

Howdy Neighbor! – Reflections on the Great Commandment
(Mark 12:28-34)

This past April I went down to the 5th annual *Inhabit* conference in Seattle, with about fifteen other United Church colleagues. *Inhabit* is a conference that has become a hub for various emergent church movements, in particular an ethos to get back out into the neighborhood and the streets in which we live, and to support the struggles and needs that are found there. In this movement the church has in many ways left the building. While at the conference I heard Dave Runyon talk about a book he co-authored called *The Art of Neighboring*. In it authors Runyon and Jay Pathak, both ministers, talk about how they and a group of other clergy in Denver decided that they wanted to do something for their city, so they went and had a meeting with the mayor and asked what they could do. The mayor, not being at all ironic or mocking, said the greatest thing they could do was to help people to be better neighbors. Like so many Western cities, Denver is also home to the same loneliness, atomism, fear and busy exhaustion that is such a part of our fragmented contemporary life. Helping people to break this cycle of isolation could have profound effects on many levels of city living.

While driving home that night Runyon says he felt a tiny bit embarrassed. A bunch of ministers had basically been asked by a secular mayor to help people fulfill one half of what is known as Jesus' 'Great Commandment', that is, to love thy neighbor as yourself. We probably should've thought of that ourselves, he thought. Shaking off the hit to the pride, these ministers went on to create a movement around *The Art of Neighboring*, one that has not only had great impact in their own city, but has been now been introduced into many others. Today I bring it to our own congregation, and by extension city, and in the last section of the sermon we will talk about a specific practice we can do in the neighborhoods where we live, with the people that live closest to us. I've been slowly putting this into practice in my own life since April, and the results have been actually quite transformative. But before we get there we need to take a little journey together, first spending some time contemplating Jesus' teaching itself, and then trying to understand why this simple turn to neighboring is so important in our time.

Jesus' commandment to love thy neighbor is found in three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. In Luke he says it just before he tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable, as you'll recall, Jesus is extending neighborly love to the Samaritan's, a group disliked by his people, so he is pushing on the spheres of who we include in our circle of care. In all the gospel stories someone is testing Jesus, and they step forth to challenge the knowledge and legitimacy of this upstart Rabbi. They ask him what the most important commandment is, and Jesus begins with replying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength". This line is from Deuteronomy 6, and is known in Judaism as the *shema*, a Jewish prayer that calls one into total devotion to God, and which was supposed to be recited before going to bed at night, and upon waking up in the morning. Imagine that, saying this mantra to yourself first thing every morning. I mean, I check Facebook first thing every morning! Perhaps I have a little work to do on the priorities of my

spiritual life. Nevertheless, there is something profound about this invitation to turn our lives and hearts toward the Holy as fully as possible. It recognizes that we don't always live there, but it also knows that this is what our souls truly long for, and so calls us back toward this North Star. There's also something subversive about this prime commandment, because we are not being called to love the State with all our hearts and soul, or the free market, or the local sports team, but God, the divine, the Source of All. This kind of primary allegiance is dangerous to worldly powers, and will always continue to be so if we choose live in this way.

So in response to the challengers Jesus begins by upholding one of the core teachings of his tradition, but he then adds to this a second commandment. This comes from Leviticus 19:18, and says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". There are a couple of things to note about this line. First, in Leviticus it follows a series of prohibitions against exploiting and oppressing the poor. So there seems to be a social and political undertone in Jesus' upholding of this commandment as particularly important to his teaching. It also seems to me that there is a profoundly mystical statement being made. Many commentators over the years have considered this line to simply be a version of the Golden Rule, that is, to treat others as we would treat ourselves. But the more I have sat with this teaching the more it unspools into deeper dimensions. There's an allegiance to Other as Self that reminds me of the famous Meister Eckhart passage, where he says, "The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love." That is, the consciousness that is looking out through my eyes, is the very same consciousness that is looking out of every other set of eyes, it's the One Consciousness that is the source of All. We might only get glimpses of this metaphysical truth from time to time if we are lucky, but Jesus is beckoning us to a future where this realization comes more and more into being. There is a profound identification with the Other here, just as when Jesus says in Matthew that "when you did it for the least of these, you did it for me" (Matt. 25:40). It would seem that with this realization, everything and all is my neighbor.

Jesus' call to love God with all our heart, and to love thy neighbor as yourself, has become known as 'the Great Commandment', and its importance is attested to in other parts of the New Testament. Paul mentions it in Romans 13, and in Galatians 5:14 he says that, "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It's also attested to in John, in James and 1 John, so clearly this is central to the Christian tradition. And I think it's worth considering how this message represents the particular ethos or teaching of the Christian religion, in contrast to other religious traditions (all of which I think have something unique to offer). Simplifying greatly, we might say that the core message of Buddhism is that all life is suffering, but there is a way out of that suffering; the message of the Hindu Upanishads is that each of us has a spark of Brahman within us, which they call Atman; and the message of Taoism might be something like "there is an energy or Way that runs throughout the cosmos, and if we align ourselves with it we will find wisdom". But Jesus' core message is to love God with all your heart and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself. As we later think about putting this into practice in our lives in perhaps new ways in our neighborhoods, we might ponder what Jesus was up to with all this. What wisdom was he trying to

impart? What did he know? Why were these twin commandments so central in his eyes to bringing about the kingdom of God?

We turn now to today and the societies we find ourselves in, and I must admit that the picture isn't a pretty one. In fact I must forewarn you that we need to take a short walk through a dark valley, and that this is not a pleasant portrait that I'm about to paint. However, I promise there's a new morning on the other side of this shadowy passage, and I'm very excited about what's emerging on that horizon.

The principalities and powers of this world have been hard at work over the last half-century breaking down all bonds of solidarity and collectivity. Perhaps no single line better represents this attack on our social sense, than Margaret Thatcher's now infamous remark that "There is no such thing as society...there are individual men and women, and their are families". This was part of a wider turn in modern culture toward extreme individualism, and an everyone must get theirs ethos. We are pummeled daily with advertising telling us to Enjoy!, to consume what we desire when we desire it. During this time there has also been a full frontal assault on unions, and the elite classes have won. A recent IMF study argues that the massive rise of inequality in our time is due to the decline of unions (1). Work over this same period has become increasingly unstable, with more short-term contracts and less benefits and job security. This has led sociologists to coin a new sociological category, *the precariat*, a mix of the words precarious and proletariat; it refers to "a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs" (2). This fight for basic life and for the dwindling scraps makes social solidarity and neighborly assistance fade from the forefront of people's minds. We also live in what sociologists call a "culture of fear", stoked by constant news stories that highlight and sensationalize the worst stories they can find, making the world seem like a terrifying place out of control, when in fact the reality of the statistics around crime do not match this manufactured picture at all. This has led to an almost besieged mentality, with people afraid to let their kids stray from view, and a general fear and distrust of those we do not know. Loneliness has become an epidemic within this situation, leading to an array of illnesses not to mention addictions.

All of what I describe here makes it very difficult for the 'Great Commandment' to flourish, for us to be neighbors and build the solidarity needed to bring forth more of the kingdom of God. The rulers of this world, what the bible calls the *archontes*, have won a temporary victory over the multitude; they have succeeded in seriously fraying the social fabric of the human realm.

But there are many signs that the tables are now turning, that we are slowly approaching a new Easter Sunday. Scientists are increasingly discovering and writing about the role of *cooperation* in the success of life on earth, and human societies. Societies, tribes, cultures that are cohesive and that help and support one another are more likely to survive than those that do the opposite. Biologists are now talking about the *snuggle* for survival, rather than the *struggle* for survival. A recent book by David Loye shows that in the *Descent of Man* Darwin only used the phrase survival of the fittest twice, whereas he wrote about love 95 times, something we don't hear too much about. Darwin had a

sophisticated understanding of the role of cooperation and group altruism in evolutionary success (3). All of this breaks the hold of the modern ideology that we are all just rational agents out to satisfy our personal desires, independent of one another. It sets the grounds for a rebirth of community, and the collective, and the neighborhood, a rebirth that is already broadly underway.

I want to mention one more book, one more resource for breaking free of this prison, because I find it so interesting and important. Rebecca Solnit wrote a 2010 book called *A Paradise Built in Hell*, and in it she surveyed the aftermath of five major disasters zones in the last hundred years, including earthquakes, hurricanes and terrorist attacks. What do you think happens in these zones where the rule of law has broken down, and the normal workings of society are torn apart? Do you think its chaos, that people turn barbarian and turn on one another? The truth is exactly the opposite. Under these primal conditions an incredible sense of common purpose breaks out, and networks of mutual aid and cooperation form quickly and naturally. It seems to me, and to Solnit, that under these temporary extreme conditions our true nature as human beings, as sons and daughters of God, breaks out, and it's to love and help one another. This is who we are and this is what we want to be. Never again believe the old propaganda that left to our own devices humans would be in a war of all against all. It's not true. That has been a damaging lie that's kept us from truly evolving into the type of society and world we desire and yearn for, the new heaven and the new earth that marks the summation of the biblical vision.

So let's finish now by turning back to the *Art of Neighboring*, and the simple exercise that they propose in that book. You'll see on the front of your bulletin an image of a house surrounded by eight other homes. The first part of the goal is to get to know the names of the people that live in the eight closest homes or apartments to you. When I heard Runyon give his talk I only knew 3 names of my closest neighbors. Runyon has given many talks on his book, and when he does he always surveys the room to find out how many names people know, and 3 is the average answer. So not many people know their neighbors these days apparently.

Before I continue you might already be forming a question- isn't everyone my neighbor? Isn't this more of a metaphorical statement, then a literal one? Well, yes in one sense that is true, and everyone we meet is indeed our neighbor when it comes to the full scope of the Great Commandment. But casting the web this large can let us off the hook when it comes to the people we actually live beside, and Runyon and Pathak think in the context in which we live- some of which I've just described- that it's important to begin re-weaving the social fabric back together at the neighborhood level, with our actual neighbors. This is about community building and resilience at the most basic level. And neighborhoods where people know each other bring many benefits- they are safer and people feel safer; it breaks the loneliness and isolation so many suffer from; people have access to simple supports, like maybe having their kids watched briefly, or the old woman down the street who needs to be checked in one once and awhile, that would either cost them money or the state money if serviced from outside. So the Art of Neighboring project is about working within our actual neighborhoods, and I agree with the authors that this is especially important at this time.

So the goal is to slowly get to know the people around us, and Runyon and Pathak suggest the best way to do that is to simply introduce yourself when you see someone, and then remember their name by writing it down on your fridge magnet. When you see these folks in future weeks, try and always use their name when you say hi. Eventually a familiarity will grow, and there might come a moment where one of your neighbors needs a lift with a ladder or something, and asks if you can help. It all starts slowly like that.

One of the biggest concerns people have when they here this, is around time. We all already know so many people, many who we don't get to see enough as it is, and now I have to get to know my neighbors? I understand this concern, and before I heard Runyon's talk I felt the same way, and when my neighbors asked me to come by for a drink, or to share some food, I always turned them down. I don't anymore, and the relationships that are forming in the back yards where we live are really awesome. The energy is totally different in our immediate neighborhood these days, and it's a lot of fun. As Runyon and Pathak argue, and I would agree, it's about setting priorities to give time to this neighboring process. And especially as Christians, if we want to be disciples of Jesus and this rich religious heritage, this work is central to our spiritual life. It's not a burden or a guilt thing, but the humble work of loving God with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength, and trying to love our neighbor as yourself. So as a congregation, I propose that for those who feel compelled to, we take on this project together. We can take a fridge magnets with the Art of Neighboring image home, and slowly do the work of getting to know those around us, and we can let each other know how it's going over the months and years to come. The book also talks about eventually having block parties too, and my neighbors and I are now in the organizing stages for one this August. People in other cities tell some great stories of what's happened for them, and I look forward to hearing what comes out of our own forays into the art of neighboring.

I want to close with one final point, and an image that came to me yesterday. One of the reasons why I think this neighboring project is so important, and why I chose to preach this sermon today, is that I believe we are heading for a turbulent civilizational transition. The world-system we live in is showing all kinds of signs of decay and breakdown; I believe we live in a world-historical moment where one form of social and economic organization is going to slowly give way to another. But if we go into that maelstrom with the same fragmented, atomized, and frayed social fabric we have now, there is every chance we will experience something none of us want to, which is societal breakdown and collapse. That's often how these transitions happen. But that's not always the case. I believe that if we build solidarity at the local level, if we rejuvenate our capacity for cooperation and the collective, we can weather that transition gracefully, perhaps even joyfully.

I was out biking yesterday trying to find the way to finish this sermon, and I was thinking about this final point around transition, when an image came to me. Have you ever seen footage of those big wave surfers, where they're surfing this incredibly large wave, and slowly but surely it starts to curl over them, completely covering them so you can't see

them anymore. You think for sure they've been crushed by this wave, smashed somewhere under water- and then miraculously, impossibly, they glide through the mist and out the other side into the open air again. That big wave is our current civilization, and it's threatening to come down on top of us. But if we can find love and connectivity at the basic level, we will be that surfer. And friends that train that comes out of that tunnel, that train is bound for glory. May it be so. Amen.

Endnotes

(1) <http://www.pressprogress.ca/en/post/rise-income-inequality-linked-decline-unions-new-imf-study>

(2) http://www.policy-network.net/pno_detail.aspx?ID=4004&title=+The+Precariat+-+The+new+dangerous+class

(3) <http://brucesanguin.com/getting-darwin-wrong-badly-wrong/>