

“Neighborly Love”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Romans 13: 8-14**

Do you like your neighbors? When you are looking at a new place to live, you will consider: its location; the amount of space it offers; if you have children, what the schools are like; crime rates for the area – all sorts of factors. One of the things you can’t really predict is what kind of neighbors you will have, unless you already know someone from that neighborhood. I have not heard of folks going door to door around their potential new home, and interviewing the people surrounding them as to whether they are compatible with their social or political views! The reality is you don’t get to choose your neighbors.

For the most part, our family has really good neighbors. There are ten houses on our court, and while we’re not close with everyone, we know a few fairly well. We watch out for one another’s property when we’re gone, share summer produce from gardens, and have chats while walking in the evenings. You may have similar neighbors where you live.

We also have, well, one of THOSE neighbors. They live across the street from us. They aren’t the friendliest of folks. They don’t keep their yard up or rake their leaves. They’re the ones you wish would one day be inclined to move so that the property values on the street might go up. You may have similar neighbors where you live.

Now imagine what it would be like if you had the opportunity to vote whether or not you wished to remain connected to the people who are your neighbors. In a real sense, that is what will happen on Thursday of this week across the Atlantic Ocean. For three hundred-seven years, Scotland has been one of four countries which form the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Now, this week, the people of Scotland will go to the polls and vote whether they wish to remain connected to their neighbors: England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

The ramifications of this vote for independence are both significant and unknown. If the Scots vote to leave the United Kingdom, it will be the end of a political alliance that is older than our own country. There is great uncertainty about the economic, military, and political impacts on the country. What currency will be used? How will this impact the Scots and Great Britain’s standing in the international community? Will there be border crossings between England, Northern Ireland and Scotland? How will all countries involved be affected economically? And the kicker of all this is the fact that, according to

opinion polls, the referendum is literally a toss-up just five days before the vote.

Why is the issue of independence even up for a vote? For much of its history, Scotland has had its ups and downs with its neighbor to the south. In the past, wars over the border with England, who is the rightful ruler of each country, not to mention religion, as we discussed last winter when talking about John Knox – all of this has created a unique cultural identity in Scotland. In modern times, there is concern over political power being held in London over issues affecting Scotland, although some of that has been tempered with the creation of Scotland's own parliament in 1999. As someone who has a deep affinity for that country, and who wrote his college honors thesis on the modern Scottish independence movement, I am enthralled by what will happen later this week.

We are not able, in the normal course of life, to take a vote to break ties with our neighbors. If we don't like our neighbors – whether they are where we live, with whom we work, dare I say, with whom we worship – there are coping mechanisms we can employ. We can ignore or avoid them, or we can make their life miserable, hoping they might leave. And yet, ironically enough, God has a funny way of either bringing those folks right back to us, like a boomerang, or introducing new people to whom it is hard to show neighborly love.

Paul was keenly aware of this phenomenon as it relates to living in community. He spends the first eleven chapters of his Letter to the Romans laying out his theological argument for trusting and believing the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Then, in chapter twelve, his focus shifts to how we as Christ's disciples are to live out that good news in our individual lives of faith, and as a community of believers. "I appeal to you brothers and sisters . . . to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (12:1). Paul makes a concentrated turn from the theoretical to the practical: don't just believe this good news, but live it through acts of love.

In our passage today, Paul speaks both to living out this good news through our acts of love, and of not being cautious or hesitant in doing so. As human beings, we tend to be creatures that seek laws or rules to guide our decisions, our relationships, and our lives within an organization. Of course, as part of an ordered society, we have laws that we follow in order for governance to be enforced and safety to be ensured. But we can look to laws in all areas of our life to follow, sometimes to the point of legalism and literalism, forgetting the basis of why those laws were created in the first place.

Paul knew that in his early-church setting, there would be tendencies to look only to the Torah, the Jewish law, as a means of how to judge and govern the community of faith. Which is why he begins by reminding his church in Rome that there is only one sign of true

obedience to the law: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (13:8). The law, as laid out in the Ten Commandments, reflects obedience to God and how we live out that faithfulness in our relationships with our neighbor: “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (13:9).

How we treat our neighbor – whether or not we like them or not; whether or not they keep their yard; whether or not we vote to be independent from them; whether or not we agree with their social, political, or personal views; whether or not we share with them the same ethnic background, language, or economic class – how we treat our neighbor, according to Paul, reflects our obedience and faithfulness to God’s law. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (13:10).

When I read verses 11-14, I feel as if Paul knows what our natural reaction is to this call to neighborly love. Our first tendency may be something like, “You know what? I know I need to show kindness to that neighbor, but let me ease into it, okay? I mean, they’re hard to warm up to, they are so different than me, and you know, God, I really don’t have the emotional energy to invest in this right now.”

To which Paul responds: “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near” (13:11-12). As disciples of the one who modeled God’s sacrificial love, we are not to be tempted to procrastinate in exhibiting this neighborly love.

And we are to refrain from acts that hinder this love of one another, acts of the flesh, as Paul puts it. Did you notice that Paul lists quarreling and jealousy equally with drunkenness and licentiousness? Self-centeredness takes on many forms, and selfish ambitions are what work against God’s love within community. We are not only being self-centered when we partake of the readily-labeled immoral behaviors (drunkenness and licentiousness), but also when we quarrel with our neighbor or harbor jealousy against our neighbor. Those are “the works of darkness” because they hinder the works of light. Instead, as Paul insists, “Put on the armor of light, our Lord Jesus Christ, and let us live honorably as in the day” (13:12-14).

How do we exhibit neighborly love – not in terms of greeting card clichés, but in real, tangible, transformative ways? I may not have invited my difficult neighbor to worship this morning. But perhaps I need to lay aside my feelings of judgment, and do something unexpectedly kind toward him. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love fulfills the law.”

There may be someone who has a starkly different viewpoint than you on something in the church, at school, in your workplace, anywhere. It could be how a particular task should be done, it could be on a theological issue, it could be how others are being treated - it could be anything. Instead of ignoring that person, or seeking to make their life miserable in hopes they will leave, perhaps it is time to lay aside the works of darkness and seek a new understanding of who your neighbor truly is. "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love fulfills the law."

If we are truly to accept the good news which we have received; if we are truly to believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord; if we are truly to be transformed by God's Holy Spirit of grace; if we are truly to be disciples of the one who has loved us unconditionally - then there is one, simple rule to follow obediently, faithfully, and forever: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Now go and do likewise.

Thanks be to God. Amen.