

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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Neighborhood Watch

Luke 10: 25-37

As many of you know, I do not live here in Springfield but just a ways north in the town of Lincoln. Before my husband and I moved to Lincoln three years ago I had never really lived in a neighborhood, not the kind most of us think of at least. My dad is a farmer and so I grew up on the family farm with the nearest neighbor a good ½ mile away. I went on the live in dorm room after dorm room after dorm room (!) and even in a tourist district but never, before this last move, had I understood what it meant to live in a neighborhood. To make my education on this matter complete our home does not have a back yard. We are on a corner lot with a large front porch that looks out over six or seven houses: my first neighborhood. From our porch my husband and I are pretty good at keeping up our neighborhood watch. Now before you think us too nosy, it's not just us! It is a pastime for the whole area.

From my rocker I can survey the never-ending siding project one neighbor has suffered through for the last four months. I can hear our neighbor Cathy ask her friend what she thinks of the new plants she's placed around her home. I can see the boy and girl who live catty corner as they play in a water sprinkler, the same fun they have often invited our own son to join in on. I know many of their names but, I'm a bit ashamed to admit, not all of them. Even so, over these months and years I find myself caring more and more about them. We actually have little in common with most of them and perhaps we would not even get along well if forced to live in close quarters but they are my neighbors. I would help and care for any one of them. They are not family or even necessarily friends but they are my neighbors.

Within my small town, tree laden enclave this kindness most often holds true but once I leave that spot the rest of the world does not seem set on such niceties. In fact, the world wants to tell us who our friends are and who they most certainly are not. This presidential candidate is friend; this one is foe. These people are welcome anytime but these people deserve a wall instead. This country is a worthy ally while this country is our enemy. Our each and everyday tells us that the lawyer's question in our passage today has not lost an iota of power or importance, even across 2,000 years. Jesus has just agreed with him that the way to eternal life is to love God with everything you have and to love your neighbor as yourself. Immediately the man gets down to brass tacks (lawyers haven't changed much either!): Alright then, so who is my neighbor? If I've got to love this person as I do myself then who is on the list. Family? Friends? Fellow villagers? More than these? Less?

Just like now, there were lines in the man's culture—lines of race, religion, ethnicity, gender—lines he did not want to cross. We know it from our Sunday School lessons as a child that to have the Samaritan be the hero of this story was audacious! Jews hated Samaritans. There were lines! So the man wonders, could he just be a neighbor to those in his neighborhood? Surely Jesus did not mean to

include streets and alleyways that lay across the tracks too. Could he be neighborly to the tax collector but leave off the prostitute from his list? He wants to know—and we do too: For goodness sakes, Jesus, where is the line?

As is so often the case with Jesus he ignores the man's question and answers his own. Rather than answering the question: "Who is my neighbor? Where is the line?" Jesus answers the question: "How does a neighbor behave?" I don't want you to walk today thinking that Jesus is some kind of a pie-in-the-sky cock-eyed optimist whose feet never really touch the ground. He knows each and every line for he spends his entire ministry walking along them and crossing them. He knows the lines but those boundaries don't help answer his question. For him, a neighbor is not about proximity, closeness, or commonality. A neighbor is about need and need crosses every boundary. Jesus says, You will know someone is your neighbor if you see them in need of your care. Your neighbor is anyone who has need of you.

This is not easy. This "being a neighbor" stuff is not simple nor is it even promoted in our world today. Let's be honest, over these last three years of war it has only become more and more difficult. This is not surprising. We are at war, right. We have enemies, not neighbors! Even in the midst of all this mess I actually caught a flicker of neighborliness the other day. In between reports of geo-political maneuverings and multi-lateral talks, I saw an interview with two moms in Boston. While neighbors within the same city, Susan Retik and Patti Quigley had never met until they were introduced by a mutual friend. They were introduced because they both had several unfortunate things in common. Both lost their husbands on September 11, 2001. The husbands, Dave and Patrick, were each aboard separate planes that struck the towers that morning. Both women were heavily pregnant at the time, seven and eight months along. Upon meeting, they suffered their grief together. Through the haze of those terrible days they, along with the rest of us, began to learn the details of the lead up to the attack. They learned the terrorists were trained in Afghanistan. They learned that those being trained in the Afghan camps had wanted to harm the U.S. for a long time and that they would do it again if they could.

For Patti and Susan these were the men who had killed their husbands or, as Susan tells it, "They ended our story." These people were surely their enemies; surely not people to love as they love themselves. For these two women, though, they soon learned that the Afghan people could never be their enemies. As Patti and Susan learned more and more they also learned that there are over a million widows in Afghanistan, 500,000 of them living in the city of Kabul alone. These women had lost their husbands from the many wars and conflicts the country had fought over the last several generations. When Susan and Patti learned this they knew these were not enemies but they were neighbors in need. In 2003 the women created the charity "Beyond the 11th" which supports widows who have been affected by the horrors of terrorists and war. In the last 4 years they have helped over 500 Afghan widows develop vocational skills so they can earn money to feed their children.

Proximity did not end up mattering. Getting along was not the point. The many nameless and faceless Afghan women were neither friends nor family nor even beloved strangers. They were not people who lived on their street or around the corner but for these two Boston women, they were neighbors. On that fateful September day their worlds shrunk. Widows who had once lived halfway around the world were now just down their street. Our times have changed our neighborhood as well. From my porch as I keep up our neighborhood watch I cannot see the children across the way under the sprinkler without also making out the silhouettes of the children in Malawi who will also soon

splash and enjoy water once a well is finally dug in their village, a well provided through the children of this church. How can I not also see those children knowing that the clean water provided by that well will mean 25% more of them will live next year than lived this past one? From my porch perch I cannot see my neighbor's new siding without catching a glimpse of men from Mexico who yearn for work and women from Iraq who yearn for safety. They are crossing the street right there on the corner. Whether or not I even want to see them, there they are!

My neighborhood has grown and so has yours and it can be overwhelming knowing so much, seeing so much. For Jesus seems to be saying, If you see someone in need, be their neighbor. This was difficult enough when we never traveled more than 20 miles in any direction, when television, radio, and the internet were yet to be imagined. Now what we can see is a tremendous amount. The needs we know of are vast in number. How are we to be neighbors when we see so well? How do we do this now?

The answer is: we cannot. We ourselves cannot bear the needs we meet. We ourselves cannot show mercy to our many neighbors in need. We cannot. This is why we come to this table of our Lord's and we eat his broken body and we drink his spilled blood. We do this for so many reasons but one of the most important is this: we take him in with the hope and prayer that we will take him on. Or to say it another way, we ingest the symbols of him, praying that his eyes will take over our eyes and we will be able to gaze with love upon both friend and stranger. We chew and swallow what he give us of himself so that his ears will take over our ears so we might better hear the cries of others rather than block them with our hands. We drink what he offers so that his mouth will take over our mouth and we will have the courage to speak of justice and mercy in the face of indifference. We do these things praying that his heart will, one day, take over our heart and we will feel and enact mercy upon every neighbor we meet. We cannot do it alone. Our faith and our fervent prayer is that Christ can; that Christ will. Christ will be the neighbor to the one in need. Christ will do it through us and, even, in spite of us. This is our prayer.