

"Loving Your (Next Door) Neighbor"

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Bedford Presbyterian Church

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Scripture Reading John 13:33-35

³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come."³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Cody, my younger son, had just come in from an after-work softball game. He sat down at the kitchen table for dinner with us and we had the following conversation:

Joe said: How was the game?

Cody said: It was great! We won! We have Gary, this Mormon guy on the team.

Mormons are really good athletes!

I said: *What?* You can't say that! Mormons aren't an ethnic group, they're a religion.

That would be like saying Presbyterians are good athletes.

Joe (the Presbyterian minister) said: Well, Presbyterians are good athletes!

I rolled my eyes.

I said: Probably this one guy Gary happens to be a good athlete.

Cody said: No, we have a bunch of Mormons at work. They're almost all really good athletes.

I sat in silent contemplation.

Cody added: And they're nicer than everyone else, too.

I said: *What?* Nicer than everyone?

Cody said: Yup. You can tell which ones are the Mormons before you know they're Mormon. They're so nice.

I'm embarrassed to say that I then said: Nicer than me?

Cody said: Mom, you're really nice. But they're nicer.

What's up with that? My own son telling me that Mormons are nicer than I am? This led to a discussion about his perception of Mormons and why he thought they would be good athletes as well as being nicer. It had to do with their faith and the way they were raised, he thought. They're not allowed to play video games and watch TV as much as other kids, was his theory, so they played sports more. And they're nice, he said, because their religion teaches them to be nice. "But our religion teaches us to be nice, too." I whined. "Not as nice as them," he said.

After this conversation, I did what any religious person would do in this modern age. I went to the great oracle Google to ask about Mormons and niceness. Evidently it's a trend. Lots of people are asking the same question. Right near the top of the results page there was an article about Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of the TV show South Park and the Broadway musical hit "The Book of Mormon." They seem kind of obsessed with Mormonism, but it turns out, they're not Mormons. However, Trey Parker had this to say: "I've been fascinated with the Mormons for a long time. They are the nicest people in the world."

Of course, historically, the Mormons have not always been nice to everyone. African Americans weren't welcomed into full participation in the church until 1978. Feminist women and homosexuals are still not welcome.

But even so, (with a New York Times op-ed piece last week notwithstanding) the general cultural perception seems to be that Mormons are really nice. That they in fact seem to embody Jesus' teaching to his disciples that people will know you are my disciples by your love for one another. Is niceness an expression of love?

Another reason I was thinking about niceness this week was because of another conversation I had with the women who participate in our quilters circle. This group meets every Tuesday afternoon and works on the quilt that is auctioned off at Mistletoe Mart every year. It's a wonderful group. I wandered in and asked the ladies what they would like to hear as a sermon topic for this week. There were a couple of suggestions made, but the one that struck me was when Harriette Scott talked about the fact that people don't know their neighbors anymore. She told a story of a couple in their neighborhood who were away at work. One day, a moving van pulled up to the house and emptied its contents, the only problem being that the people were not moving. It was thieves who pulled up and helped themselves to everything in the house. In the olden days -- in the neighborhood where I grew up, for example, that could never have happened. We were friends with all of our neighbors and we would have known if they were moving or not.

Now this new reality of not knowing your neighbor may not be true for each of you, but the consensus in the quilting group was that it was true in general and it rings true in my experience. The reasons for this new isolation are many and varied. One of them, around here, has to do with the zoning and the fact that many people have chosen to live so far apart from each other. Not being able to see your neighbor's house is considered an asset by many. Another reason is the accelerated busyness of our lives. We don't have time to hang out with neighbors.

Another major factor is the general culture of fear that has been promulgated by the 24-hour news cycle. Fear of the stranger. Fear of the other. FEAR, fed and fattened by the occasional horror story from some neighborhood somewhere in the country, makes us all wary of neighbors we do not know. How do we love our neighbors when we're afraid of them?

We've talked a lot in church about expanding our definition of neighbor to include poverty-stricken families in Nicaragua and Hurley Virginia, as well as the homeless poor on Manhattan streets and the people who are fed at the food pantry and the homeless people we have fed and sheltered in Fellowship Hall during the winter. Obviously, it's a fine thing that we have embraced the world in all its diversity as our neighbors and we have loved them, through the work of our hands and hearts. We're called by God to look out for the brothers and sisters in this way.

But what about the family next door? In some ways, it's easier to love people you don't really know, the people whose lives you touch briefly. But what about the ones who are there every day? And I may not be talking about your literal next door neighbor. How about your neighbor at work? At school? In your extended family? The person sitting behind you at church? Will they know you as a Christian by the way you have loved them?

Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Here's a story about neighborliness. I have a niece and nephew, Karen and Patrick, who live in a small city in North Carolina, called Sanford. Karen's sister, Rebecca, decided to run for city council. We visited recently, and Karen, who acted as Rebecca's campaign manager, told me that during the campaign, they went to every house in the district, knocking on doors. I said that given my basic shyness, I'd rather go for a root canal than knock on doors and ask people to vote for me. Karen, who is a pretty shy person herself, said, "Oh no, it was fun! People were glad we came." This surprised me, but then she told me the secret. "When people came to the door, Rebecca would introduce herself, say she was running for city council, and then she would ask them what issues were important to them in city government." It turns out that almost everybody was happy to talk. Karen and Rebecca listened and took notes. Many people, Karen said, expressed gratitude for the visit and said that no one "official" (or potentially official) had ever knocked on their door and asked them what they thought. Do you think Rebecca won that election? You bet she did.

What if each one of us picked a neighbor we do not know and engaged that person in conversation, with the sole purpose of listening generously. What does it mean to listen generously? It means listening with love, listening with full attention, listening with the intention to really see and know the person you're with. Not waiting for the person to stop talking so that you can talk, not trying to be impressive or even to give good advice, but just to be present, open and truly interested. I'm sure we've all done this for people we love. But can we widen the circle a little? Is there some "neighbor" in your life who would love to be heard, seen and recognized? Someone you don't know very well, who would love to tell their story. Listening generously is a gift. It's like shining a light on someone -- you can watch them open like a flower to the sunlight, watch them blossom and grow. It's an act of love that goes to the very heart of Jesus' teaching. It's another way to love your neighbor.