



Love Thy Neighbor: Loving Where You Live

Acts 17:22-31

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Over the course of the past few years, I've found that we – humanity at large – have forgotten how to relate well with one another. I say we've *forgotten*, but in some ways I wonder if we ever actually knew how to relate well with one another. It's almost as if we, as a global humanity, were just putting up a façade of pleasantries, which was intended to mask a deeply hidden lack of desire to actually be in relationship with others.

Perhaps the accessibility of digital and social media outlets have aided in this contentious atmosphere. What used to be hidden complaints, shared with one's family around the dinner table, have now poured out into the greater circle of publicity where others can join in the ranting and raging. And, while such an inability to relate with one another may well be most visible in our political engagements, especially in our community in the Nation's Capital, such incompatibility is also obvious in our personal lives and in the Church. No realm of life seems immune to such arduous disagreements. Instead of seeking a way we can work together, our first instinct tends to be speaking out against those who hold a differing opinion.

I've seen a lot of that even this past week. Admittedly, it's exhausting.

Perhaps it's fitting on Mother's Day to hear a sermon that mothers do a pretty good job of summing up in their admonishment to fighting children, "Why can't you just get along?"

Almost a decade ago, a number of clergy from the Denver area called a meeting with their local Mayor. The churches had seen that there were a number of problems in the area that needed to be addressed. Their community was challenged by the same kinds of problems we see in many urban and suburban communities across the nation: problems surrounding child hunger, drug and alcohol abuse, elderly shut-ins with no one to look in on them, poor housing, and at-risk kids. As we see even in our own community, such problems do not go unnoticed, but from a political perspective, if the City Council and local voting body can't agree on how to address these issues, they go untouched. It takes years to get a government program created, funded, and working – and it doesn't often take long for the next cycle of elected officials to come in and tear the program apart. That's not to say the government shouldn't be addressing these problems, but the Mayor of Denver said to these church leaders, "The majority of these issues that our community is facing would be eliminated or drastically reduced if *we could just figure out a way to become a community of great neighbors.*"¹

Not too much different than what your momma told you as a child? We could solve our problems if we could just figure out how to get past our differences and learn to be great neighbors. I find this gathering in Denver laughable. These clergy leaders called a civic leader to

offer help in the community, and the civic leader basically said in response, *isn't this what your faith tells you to do?*

It's true. Such a call – a call to be great neighbors – falls perfectly in line with our Biblical foundation as people of Christian faith. Throughout the Bible, God invites us to love as God loves. I don't feel like I need to preach a sermon on Jesus' teaching in Matthew 22 for you to know that Jesus himself says the greatest commandment is "To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, *and* to love your neighbor as yourself." Loving your neighbor is a rudimentary standard of the Christian faith – you can not be living faithfully if you do not love God or love your neighbor. Such living, Christ says, is foundational. Yet, it seems that loving your neighbor is harder than Jesus had anticipated it to be.

It didn't take long for such a teaching to be discussed and dissected. What do you mean by *love*, Jesus? What do you mean by *neighbor*? One temple leader pressed Jesus on this topic in Luke 10, asking the question bluntly, "Who is my neighbor, Jesus?" The man was seeking to more narrowly define *neighbor*, so that he could choose to whom he shared *love*, to justify his current actions and response to others. In reply, Jesus offers the story we call, *the Parable of the Good Samaritan*. The Samaritan – the man who was outcast from the Jewish community – served as the example of God's love because of the love he showed the man in need.

Because *loving your neighbor* has become such a hard thing for us in today's culture, over the course of the coming month, we're going to try and make this commandment simple. We're going to look at some realistic steps to begin practicing what it means to love your neighbor. I encourage you to pick up a copy of this book, *The Art of Neighboring*, which I will be using in my preparation for preaching each week. However, I will not cover all the book has to offer in the coming weeks' sermons, so you're invited to read along and practice, what the author Dave Runyon calls, *literal neighboring*.

To give us some advice on what this looks like, we turn to our text in Acts 17. To understand this text in Acts, you have to know Paul. For Paul, to love someone else was to speak the truth of Christ into their lives. Paul believed so fully in the power of the knowledge of Christ, that for him, to love another was to share with them his knowledge of Christ's love. That was also his gift – that is the gift God gave him for loving others – to teach others about God's love.

Paul has made his way to Athens, Greece. The city of Athens was a hotbed for intellectuals in the Greco-Roman world. It was the place for philosophical and theological debate. Paul, remember, was not a philosopher; he was an evangelist. As an evangelist, Paul's focus and call was not to engage in great intellectual deliberation, but to teach people about God's love in Christ. So, that is what he did. Paul went to the synagogues and argued with the Jews about faith – comparing his belief with theirs; he went to the market-place and he talked about Christ with any who would give him an ear. Some of the philosophers in town heard what he was saying, and found his teaching interesting. So they invited him to come and speak at the Aeropagus.

The Areopagus was the place “where the Athenians spent their days doing what intellectuals enjoy – relieving their boredom by searching for new ideas.”ⁱⁱ It would be like saying, the Areopagus was the place for 1st Century TED Talks. This is a place where people could speak on new ideas, and others could be enlightened by such talks. Having been brought here by the locals, Paul is about to give his TED Talk on Christ.

Paul stood before the Areopagus and began speaking, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’” ... The Athenians are so religious that they have even marked an altar to an unknown god in the case they have forgotten one, or perhaps in the case there is a god they do not yet know about.

Paul continues – but his opening remarks make something very clear. To connect with others, you have to know them. As Paul stood up in the pulpit of the Areopagus, he had already taken the time to get to know the people and their city.

He now uses what he knows of this place and this people, looking at this statue to an unknown god, to talk about the Lord we proclaim as Creator of all things. He finds the place of longing in their lives, their desire to know the unknown, and he connects what he believes with what they seem to not know. Paul says that this unknown god, it is the God of all creation.

As he is speaking, it becomes clear he not only has gotten to know the people and their beliefs, he also has learned much from their extended culture. He ties in quotes from Greek poets. Going back to the Scripture, it reads that Paul says, “in him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”

Remember, for Paul, loving on others meant teaching them about God’s love in Christ. But look how he’s doing this – he’s not beating them over the head with a Bible ... or scrolls and letters, which he would have had at that time. In fact, in this entire sermon-like TED Talk, Paul doesn’t quote scripture even once. He’s not quoting or listing a history of Christianity or Judaism. “Sometimes poetry, natural theology, and human experience provide an excellent starting point.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is especially true in this space for Paul because that is the language of the people to whom he is speaking.

Paul knows that to introduce his faith in a way that makes no connection to the people’s lives will be a waste of his time and theirs. He knew that to share in conversation with the Athenians, to love on them in the way he knew how to love on people, he had to know who they were, how they spoke, for what they had passion, for what they had desire, and for where they had a longing for more.

We go back to the text, Paul continues speaking, “From one ancestor, God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.” ... This sounds a lot like predestination – a promise that where we are was decided for us by God long before we were even born. I find it hard to say that God

has designated us to live in certain areas – that would be like saying God wanted people to live in slums in third world countries, or that God ordained people to live in unsafe urban housing, or that God prefers people to live lives out in mountain hollers with no plumbing or clean water. I think sociology and human history provide a different perspective on how people end up in such housing projects or places. And we've talked about predestination before here at Washington Street – it's very Wesleyan to believe that God knows where we'll be and what we'll be doing – but not because God decided it for us. Rather, because God is so all-knowing, so omnipotent, God knew where we'd end up before we ever made it there.

So, if I can move beyond my knee-jerk reaction to what Paul says, I do think that what Paul has to offer here is very powerful. At the core of what he's stressing is a 'theology of place.' That is, he's making the argument that one can, and should, be faithful to the God of all creation regardless of when they live, or where they are living. He's making the argument that in whatever place we find ourselves, it is there God is trying to work in and through us for the benefit of God's will.

To the Athenians, Paul is not trying to call them to move to Jerusalem, or to join one of his already founded churches around the Mediterranean Sea. Paul is giving them the blessing to partake in the work of God where they already are. Said more succinctly, to be a person of faith, who believes in all that Christ has offered in his witness, Paul is teaching the Athenians, (and we would do well to hear his message) we must begin to really Love Where We Live!"

We have to see our place – our residence, our job, our community, our church – as the place where in God wants us to be working for his good at this time. If we're here, then we ought to be loving on this space while we *are* here. Much as Jesus shared love with the Samaritan woman when he was in Samaria, and Galileans when he was in Galilee, and the Canaanite when he was in Canaan, we should be loving on our neighbors when they are our neighbors.

And perhaps that one of the greatest challenges. If Paul's example and teaching offer anything, it's that we should love where we live, and that to truly love on the people where we live, we have to get to know them.

I think for many people, the hardest challenge to living this out – to loving where you live and to love your neighbors – is agreeing on who exactly is your neighbor. Is the person sitting next to you on the Metro a neighbor? Is the person taking your order at the Chart House your neighbor? Is the person in the cubicle next to yours at work a neighbor? We seek to justify why we don't love people by writing them off as not really being our neighbor. So, as we start this focus on loving your neighbor, I want us take such a delineation off the table. Let's begin with the most basic of definitions for the term – let's look at your physical – your residential neighbors.

If I were to ask you to tell me the names of the eight closest residents to your physical place of residence (whether an apartment, a stand alone house, a condo, a town-home, or a tent), how many of your neighbors can you name by name?

I'm talking *names*. I don't want to know that you have a man across the street that walks a Golden Retriever every day at 4pm. I don't want to know you have a couple across the hall who jams out to old school R&B every evening at dinner. I don't want to know about the two children whose screaming in the backyard every Saturday morning at 8am wakes you up. I want to know about Shonda and Sherry, who live next door... I want to know that Jackie and Phil have two kids, Julie and Maurice, and have lived in their house for 20 years ... we have to learn from Paul – how can you love who don't know?

As Paul is our example here, it may not be enough to just know their names – you may need to know much more than their names to really love on them. “If we take our cue from Paul, we will first learn the listen carefully to the culture [of others] hearing deep within it aspects of the ways people are seeking and searching for the one true God.”^{iv} We have to get to know one another. But, we can't get to know more about the people who live next to us, if we can't even get to know their names.

**Block Map
House Chart**

a.	a.	a.
b.	b.	b.
c.	c.	c.
a.	 <p>Your House</p>	a.
b.		b.
c.		c.
a.	a.	a.
b.	b.	b.
c.	c.	c.

ⁱ Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon. *The Art of Neighboring*. Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2012.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matt Skinner. workingpreacher.org. Retrieved May 8, 2018.

^{iv} John S. McClure. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year A, Volume 2*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.