

## **My Neighbour is My Neighbour**

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Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
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Texts: Amos 5:21-24; Luke 10:25-29

The story of the Good Samaritan is probably one of Jesus' most well known parables. Today we didn't even read the whole story, we just read the set-up for the story. The lawyer comes to Jesus, discusses what is most important about the law, rightly answering that "love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself" are the way to eternal life, or as some of the other gospels phrase it, these are the foundations of the law. And then in Luke's gospel the questioner asks, "And who is my neighbour?"

That's the question I want us to think about today. Jesus' answer to the question posed by the lawyer is familiar to us. With his story he tells us that neighbourliness is not confined to people who live near you, you show your neighbourliness whenever you show compassion to anyone. This parable is so famous, I think, because it encourages us to break down great dividing walls of hostility...walls between us and them, between people with my skin colour and people with other skin colour, between people who live in my country and people who live in that country.

Jesus didn't just tell stories about this...he lived this way. Jesus broke down all sorts of barriers as he travelled from town to town, meeting strangers and outcasts, providing help and healing and good news. His actions, whether it's talking to the Samaritan woman at the well, healing the centurion's servant, touching lepers...and his stories like this Good Samaritan story...challenge us to live a certain way in the world.

Jesus talked about barriers being broken down and compassion being shared, and I want to talk about that today. But not in terms of helping strangers on the road, but rather I want to talk about connecting with the neighbours on your street. Now Jesus didn't talk about his literal neighbours. We hear about the many people that Jesus treated as his neighbours, but oddly enough, we don't hear very much about Jesus' actual neighbours. Jesus did grow up in a neighbourhood in Nazareth, but the gospels don't tell us about his interactions with them, because the gospels mostly focus on Jesus' public ministry, which happened when he was a travelling man.

We don't know the name of Jesus' next door neighbour. We don't hear about the woman whose garden was next to Mary and Joseph's house, or the kids Jesus went to school with.

While we don't get specifics, we do get stories about neighbours. Stories that came out of Jesus' understanding of what neighbours are. Jesus tells the story of the woman who loses a coin. When she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours to come and celebrate with her. The same with the shepherd who finds the lost sheep, it's the neighbours who celebrate with him when the lost sheep is found.

These are the neighbourly relations that Jesus was used to in his experience of life in his Nazareth. One of the gospel writers tells us that Elizabeth's neighbours rejoiced with her when she became pregnant in her old age. All the neighbours wondered, what would become of this child John. Knowing about each other's lives, and celebrating together is an important part of community life.

And then there's the parable Jesus tells of a friend coming to borrow bread in the middle of the night, to feed another friend who is visiting. It's unlikely that a man would travel across town in the middle of the night and leave his guest sitting alone. He's likely knocking on his neighbour's door, asking for bread.

Jesus tells stories from his everyday life, of people living in community. He talks about people celebrating with each other, helping each other, being involved in each others' lives. Community life, village life, was the context out of which Jesus tells these stories.

Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan as a way of expanding the concept of hospitality and connectedness that already existed between neighbours. I imagine that Jesus couldn't even imagine a world where you didn't know your neighbour, because he grew up in small-town Nazareth.

North American society, for many people, is vastly different than the world Jesus grew up with. In our urban contexts, where mobility is frequent and people come and go, we don't get the sense of neighbours. Very few people stay in one neighbourhood over several generations, which would have been the norm in Jesus' day. In our society, every generation has to forge new relationships with the people they live near.

And our urban landscape is different than Jesus' hometown. When I was in Nazareth a few years ago, I toured Nazareth Village, which is a living museum. It has buildings and roads made to look like Jesus' time. I was struck by the way homes were tight together, cheek by jowl, and windows were simply openings in the adobe brick. Everyone would have known everyone's business.

The urban landscape in Canada is different. We value privacy over connection. We build high fences that cut us off from our neighbours, so we don't have to look at them, let alone talk to them. We get into our cars in garages, which cuts out the chances of having a neighbourly conversation as we leave the house. People still like to sit outside, but they do that in the backyard on their deck or patio surrounded by fences, not on the front porch where they can see and greet their neighbours, and see what is happening on the street.

What makes it even more complicated is that we are very suspicious of people we don't know. Whole generations of kids have been raised these days to be afraid of strangers, to not talk to strangers. Unless their parents are present, they don't interact with anyone in the neighbourhood. Adults are afraid to approach kids, even with good intentions, because it scares them. I said hello to a little girl on my street, and I saw the frightened look on her face. I was a stranger to her, she was afraid of me.

I want you to listen to this song. I think that some of you will be very familiar with this song: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdJVX2SINaA>

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,  
A beautiful day for a neighbor,  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine?  
I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you,  
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.  
So let's make the most of this beautiful day,  
Since we're together, we might as well say,  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?

This is the theme song from the PBS children's television show, Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood, that ran for over 40 years, and is still being seen today on some networks. Fred Rogers, who was also a Presbyterian minister, wrote the lyrics to all the songs on his show. He wasn't just trying to entertain children, he was trying to teach them life skills, and he thought long and hard about what he put on the show. He felt kids needed to learn that the world is a beautiful place, filled with beautiful people that you can get to know.

I think the appeal of his show was that it was so countercultural to what children were being taught at home. Teachers and parents trying to street proof the kids teaching them that world is a scary place, full of danger...and Mister Rogers telling them every day that the world is a place full of wonder and relationships that are waiting to be born. The lasting popularity of this show, and the fact that it was seen by millions and millions of children every day, points to a deep longing for community.

I have described the difficulties of living in the urban environment, but some of you might disagree with me because your urban life experience is different. Some of you live in neighbourhoods where you have lived for decades. You've formed important relationships with the people around you, so much so that your neighbourhood is almost like a rural neighbourhood right in the city. And some of you live on farms, and you know what rural life can be like. You don't need to hear a sermon about loving your literal neighbour, because you already do that. You have been at each other's weddings or baby showers or you've dug each other out of snowdrifts. Casseroles have exchanged hands.

Let me tell you a story about community. My husband Eugene grew up on a farm in Rosefarm, a tiny community in southern Manitoba. One year when Eugene was around 12, there was a big hailstorm, and it just so happened that the hail came down right on Eugene's dad's farm, wiping out their entire crop of wheat. A big disaster for a small farmer, who went from year to year with not very much money.

And as is the case with rural communities, people know each other's business. After the storm people drove around to look at the damage, and they saw the Penner fields, and knew the predicament they were in. Eugene has a very clear memory of something that happened not long after that hail storm. Their neighbour Ed came driving up their driveway with a truck full of grain. Ed put a whole truckload of wheat into the Penner's empty granary. A loving your neighbour act.

Forty years later, when Eugene's dad died, many old neighbours from Rosefarm came to the funeral, even though it was quite some distance away, because the Penners had moved off the farm 30 years before. Attending the funeral was another loving your neighbour act. Eugene was so grateful they had come to remember his father's life. And glad he had the chance to go to Ed and tell him that he would always remember his kindness, and the sight of that grain truck coming up the lane. Eugene told him how much it meant to him, how it taught him about the strength of the Rosefarm community, that people looked out for each other. Ed had tears in his eyes as Eugene said this. It was true. It was a strong community. Even though Eugene's parents had moved away from Rosefarm long ago, they were together to the end of their lives.

There are people in the city who have communities like that. It's likely the type of community that Jesus grew up in, a community where people call on their neighbours to rejoice with them, to ask them for a loaf of bread to feed unexpected visitors. These neighbourhoods are real and possible. But it is definitely not the norm today. Especially in a big city like Edmonton, many people don't know who their neighbours are. How can you love your neighbour if you have never even spoken to them. How will you know what they are celebrating? How will you know how to offer help in a hard time?

I love the old Robert Frost poem "Mending Walls", which is all about neighbours. The writer of the poem is mending a big stone fence with his neighbour, who keeps insisting that "Good fences make good neighbours." In fact that is the most famous line of that poem. As they take the rocks and build the fence up, the author keeps giving the alternative suggestion, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," and he wonders whether a fence is needed at all. The poem has tension in it. They don't agree about the fence, but the act of working on the fence is a way of building a bridge between them.

I like the poem because it is so real. Neighbours don't always agree. It's not always easy to love neighbours. They can be cranky or grumpy, and they are always there. Sometimes it's easier to do a kindness to a random stranger than to reach out and do a kindness to the person across the street. Because if the gesture doesn't go well, you will never see that stranger on the road again. But if the gesture with your across the street neighbour doesn't go well, that could be awkward. There is more at stake with the people who live closer to us. There is also a lot to be gained by loving your neighbour.

I want to tell you about some neighbours I had, growing up on Taylor Avenue in St. Catharines. In 1978 my dad bought the only new car he would ever own, a shiny blue Dodge Coronet 440. His pride and joy. He owned the car three days when a woman backed into him in a parking lot, scraping and denting the whole side of the car. He was so mad at this stupid woman who had wrecked his new pride and joy. This was just a month before we moved to our new place on Taylor Avenue. My father could hardly believe it when it turned out our new next-door neighbour was, you guessed it, the woman who had wrecked his car. Not a good way to start out a neighbourly relationship.

And then there was Mrs. Virtiva, the old Polish woman who lived across from us on Taylor Avenue. She was always yelling at us because our cat liked to spend time digging in her flower gardens. It's hard to form a neighbourly relationship when the topic of every conversation is cat poop. And yet...and yet...my mother worked on those relationships. Cordial relationships eventually grew. Over our side fence (which was a three foot high picket fence) my mother got to know the woman who had wrecked our car. They talked and commiserated over the weather and kids. Recipes were exchanged. I saw my mother asking about Mrs. Virtava's rheumatism and saw her patience as she listened to the long answers. They talked about knitting. Slowly, slowly, my mother became more involved in the lives of these two women. The things that happened between us and our neighbours were not big things, but they had surprisingly long lasting results.

We only lived on Taylor Avenue for four years. Then we moved. The family next door moved too. But the relationships that started there lasted for forty years, till those people died. My mom would go and drop off a birthday card once a year for Mrs. Virtiva. Then Mrs. Virtiva had an operation, and my mom dropped off meals. As Mrs. Virtiva got older, my mom started gardening for her, because my mom loved gardening, and we lived in an apartment. Then my mom started doing her laundry for her. In the end my mom was one of the few people who attended Mrs. Virtiva's funeral, she cried because she missed her long-time friend.

There were initial walls that had to be overcome; walls of hostility about an accident, about a conflict over cats. But the relationships grew and were sustaining relationships. There was love between neighbours.

I haven't always been so successful in my neighbourly relationships. One story in particular bothers me in my history with my neighbours. Eugene and I were living in Vineland, and the house next to us changed hands five or six times in the years we were living there. One family only lived there a year. This couple was middle aged, but newly married. They weren't really friendly, only giving me the faintest of nods when I would smile and wave hello. And that didn't change over time, they simply didn't want to talk to us. The only time I saw the man outside was when he was practicing his martial arts moves alone in the backyard. He also had a huge Rottweiler that barked incessantly and growled at me every day.

The man had a son from a previous relationship, and on occasion the nine year old boy would visit for a weekend. The boy would wave at me from the front porch and we would exchange a few words. One summer afternoon, as I was getting into my car I paused and chatted with the boy, who was sitting on the front porch. He was wearing shorts, and I saw he had a really nasty purple round bruise on his thigh, so I said, "Were you playing baseball, did you get hit by a baseball, that looks like it hurts!" He just matter-of-factly said, "No, my dad kicked me because I didn't get off the couch." "That's not good, he shouldn't kick you!" I said. And he didn't say anything, and I didn't know what to say next. And so I just got into my car.

I was really upset hearing that the father had kicked his son. But I never did anything about that. I thought about talking to the man, but I immediately ruled that out because that was too confrontational, and I was intimidated by him. I thought about calling Family and Children's Services. But then I thought that he would probably figure out who called, and this would cause a lot of tension between me and our neighbour...and we live next to each other, and I didn't want to be enemies with this man. I rationalized to myself that this boy's mother would see the bruise and do something about it. These people moved away the following year.

It's funny how there are things that you do, that don't seem big at the time, but they stay with you for a really long time. I am still thinking about this, about the choices I made and why I made them and what I didn't do. Not doing something to help that boy is something I regret deeply. And I think I learned something from that...two other times since then I've come across children who were hurt and I did do something.

What happens when you love your neighbour as yourself? You look out for them, you protect them when they are need to be protected. You care for them when they need to be cared for. You celebrate with them, a card or cake when someone graduates or has a birthday. Neighbours help out when there is a need, whether it's helping someone get to an appointment when their car is broken, or lending a cup of sugar or delivering a tray of muffins. It's an abundant community, because there is love, there is compassion, there is simple human kindness. It's not that you have to be close personal friends with everyone on your street, but in taking an interest in people's lives, small gestures can mean a lot.

Today we read two different pieces of scripture. One was the familiar setup for the Good Samaritan story. The other were some hard verses from the prophet Amos. He tells the people of Israel he hates, he despises their festivals, their solemn assemblies, their burnt offerings and grain offerings, their songs and harp music. What God wants to see is justice rolling down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. The Israelites had become preoccupied with religion that was taking place within the four walls of the temple, and entirely neglecting the point of religion, which was to act justly.

These verses are a prophecy for the church throughout history and a wake-up call for churches and denominations in our own time. I am not convinced that God's whole plan for the world is summed up by having more and more churches, filled with people singing and worshipping and taking offerings and celebrating Christmas and Easter. If that is what we are aiming for and focused on, we are missing the point. If the prophet was writing today, he would say, I hate your bulletins, I hate your hymns, I hate your collections, I hate your sermons and your worship songs....all those things are not important compared to how you are living out your faith.

I don't think that God is interested purely in the church planting business. I think God is in the kingdom of God business, which is not defined by church walls or church membership. In fact, it is pretty much defined by breaking down walls that divide us. Jesus told us that we are supposed to be part of God's business, which includes loving your neighbour as yourself.

We live in a lot of different communities, we have a lot of different neighbours. I'd like to hear your neighbour stories, we need to tell them to each other. What are the challenges and joys of living in your community, whether that's in Sherwood Park or or Garneau or Terwilliger or on a Range Road? Loving your literal neighbour can be a joyful thing, and it can be messy, and it can be hard. How can we encourage each other in our journeys to be a neighbour to our neighbours?

And importantly, I think Jesus wants our church to be a good neighbour. What does it mean for us to have a congregation located in Lendrum? Over fifty years ago, a group of people, some of whom are still here in this room today, came out and looked at a piece of swampy land, and decided that it was here we would come together to worship God. God had a purpose for us to be in Lendrum. How are we helping righteousness, or right living to flow here in this neighbourhood? Is our building ours for use only by us, or is it an asset that Lendrum can use to build community? Are there ways we can serve the people who live here? And next week we are putting these ideas into practice by offering a free breakfast for our community...I'm looking forward to that.

The Good Samaritan had his eyes and ears open as he walked down the road to Jericho. How are you keeping your eyes and ears open as you walk out the front door of the church? As you walk out your own front door? I hope that you will leave here today with Mr. Rogers' song stuck in your head, like a hymn:

It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood  
So let's make the most of this beautiful day,  
Since we're together, we might as well say,  
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?