

“Welcoming Our Neighbors”

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

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*Galatians 6:1-16 My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads. Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher. Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but **if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.** So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, **for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.***

See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.

The Apostle Paul is writing to the Galatians. This scripture is toward the end of his letter to them. He wants them to know under no uncertain terms that the only thing that matters is following the Law of Christ. He writes this in BIG Letters to get their attention. If he had a computer, I would think that he would be writing this in BOLD and underlining it. The Law of Christ meant that they are to love one another and “bear one another’s burdens.” They are called to serve each other just like Christ did. There was antagonism going on from those who wanted everyone to follow the Law of Moses which called for all males to be circumcised. They were condemning others over this issue in the hopes that they would join their side. The focus was not on Christ at all.

The job of judging does not fall to one another only to God. All of us sin so there is no need to point a finger at anyone but yourself. This is only going to divide the community. Paul says, “Test your own work. You will reap what you sow.” The goal is to sow to the Spirit and thus you will reap eternal life with the Spirit. We are all new creations in Christ. We are to live in unity and harmony as Christ’s followers. That is easier said than done when it comes to our flaws and differences!

So, if the goal is to sow to the Spirit, what does that look like? As new creations in Christ, how do we sow unity and harmony with each other and our community? I want you to look at the person sitting on your right side and now to your left side. How well do you know this person? You may be lucky that they may be your spouse or child. They may be a long-time friend or someone you just met. Perhaps, they are a stranger. Who are they? What do they want? What are their gifts?

A week from Monday, we will be in Vacation Bible School mode! You all know as I have shared many times in the past that this is my favorite time of year. It is also my most challenging especially when the church only has had its electricity working like last year! But, what I always come away with after the week is how we all worked together to make such a wonderful thing happen! We share our gifts of teaching, music, science, leadership, hospitality, cooking and generosity. We tell God’s story. We may not agree with each other on how everything should happen but through it all we grow together. I believe we love each other more because we have

grown in our relationships with each other. We have connected with a large number of children and their parents from our community probably more than we do all year round. We get to connect with old friends – Kelly and Jon Simpson, Liz Arrieta and Manuela Ek de Novak. Can you believe that they come back to share in this special week with us? I think they love us and want to take part in ministry with us.

This year, our congregation is blessed in the opportunity of not only engaging with our community during Vacation Bible School but also the Community Picnic on August 27. It seems like so much energy and focus in my work has gone to planning these 2 events.

As we learn and grow in relationship from our time spent at VBS, I believe we can also grow in relationship with our community during our time at the picnic. This is our opportunity to sow to the Spirit of God. It is clear that our congregation has stepped up to the plate and has generously given from your hearts in providing a free lunch to all who attend. It is clear that many have stepped up and committed to doing work toward making this event successful. But, I think we are called to get to know our neighbors. Our goal of this picnic is to move outside the walls of the church and hopefully it won't rain for us to meet that goal. But, the other goal and maybe more important is for us to get to know our neighbors.

A small group of us have been meeting with DeAmon Hargis and other pastors and members of Presbyterian Churches in our Presbytery. DeAmon is a community listener and has been a part of successfully connecting the congregation of Broadway Methodist Church with its community. The key DeAmon stresses is to get to know your neighbors. Who are they? What are their passions? What are their gifts? How do they want to share their gifts and passions with others? By learning these things, we can find ways to connect with each other.

At our last meeting, DeAmon had us walk through the neighborhood of First Meridian Heights. We didn't need to engage in conversations with people unless we wanted to do so. But, we were to look for the gifts and the blessings that were in the community. We were not to look at the deficits. First Meridian Heights Presbyterian Church is in a really nice area. There were beautiful lawns. The homes were nicely maintained and some looked renovated. It was wonderful to see neighbors sitting out on their porches visiting with one another. There were kids and a father playing stick hockey out in a yard. DeAmon described this exercise as Asset Based Community Development. It focused on knowing your communities assets and gifts. It helped us see and get to know the community.

Now, I told DeAmon that I felt very safe walking through this neighborhood. But, when my children were in youth group at Faith Presbyterian Church several years ago, we went on a mission trip to Chicago. We served in an area called Cabrini-Green. We walked that neighborhood and I didn't feel safe. There were bullet holes in the apartment buildings. There was broken glass where children were playing. It was a rough place to be. It definitely took me out of my comfort zone. But that is where the church was serving. I needed to see it and not point fingers at the deficits.

Our session will be doing this at our all officers' retreat the Saturday before the picnic. This is our way of continuing to seek to be an open, caring, community. This has come from our listening sessions last year and something that we talked about at one of our SET programs in the spring. Out of these gatherings we sense the need to reach out and get to know our neighbors. We need to connect with them. We need to find out who they are and what they want in life. We will need to open our hearts and eyes to see their gifts. But, I believe this is what we are called to do as we sow the Spirit of God in this place at this time.

On the day of the picnic, I urge to attend. I am so thankful to the people who generously gave so that everyone can eat at no charge. But don't let that be your only part in this event. I pray that

we won't get so caught up in the doing and busyness that we lose sight of our goal which is to connect with our neighbors.

I hope that we won't be hung up on how much free food people are taking. I hope that we can have faith that God will provide and that our focus will be on our guests in a positive way. That we can act as Paul says with a "Spirit of gentleness." That we can put aside our differences of culture, language and anything else that can separate us from our neighbors and simply celebrate the new creation of Christ in all of us.

I pray that we can hear the words of Paul which are written in BIG letters to get our attention. The Message puts it like this, "But the one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life. So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith." Thanks be to God, Amen.