



**Love Thy Neighbor: The Fear Factor**  
**Numbers 13-14, Mark 2:13-17**

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June 3, 2018

Over the past month we have been considering what it means to more directly live out the second half of Christ's teaching regarding the greatest commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself. To help us focus in on this commandment and to live this out, we have been focusing on the hyper-local – on our immediate residential neighbors. We've worked to get to know the names of those who live around us, and we've considered how much more we need to know than just their names, if we're really going to be able to love our neighbors.

Last week we looked at one of the greatest inhibitors to our loving our neighbors – the time barrier. We are such busy people that finding the time to share in community with others can be challenging. This work is difficult because it calls us to be interrupted and inconvenienced - it takes time. If we are to take the great commandment literally, it means we have to be intentional about how we schedule and use our time. Does our schedule and our use of time reflect God's call on our lives as disciples to love God and to love our neighbor?

A second barrier, which will be our focus today, is the fear factor. Too often, our fear – our fear of the other, and perhaps even the fear of ourselves – keeps us from loving the very people God is calling us to love.

A number of years back, when I was just entering into the ministry, I was sitting in on a seminar that was looking at social media use in the life of the church. This was back before Instagram and SnapChat had been launched, and Twitter, though available, was not yet seen as a useful tool for the church ... Ok, so this was only like 10 years ago. Anyway, all one needed to know about social media was how to leverage Facebook, and the promise was that your church, if utilizing Facebook well, would be so hip and modern, that all the cool kids would flock to you.

But the focus of the seminar wasn't just about the church's use of Facebook, the seminar talked a lot about how we as pastors use Facebook. The observation of the teacher was, if 80-90% of people looking for a church will visit your church website before visiting, then nearly half that number – so, roughly 40% of people – will look up the pastor on Facebook before coming to a church. (I won't ask for a show of hands to see how true that is.)

What they offered is as applicable to anyone working outside the church as it is to us who are employed in the church – when people want to know who you are, what you think about key issues, your political or religious beliefs, who you hang out with, and where you like to visit ... they will stalk you on Facebook. They offered this information because they found that people will make certain judgments about you based on their perception of who you are, with nothing

but your public social media presence as their basis. Someone could choose to attend or not attend a church solely based on their perception of the pastor.

What they were teaching, is that ***in the world of social media and non-stop digital news, perception is everything.***

We know this phenomenon is true. The idea that perception rules is the very troubling reality behind fake news. It doesn't matter if what comes across your screen is real or not (factual or not), if you hear something enough, read something enough, see something enough, there is a very real likelihood that you will begin to think it's true, even if there is nothing truthful about it. While we can blame this fake news trend on the growth of social media and the profiteering media, the reality is, such use of fake perceptions to sway the feelings of others has long been a standard practice in our nation.

From the days of our inception as a nation, we have found ways to convince groups of people to believe a certain way about others groups of people, even when that way of thinking had no validity. The ways in which we treat, talk about, look at, depict in images, and write about groups of persons plays a part in how they are perceived. Take a walk through the new African American History museum in DC, and look at the statues and paintings that were long used to bring about a negative stigma on people of color. Consider that in 1920 in our Commonwealth of Virginia, the *Racial Integrity Act* required Native Americans to classify themselves as 'black' – there was no Native American option for ethnic or racial identification. That wasn't changed until *last year* – it was January of 2017 before Virginia changed the laws and allowed these six tribes of Virginia to receive recognition as Native Americans. Such subordination of an entire ethnic history sets the tone for how people of that tribe are received in the larger culture. It silences their stories, and as such, it silences the truth. But truth has become about perception, not about reality.

The problem with silencing some stories, and mistelling others, is that when we are continually exposed to such alternative facts, a subtle shift can take place in how we view the people around us. It's easy to believe that the exceptions are the norm, and we end up lumping whole factions of people into misinformed groupings. Such wrongful stereotypes and accusatory categories lead us to fear whole subsets of the population by the way people look, the melanin in their skin, the head coverings they wear, the language they speak, the food they eat, or their location of worship. Our perceptions of these entire subsets of the community drive our fears, and keep us from fully experiencing the blessing of community God desires for us.

Consider the story we read in Numbers 13 and 14. The people of Israel have been promised by God a land that is filled with milk and honey, and is populated by others. They come to the edge of the land and the Lord says to Moses, "Send out men into the land ahead of you – the land of Canaan – *which I am giving the Israelites.*" ... This is the land God has promised them.

Moses obliges, and sends out 12 scouts to survey the land. They find the land to be just as God had promised – it's flowing with milk and honey, and it's inhabited by others. After forty days of

inspecting the land, the scouts come back. They attest that the land is just as God has promised, but that the inhabitants are strong, and their cities are fortified with walls. They go through the list of the people they found there – the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, and others. They are reporting back about how dangerous the inhabitants of the land are.

Amidst their concern for the strength of the people, Caleb – one of the scouts – chimes in, saying, “We must go at once and occupy it, for we are able to overcome it.” Caleb saw something different – he saw that God’s people could go in and occupy the land, just as God had promised they would.

But he is quieted – as the others again state, “The men are stronger than we are.” And it’s not just the perception they have of the others that they fear, it’s the perception they have of themselves. They go on to say, the people are so big, “to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” ... They’re so scared of the others, that they have denigrated themselves to be as grasshoppers to these giants inhabiting the land.

Then look ahead to Numbers 14, and you can see God is agitated by their perception. The Lord, in response to this decision to pass the land by because of their fear of the people in it, says, “None of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and the wilderness ... shall see the land that I swore to give their ancestors. But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.”

“God became angry at their cowardice and lack of faith, and as a result, they spent forty years wandering the wilderness. They were on the doorstep of something that God wanted them to do through them, but their perceived fears kept them from what God had laid out for them.”<sup>i</sup>

In their fear of the other, they failed to live into what God wanted for them. Even when a minority was saying, ‘let us not fear,’ the more threatening voice of fear won out.

That’s how we are conditioned – from the time we’re children, we are conditioned to let the fear of the other win out. From the times our parents held on a little bit tighter to our hands when walking by someone on the street, to the times we drove the long way home to avoid certain blocks or neighborhoods, to the times our friends didn’t invite certain classmates to their birthday parties ... we are, even subconsciously, trained to fear people who are different than ourselves.

That’s not to say all caution is bad. The stranger danger way of living has saved more than one child’s life. But to address the fear factor that inhibits our living out Christ’s call to love our neighbor, we have to do some honest and serious work to name what fears of stranger are due to iniquitous stereotypes, and which are healthy for our safety.

God praised Caleb, because he saw what God saw – and sought to be faithful, even amidst the fear of the other. This is the same witness that we see in Christ.

In Mark's gospel, we read that Christ was travelling with a large crowd. As he was walking along, he came across Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the tax booth. Levi was a tax-collector. Jesus says to him, "follow me." These are the same words he offered to other disciples, and Levi's response is the same. He doesn't reject, put up a fight, or ask, "who me?" Levi gets up and follows Jesus.

I feel like the scripture leaves out part of the story here, because Levi begins to follow Jesus ... he's walking behind him ... and the next thing we know, they are dining at Levi's house. Is Levi following Jesus thinking to himself, "hmmm, where are we going? ... ummm, Jesus, this is my neighborhood. ... wait, wait, wait, that's my door. Why are you going in my house? ... oooooo."

I mean, let's be real, if I asked you to get in the car with me, and I drove to your home, and opened up your front door, what are you thinking? Levi must be shaking, wondering, what are we doing here?

But the text doesn't offer us any of that, Jesus doesn't wait for the invitation. We're just told, "As Jesus sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting there with Jesus and his disciples."

Let's be very clear, tax-collectors and sinners, a phrase repeated three times in this text, are two different groups of people. The tax-collectors were hated because they had made an agreement with the Romans to take money from the locals. They had a quota they had to pay to Rome, and anything they made on top of that quota, they got to keep for themselves. So, they charged extra. This is a true story of someone who steals from the poor to give to the rich.

And then we have the sinners. This goes beyond our short-sighted claim that, "we are all sinners." (As if any one of us actually believe there's validity to such a statement. We all classify sin in one way or another.) This text isn't referring to the masses, who are sinful. This is referring to a specific group of people. It's talking about murderers, bandits, thieves ... they are bad company (or as some might say, *bad hombres*). ... These are the people you warn your daughters about, praying they never bring such a person home for dinner.

Tax-collectors and sinners were not people to be associated with. They were hated by the community, avoided at all costs, and relegated to the outskirts of town. As William Placher says, "Eating with the polluted was polluting."<sup>ii</sup> This was something no person of deep faith would consider, much less a rabbi. It was considered detrimental to their position and prestige. It would be like your pastor having coffee with white supremacists, or dining at a night club decorated with poles. It was the place *not* to be.

Jesus went and welcomed, gave validity to, saw the humanity in, and graced with love those for whom the community had no love. No wonder these people, these tax-collector and sinners, wanted to be around Jesus. No wonder Levi got up and followed with little hesitation. "It makes sense why they were attracted to him and followed him and why, ultimately, he chooses to go

to them.”<sup>iii</sup> Jesus looked beyond the fear labels that the rest of the community had stuck on these people, and he greeted them, welcomed them, and dined with them.

The story of Jesus is one that is perfectly clear. The love of God is not reserved for those who claim to have it right, or claim to be of perfect faith, or claim to know the right way. The “stories in the gospels show clearly that Jesus’ message included in God’s reign those whom some religious leaders would exclude as unworthy.”<sup>iv</sup>

But if we’re going to break through the fear factor, it means we’ve got to acknowledge our own misconceived beliefs about others. If we’re going to take seriously Christ’s command to love our neighbor, then we have to stop thinking so much of ourselves and so little of those around us. If we’re going to engage with people who think, look, act, sound, eat, travel, worship, celebrate, and grieve differently than us, we have to learn to see them as Christ sees them – as those who have been created in the image of God, and as those worthy of God’s love.

I know we’re going late, but I don’t get to preach the next few weeks, so bear with me. Here’s a few practical ways to break through your fear and to engage with those around you.

First, make yourself more visible. As Christ is our witness, why did so many flock to him? Because Christ didn’t live his life in the inner sanctuary of his entertainment room or kitchen. He went to the people; he walked the streets. I love my backyard, but sometimes, it’s worth sitting in the front yard, because fences don’t always make the best neighbors. Sometimes you have to take a step to make yourself more visible so that you can see the people who live around you.

Second, an ode to last week, you have to slow down. “Being a good neighbor simply means slowing down and being aware of what [God] is designing. By developing real relationships (with the people around you), you’ll find out how God is already moving in a person’s life.”<sup>v</sup>

Third, eat. There are few things in life we all share in common, but one is hunger. We have to eat to live. So, again pulling from Jesus’ model, have a dinner party – throw a block party. Put the grill on your driveway, or set up a George Foreman on the side walk out front, and throw on some burgers. Even if people don’t eat, they’ll wonder what you’re doing. I don’t care if they talk to you because they think you’re crazy or if they are genuinely looking for a good neighbor, if it strikes a conversation, I consider that a win!

Finally, take risks – stretch your comfort zone. You may knock on a door to say hello, and they may not answer because they think you’re selling something, or they may think you a Jehovah’s Witness. Don’t fear the rejection – trust in the provider of strength to bear fruit in your neighboring. ... We are making this easy for you in the coming weeks. I’m giving you the space to get to know more people in our community. Next Sunday, we are not worshipping here at Washington Street. (Have I made that clear yet?!) Next Sunday, we will worship at 11am just one block South at Downtown Baptist Church. Take the opportunity to get to know your neighbors. Introduce yourself, tell them about yourself, ask their name – these are brothers and

sisters in Christ, who worship every week next door to us. In two weeks, again, at 11am, we will be worshipping at Roberts Memorial UMC, just 5 blocks south on Washington Street. For almost 170 years, our Methodist churches have co-existed. It's time we get to know our neighbors. In three weeks, we will gather for worship and a picnic at Ft. Ward Park. You'll have a chance to get to know one another better.

Loving your neighbor is not an option – it's primary to our faith, and a necessity for living into God's will for humanity and creation. Practice, learn, strive, and share God's love in ways that tell the other, you are worthy – you are loved – you are important – you are one of God's beloved. Don't let fear, perceived wrongly, manifested by partisan mongering, keep you from sharing in God's great love. Shed your fear, a share in the love of your neighbor, for the glory of God. Amen.

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

<sup>ii</sup> William C. Placher. *Belief, a Theological Commentary on the Bible: Mark*. Westminster John Knox, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> David Lose. Davidlose.net. Retrieved May 31, 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> Paul L. Hammer. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

<sup>v</sup> Pathak & Runyon.