverbs, revealing three dimensions of what it is to live as a neighbor.

Proverbs 3:27-28 "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbor, 'Come back tomorrow and I'll give it to you' — when you already have it with you."

First: Don't Be a Bad Neighbor

Proverbs 3 gives four prohibitions — do not, do not, do not, do not — in an escalating chain. The first two are sins of omission; the second two, sins of commission.

- Do not withhold good when it's in your power to act (v. 27) — don't fail to give the food, clothing, shelter, encouragement, or counsel a neighbor needs when you could.
- Do not say "come back tomorrow" when you already have it (v. 28) — do good promptly and sincerely; if what they need is in your fridge, go get it and hand it over. No excuses.
- Do not plot harm against a neighbor who lives trustfully near you (v. 29) — Proverbs is all about planning, but this says: don't plan evil against those around you.
- Do not accuse someone for no reason when they've done you no harm (v. 30) — whether in a fight or a lawsuit meant to destroy them, do not harm your neighbor.

Taken together: do not do harm, but do do good. As one scholar (L. Wilson) notes, the prohibition makes the positive command easy to discern — your obligation to your neighbor overrides your own convenience.

Second: Don't Be an Annoying Neighbor

The second dimension, from Proverbs 25:17, is refreshingly practical: "Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house — too much of you, and they will hate you." The Hebrew literally reads, "let your foot be precious in their home." It's not saying never visit; it's saying don't live there if you don't actually live there. There can be too much of a good thing. Even neighborly relationships need appropriate boundaries — and the basic boundary is that you visit your neighbor's home for their good, not merely your own. Don't wear out your welcome.

Proverbs 25:17 "Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house — too much of you, and they will hate you."

Third: Be a Good Neighbor

The third dimension, from Proverbs 27:10, is the heart of the matter: "Do not forsake your friend or the friend of your family, and do not go to your relative's house when disaster strikes you — better a neighbor nearby than a relative far away." This highlights the importance — for survival and for flourishing — of having people around you whom you support and who support you: a community of care that is useful, necessary, and good. Wilson calls verse 10 an amazing claim: in the ancient Near Eastern view, friendship can be stronger than a blood relationship — not to minimize family responsibility, but to lift up the value of a near neighbor.

Put simply: God has made us humans with a deep need for community — for geographically proximate relationships, people near us who are actually in relationship with us.

Proverbs 27:10 "Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your family... better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away."

The Ancient Wisdom in Our World: We Still Have Bad and Annoying Neighbors

How does this map onto today? We certainly still recognize bad neighbors. The sermon told the story of Nicholas Yung, a German immigrant who in 1876 built a lovely home on what became San Francisco's Nob Hill — with windows to the breeze, a bay view, and a garden. When railroad baron Charles Crocker bought up the surrounding block but couldn't get Yung to sell, Crocker built a forty-foot "spite fence" around three sides of Yung's home. No sunlight, no breeze; the garden died and the house went dark. A bad neighbor. And such stories aren't only from long ago — an HBO documentary this year ("Neighbors") profiles real dysfunctional neighbors: former friends fighting over a strip of grass, someone bringing livestock into the suburbs, another hoarding feral cats.

We still have annoying neighbors too — the too-loud teenager with the bad muffler, the too-slow Amish buggy, the too-stinky operation down the road. (If you think you don't have an annoying neighbor, the sermon joked, ask your neighbors — they might.)

But We Have Lost the Good Neighbor

The more important and sobering point: we have largely lost the good neighbor. The sermon recalled an older rural world where 40-acre farms sat close together, and on a quiet summer night one family would start playing a fiddle or a trumpet on the porch, and a neighbor across the section would hear it and join in with their own instrument — a whole neighborhood making music together. These were communities that came to help each other butcher hogs and thresh grain. We have lost that.

The sermon marshaled the evidence. Recent reporting documents a steep decline in neighborhood socializing since the pandemic — Americans rely far less on close neighbors and venture out less. One figure: only about 25% of adults 18-29 now talk with their neighbors even a few times a week, down from 59% as recently as 2012. One in three Americans say they don't rely on people in their community, and nearly half say their

neighbors don't work together or look out for one another. As Robert Putnam documented back in his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, this decline has been building since the 1970s: we used to bowl in leagues — regularly, with commitment, dependent on one another — and now we bowl alone, atomized and in solitude. (The sermon held up a pin from the now-closed Sioux Center bowling alley as a fitting emblem.)

And the consequences are real. The sermon told the tragic story of Joyce Carol Vincent, a vibrant young woman in London who died of an asthma attack on her couch at 38 — and whose body lay undiscovered for nearly three years, TV still on, in a city of eight million, until unpaid bills finally prompted a welfare check. We bowl alone, we live alone, we die alone. Is this God's wisdom for living?

The searching questions followed: How many of us know our neighbors? Would we trust them with a key to water our plants? Do we bear each other's burdens — or are we all inside, on our phones, windows shut, living our own little lives? Mr. Rogers would say this is not the way. So would Solomon. So would God.

First Truth: God Made Us for Connection With Those Around Us

God has made us for connection — not only with distant people we choose, but with those near us. "Better a neighbor nearby than a relative far away" is a call to find fellowship, love, and beauty in the people around us. And this is not merely ancient wisdom; it is God's intent for humanity, clarified in how he forms the church.

The sermon grounded this in that morning's baptism of baby Leland. In the Reformed tradition, a baptism can't be done privately at a family's home on request — because baptism is a covenant sign of God to his community. That's why the whole congregation, not just the parents, makes promises. God is telling us that we don't live the Christian life as isolated individuals finding our own God and our own good; we live it as a community that does so together. As 1 Corinthians 12 puts it, the body is one yet has many parts, all baptized by one Spirit into one body. The church is meant to be the world's example of neighborliness — the very connection we were created for. "It is not good for man to be alone"; God forms a covenant family.

The sermon returned to Nob Hill: Yung and Crocker both died in their feud, neither yielding. Years later Yung's family sold, and then the 1906 earthquake leveled the city and destroyed both homes. What was eventually built on that spot? A church. In a world starving for connection, perhaps the church is the beachhead — the very thing the world needs: a community of people different from one another who still love one another and bear each other's burdens. This is why the congregation runs Celebrate Recovery, Bible studies, and English classes for immigrant neighbors.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 "Just as a body, though one, has many parts... so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body."

Second Truth: God Calls Us to Serve Those Around Us

We are made not only for connection with our neighbors but for service to them: "Do not withhold good from those who deserve it when it is in your power to act." And this too is not merely ancient wisdom. When Jesus was asked to summarize the whole of Scripture, he named two things: love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength — and love your neighbor as yourself.

Then, asked "who is my neighbor?" — what does someone have to do to qualify? — Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan. His answer flipped the question. Not "who is my neighbor?" but "who was a neighbor?" Not what must they do to qualify, but what must you do to serve? "The one who showed mercy — go and do likewise."

How can we possibly do this? Only by recognizing a deeper story. John 1:14, in Eugene Peterson's rendering: "The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood." Jesus moved among us, walked our streets, ate our food, lived in our homes. He bears our burdens, numbers our tears, shares our joys. Jesus is the good neighbor — and only in recognizing what he has done for us can we cross the street, knock on the door, and be a good neighbor to those around us, even when they don't seem to deserve the knock, even when their pickup is too loud or their chickens too noisy.

| **John 1:14 (The Message)** "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."

Two Closing Stories

First, from a recent New York Times account: after a major earthquake in Venezuela this summer (June 24, over 6,300 deaths), two teenage brothers — Winder, 17, and Davey, 15 — came home to find their twelve-story apartment building pancaked on top of their family: their grandmother Carmen, their mother, and their ten-year-old brother. With almost no resources, the boys began digging by hand through concrete and rubble — with a borrowed pickaxe, a shovel, a kitchen knife — day and night for weeks, trying to free their loved ones' bodies to give them a final act of dignity. On day 25, exhausted, help arrived: a group of Christian volunteers from a nearby city, wearing shirts that read "Love Your Neighbor." They dug alongside the boys, uncovered the mother's Bible (open to Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation"), reached the grandmother's body, and — as the family huddled and the boys cried in their father's arms — one of the rescuers said a prayer. This, the sermon said, is what neighboring looks like: digging through rubble, descending into the hole, weeping with those who weep, gathering them in prayer.

And then the turn home: we all admire that story and imagine we'd do the same. But there are Venezuelans in Sioux Center. There are Ukrainians in Sioux Center who come from hellish places with nowhere to return, and many now cannot stay or work. Without wading into politics or policy, the sermon simply asked: Do you know their names? Do they know that you know their names? Do you know their story? Are you suffering with them and holding them in prayer? Are we being good neighbors?

Second, the bowling pin itself: it came from Daryl Kuiper, a neighbor who used to knock on the pastor's door bringing meat sticks or honey. Daryl and his wife Lynette — known for the cards she mailed to so many — were both buried recently. Their bodies are gone, but their legacy of God's life continues, because they were the kind of people who crossed the street, knocked on doors, said "I think you might be able to use this," wrote the card, offered the prayer, gave the tight hug when someone was hurting. In lives like Daryl's and Lynette's, we see the life of Christ lived among us.

Key Takeaway

God's wisdom for our relationships is threefold: don't be a bad neighbor (do no harm, and don't withhold good), don't be an annoying neighbor (honor boundaries), and be a good neighbor (build a community of care). We were made for connection with those around us and for service to them. And we can only truly love our neighbors because of the ultimate good neighbor — the Word who moved into our neighborhood, bore our burdens, and now sends us across the street to do likewise.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take your time. Listen well to each other. There are no wrong answers — only honest ones.

1

The sermon drew three dimensions from Proverbs: don't be a bad neighbor, don't be an annoying neighbor, and be a good neighbor. Being honest, which of the three is your biggest growth area right now — and why?

2

Proverbs 3 says to do good "promptly and sincerely" — don't say "come back tomorrow" when you already have what your neighbor needs. Where are you tempted to delay or make excuses when you could actually help someone now? What's behind the delay?

3

Proverbs 25:17 warns against wearing out your welcome — "let your foot be precious in their home." How do you think about boundaries in your relationships? Is your struggle more with overstepping them, or with keeping people at too great a distance?

4

The sermon documented a dramatic decline in neighborliness — only 1 in 4 young adults talk to their neighbors weekly, down from 60% in 2012. Do you feel that decline in your own life? Do you actually know the people who live near you? Would you trust them with a key?

5

The story of Joyce Carol Vincent — whose body lay undiscovered for three years — is a sobering picture of "we die alone." What does that story stir in you? What would it take for your community to be the kind where that could never happen?

6

Jesus flipped the lawyer's question from "who is my neighbor?" (who qualifies?) to "who was a neighbor?" (who showed mercy?). How does that shift change the way you think about your obligations to the people around you — including the ones who are hard to love?

7

"The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood." The sermon said we can only be good neighbors because Jesus was the ultimate good neighbor to us. How does what Jesus has done for you actually fuel your ability to cross the street and knock on a door?

LIVING IT OUT

We were made for connection and for service. This week's invitation is to cross the street — literally.

In Your Inner Life

- Read Proverbs 3:27-30, 25:17, and 27:10 this week, and let them examine you. Ask honestly: over the past month, have I withheld good I could have given? Have I worn out a welcome? Have I been a good neighbor to anyone? Bring your honest answers to God.
- The sermon said we can only love our neighbors because Jesus first moved into our neighborhood and loved us. Meditate on John 1:14 this week — the Word made flesh, dwelling among us. Let gratitude for the ultimate good neighbor become the fuel for your own neighboring.
- Sit honestly with the question the sermon posed: am I all inside, on my own phone, windows shut, living my own little life? Ask God to show you one specific way your habits have pulled you away from the people right around you — and one small step back toward them.

In Your Closest Relationships

- Proverbs lifts up the value of a near neighbor — "better a neighbor nearby than a relative far away." Who are the people geographically closest to you (next door, down the hall, across the street)? Name them. If you don't know their names, that's this week's first assignment.
- The sermon honored Daryl and Lynette Kuiper, who crossed the street with meat sticks, honey, cards, and hugs. Pick one of those simple gestures this week — a card, a small gift, a knock on the door — and offer it to a neighbor, expecting nothing in return.
- Think about boundaries honestly (Proverbs 25:17). Is there a relationship where you tend to overstay or overask — or one where you've kept someone at arm's length who's actually reaching out? Take one concrete step to right the balance this week.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- "Do not withhold good when it is in your power to act." This week, watch for one concrete good you have the power to do for someone nearby — and do it promptly, without the "come back tomorrow" excuse. Don't overthink it; act on the first real opportunity.
- The Good Samaritan didn't ask whether the wounded man qualified as a neighbor — he asked how to serve. This week, look for someone easy to overlook or write off (the annoying, the different, the inconvenient) and find one way to be a neighbor to them anyway.
- The sermon named the loss of the old rural neighborliness — helping each other butcher hogs and thresh grain. What's the modern equivalent you could offer? Helping with a project, a move, a meal, a ride. Offer your hands to a neighbor's need this week.

In Your Faith Community

- The sermon said the church is meant to be the world's example of neighborliness — the beachhead of the connection the world is starving for. How is your congregation doing at that? Identify one way you could help make your church a more visible community of care this week.
- The sermon named Venezuelans and Ukrainians in the community who have fled hellish places and now face uncertainty. Setting politics aside, take the sermon's questions seriously: Do you know their names? Their story? This week, take one step to learn a name and hear a story — and hold them in prayer.
- Baptism reminded the congregation that we don't follow Christ alone but as a covenant family making promises to one another. Reflect on the promises you've made (or witnessed) to support others in your church. Is there someone you promised to walk with whom you've drifted from? Reconnect this week.

A Word to Carry

You were not made to bowl alone, live alone, or die alone. You were made for connection with the people right around you — and for service to them. The Word moved into your neighborhood and became the ultimate good neighbor to you. Now go, cross the street, and do likewise — even if the pickup is too loud and the chickens too noisy.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

Neighboring isn't a feeling — it's crossing the street. This week, be a good neighbor to one specific person nearby.

This Week's Challenge: Cross the Street

Daryl and Lynette crossed the street with honey, cards, and hugs. The Christian volunteers in Venezuela crossed a country to dig in the rubble. This week, cross your own street to one neighbor.

Step 1 — Name a Neighbor.

Think of one person who lives near you — next door, down the road, across the hall. Ideally someone you don't yet know well, or someone you suspect is isolated. If you don't know their name, your first task is to learn it. Write it down.

Step 2 — Actually Go Over.

Don't just resolve to be friendlier — physically go. Knock on the door, walk over, start a conversation. Bring something small if it helps (the sermon's meat sticks and honey come to mind). The point is presence, not a grand gesture.

Step 3 — Learn Their Story.

Ask questions and listen. Where are they from? What's their life like? What do they carry? The sermon's sharpest challenge was simply: do you know their name, and do you know their story? Move one relationship from stranger toward neighbor.

Step 4 — Offer a Concrete Good (and Prayer).

"Do not withhold good when it is in your power to act." If you learn of a real need, meet it promptly — don't say "come back tomorrow." And hold this neighbor in prayer this week, whether or not the moment allows praying with them.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share who you reached out to and what happened. A church that learns to neighbor together becomes the beachhead of connection its community is starving for.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Read the parable of the Good Samaritan in full (Luke 10:25-37) this week. Notice Jesus's reframing of the lawyer's question, and ask yourself honestly which character you most resemble — the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, or the wounded man. What would "go and do likewise" mean for you specifically?
- Take the sermon's isolation statistics seriously and do a personal audit: how many of your neighbors' names do you actually know? Make a simple goal — learn one or two new names this month — and take the first step this week.
- Consider one of the congregation's existing avenues of neighboring — Celebrate Recovery, a Bible study, the English classes for immigrant neighbors — and explore how you might get involved. Being a good neighbor is often easier when you join something already crossing the street.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — for the God who made us for connection, who forms us into a covenant family, and who himself became the ultimate good neighbor in Jesus, moving into our neighborhood to bear our burdens.
- Confess honestly — the ways we've withheld good we could have given, worn out welcomes, kept our windows shut, and lived our own little lives while neighbors went unknown and unloved.
- Ask for a neighbor's heart — that God would give you eyes to see the people right around you, courage to cross the street, and love that doesn't wait for others to qualify.
- Pray for those on the margins — the Venezuelans, the Ukrainians, the isolated, the overlooked in your own community. Ask God to help you learn their names, hear their stories, and hold them in prayer this week.

"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. Jesus is the good neighbor — and only in recognizing what he has done can we cross the street and knock on the door."

— From This Week's Sermon