

You see, it all began as a test--a way to see what Jesus would say, how he would answer. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Well the man already knew the answer, and so Jesus simply invited him to tell what he knew--"What do you find in the law?" "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and Love your neighbor as yourself." That's it, Jesus replied. You've got it.

The conversation could have ended right then, but that wasn't enough for the lawyer. "But who IS my neighbor?"

Arvada, Colorado is a town of about 100,000 people. Some years ago, a group of pastors there were distressed by the problems they were seeing around their city, so they had the idea of meeting with the mayor to talk about it. And they asked the mayor this simple question: What can we do to help? How can we lead the people of our churches to make a difference in this city?

They were sure that his response would be something along the lines of a new program or a social service that they could develop or provide for those in need in the community. Perhaps a new food pantry or an after-school program. But that wasn't it at all. Instead he told them, "the majority of our issues in this city would be drastically reduced...if we could just figure out a way to become a community of great neighbors."

Who is my neighbor?

Jesus responded to this question with perhaps the best-known parable in all of scripture--the good Samaritan. We've heard it again and again. Many of us have been acquainted with this Samaritan for years now. You don't even have to attend church or read the Bible to know the good Samaritan. There's Good Samaritan foundation, Good Samaritan hospitals, there's even a good Samaritan law.

The parable was a challenge to the one who asked the question, "Who is my neighbor?" It was a twist--an unexpected turn to show this law expert that his neighbor may not be who he thinks it is--his neighbor could, in fact, be someone whom he despises, someone he doesn't know, someone he thought he was

supposed to stay away from. What Jesus seems to be doing here is widening his answer--and our answer--to the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

But at the heart of Jesus' story is the sense that our neighbor is anyone who is in our path, anyone whose life intersects ours; and while, yes, our neighbor could include someone across town or someone across the world, the truth is that we have people right outside our front doors, who literally cross our paths day after day, after day. They are our actual neighbors--the people who live next door, across the street, or across the hall.

So this month of September we are delving into this question, this challenge of really loving our actual neighbors--the people who live closest to us. We're taking Jesus seriously when he says to love God and love our neighbor. I love a metaphor as much as anyone else does, but I think that sometimes the metaphor can let us off the hook. As Jay Pathak says, we end up with a metaphoric love for our metaphoric neighbors, and our communities are changed--but only metaphorically, of course. In other words, nothing actually changes.

We are called to be a church who takes transformation seriously, and who is seriously involved in God's work of transformation in this community, this place where we have been planted and rooted and called to serve. And what we know to be true is this: transformation happens through relationships. Our lives are impacted when they come into contact with other lives, and when the lives in this community are changed, then the community is transformed, not metaphorically, but really and truly transformed. So this month we are going to climb out of the metaphor. We are going to take Jesus' words at face value, and actually work on loving our neighbors.

So what does it mean to love your closest neighbors?

Well, it's a simple start, really. First, to begin to love our neighbors, we have to know them. We have to answer this question literally--"Who is my neighbor? What is his or her name?" When you came in this morning, you should have received a handout with your weekly word. And on that sheet you'll find this lovely grid. In the center of the grid, you'll see your home. Now, you may live in a house, or a townhouse, or an apartment, or a mobile home, but whatever it is, that's you right in the middle. Then all around you are your neighbors. There

are the people right next door, and the people across the street or across the hallway, and then the people who back up to your place, maybe you share a fence or a wall with them. However this makes sense to help you imagine your 8 closest neighbors, use it that way. Now imagine those 8 people, those 8 homes that surround your home, and ask yourself, "Can I name the names of the people in those homes?" Typically only 10% of people can fill in a name for someone in each of those 8 spaces. So if you can do that, then take it a step further, ask yourself, "Do I know something about this person that I could not know just by standing in my driveway or at my front door?" So it doesn't count if you know what kind of car they drive, or if you know that they leave for work at 7:00 or that they have 2 kids--what we're getting at here is, "Have you had a conversation with this person? Have you taken some interest in them, to learn something about them that cannot simply be observed?" Only 3% of people can fill in that part. Then step three is to ask yourself, "Do I know something in depth about these people? Do I know them well enough to know something about their dreams, their needs, their fears? Have we shared life together enough to have a real, substantive relationship?" Less than 1% of people can say that about their neighbors.

We moved to Westbury, to this neighborhood, in January of 2013. And when we moved in, we were inundated. We received mail by the boatload, filled with advertisements for local companies, invitations to local churches, information about the civic club, tons and tons of mail, and flyers stuck into our door handle. And do you know where all of that is now? Well, hopefully by now it has made its way through the recycling process and has been remade into some other, more useful piece of paper. But I did keep one piece that we received. I keep it on my refrigerator, but I took it down to show it to you today. Here it is--this is a handmade note, drawn with crayons, there's a little bit of grass drawn across the bottom, and it says, "Welcome to the neighborhood." And inside is a note from our neighbors, The Olanders. And the note says "we look forward to getting to know you...we were so excited to hear that you were coming because we are also a family of 5." It has their phone numbers, and it has a place where their 5 year old son had drawn each member of their family and labeled them, I assume to help us figure out who was who when we saw them. And most importantly, this note came attached to a box of brownies, held in the hands of people who carried it to our doorstep, knocked on the door, smiled, and said hello.

You see, I can tell you that loving your neighbor matters, because it has mattered to me. It mattered to me that these people came over to my house, crossed a busy street and navigated my unwieldy sidewalk not to sell me their product, not to get me to come to their church, not to tell me to get my trash can out of the way or to turn my music down, no, they came over simply because they cared. Because they wanted us to feel welcome, and safe, and loved.

Ultimately, neighboring is a reflection of this truth: that there is a God who has come out of God's house, traversed the space between heaven and earth, crossed the front lawn, so to speak, in order to involve himself with our lives, to be near with us, to draw us out of our own front doors, into a life that is shared with others.

It seems so simple, but when I look at this grid, I see that inertia has gotten the best of me. I've gotten used to just kindly waving to people from afar, rather than taking the risky step to cross the lawn and connect. Friends, this week I challenge you to take a step out your front door. See if you can add a little to your neighborhood grid, get to know a neighbor. Put this grid on your fridge and just start chipping away at it, one neighbor at a time. Take a walk around the block or around your building, and pray for God to guide you into relationship with those who are closest to you. As you take steps in tending to your relationships with your neighbors, I hope you'll share the stories with me and with others, and we'll see together what God is transforming in our midst. Friends, this is gong to be fun.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Summary: In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we find a call to love the neighbor who crosses our path. Loving our closest neighbors begins with getting to know who they are.