Art of Neighboring, Week 1 – "Who is my neighbor?"
Luke 10:25-37

This morning we begin a 4 week series on the Art of Neighboring. Why this series and why now? you may be wondering. Many, if not most folks have forgotten the importance of kindness and community. Instead of moderating our speech and our actions, instead of practicing kindness, it has become normative to spew anger and all manner of vitriol everywhere from social media platforms, to road rage, to television and printed news. (PAUSE) Now more than ever, we, the church, have the opportunity to model for the world a better way – to show others through our words and actions what it means to obey the greatest commandments to love God and to love our neighbors.

So, over the next four weeks, we are going to look intentionally at the art of neighboring. Today we'll talk about who is our neighbor – and we'll all leave with some homework to do. Next week we'll talking about making time for our neighbors. In week three we'll talk

about what happens when we fear our neighbors, and we'll end our series with looking at our motivations for loving our neighbors.

As we heard in the Scripture lesson this morning, Jesus tells the lawyer that if he will love God with all of his heart, soul and strength and love his neighbor as himself, he will live. But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asks, "and who is my neighbor?" "Who exactly am I supposed to love and what does that mean?" In response, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. (PAUSE) We all know it well, don't we?

A man is travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho - a dangerous stretch of road, when he is attacked by a gang of robbers, who strip him, beat him, and leave him for dead. Two supposedly upstanding members of the community come upon the man – but instead of stopping to help, they pass by on the other side. But then a Samaritan comes upon the man and he is moved with compassion. Acting as a loving neighbor, he stops and uses his own supplies to bandage the man's wounds. But that's just the beginning, isn't it? He loads the man on his

donkey and brings him to a local inn where he continues to provide care. The next day, apparently needing to continue his own journey, the Samaritan gives the innkeeper money and implores him, “Take care of him, and when I come back, I will repay you – whatever more you spend.”

It’s extraordinary, isn’t it? How many of us, driving through a rough part of town, would stop to help someone lying injured on the side of the road? How many of us would get out our first aid kits, do some basic first aid, load the man in the back of our car, drive him to the Hilton Garden inn or to Henrico Doctor’s hospital and then offer to continue to pay for his care?

Now, we do live in a very different day and time, and there are good reasons to be cautious. But even so, a few of us might call 9-1-1, but if we’re honest, a good many more of us would choose not to get involved. But friends, this level of care certainly seems to be what Jesus commands. (PAUSE) Ouch, I’m feeling the pinch already, are you?

Over time, the church has taken this story to mean that our neighbor is anyone, anywhere, who may be in need. And today when we see news live from all over the world, a neighbor in need might live an ocean or a continent away. It some ways, that's a very good thing as we give money, and go and serve those in great need across the globe. But in some ways, as we talked about last week, this global view of neighbor can make it easier for us to be overwhelmed and become more detached from what is happening right around us.

About 15 years ago, Pastor Dave Runyon, one of the authors of the book, The Art of Neighboring, gathered a group of 20 pastors in the Denver area to think, dream and pray about how their churches might join forces to serve their community, and they invited the local mayor to join them. They asked the mayor one simple question, "How can we as churches best work together to serve our city?"

The ensuing discussion revealed the usual list of social problems – at risk kids, hunger and homelessness,

substance abuse, loneliness and isolation, senior adults living alone with no one to check on them.

Then the mayor said something that inspired the group of pastors. He said, **"The majority of the 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 good neighbors."** Often, he said, people identify a problem and they come to local officials looking for the government to begin a program to address the issue. But, the mayor said, relationships are often much more effective than programs because they are organic and ongoing. When neighbors are in relationship with each other, the elderly shut-in gets checked on, the at-risk kid gets mentored by a dad down the block, and so on.

But that's hard isn't it. Why? First everyone is so busy – we'll talk more about that next week. But the way we live has changed as well. When I was growing up, we lived on a cul-de-sac. We played ball in the top of the court, we played hide and seek across the neighborhood in the evenings. When the weather was warm, the adults

would congregate in their folding webbed lawn chairs in front yards to visit while the kids played.

Now, most of our kids are scheduled with activities several nights a week, and few of us feel safe just sending our kids or grandkids out to play. And when it's warm enough to sit outside, where do you find us? On our back decks behind our privacy fences where we only see a neighbor if we've invited someone over.

It's challenging to connect these days isn't it? But how might our world be different if we all began to take Jesus' command to love our **actual** neighbors more seriously? That's what the authors of this book are urging Christians to do – in fact the subtitle of their work is "Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door."

On the insert in your bulletin today, you'll find a chart that looks like this. The book authors have used it in hundreds of churches with thousands of people over the last twelve years. Here is how the exercise goes. Imagine that the house in the middle of the grid is your home, and that the eight other squares represent the

houses that are closest to you. Now, you probably don't live in a neighborhood with a neat grid like this – you may live on a five-care lot or in an apartment, but think about the 8 neighbors that are closest to you in whatever configuration that means.

When you get home today, here are your homework instructions. In each block, under letter "a" write the names of the people who live in the house or apartment represented by the box. Under letter "b" write down some information about each person – things that you can't see by standing in the driveway or walking by. So not they are Va Tech fans because they have a Hokie bumper sticker. Write things like, he is from Pennsylvania, she is a teacher, likes to read, babysits their grand-children, etc. Finally, in block "c" write down in-depth information you may know. What are their career plans, what are their spiritual beliefs or practices ? What things have you learned from meaningful interactions with them?

You probably already have an idea already of how you'll be able to do filling in the blocks. Are you curious

about how others did? Of the folks that have done this exercise and reported back, only about 10 percent could fill in the names of all 8 of their neighbors in line a. 10%. Only about 3% can fill out line “b” for each home, and less than 1 percent can fill out line “c”.

On a very practical level, what does this tell us about our neighboring? It told me some things. We’ve lived on our street for over 30 years. For a number of our immediate neighbors, I can fill in a, b, and c – and we do a good job caring for each other. But we have some newer neighbors that I have not taken the time to meet. They live in rental units so I justify myself into thinking that they may not be here long enough to develop relationships with. This exercise let me know I have some work to do.

I’m the block captain for our block, and we used to host block parties a couple of times a year. We hadn’t started that back up since COVID . I started reading the book for this series back before Christmas two years ago, and God nudged me, “It’s time to have a neighborhood gathering.” So that night, I asked Jay, “how would you

like to have a holiday drop-in Friday night?" He was game, so I printed out fliers and we walked them around the street. Two days later, as the party approached, I was thinking about the things I needed to do to get ready. I told Jay that I was regretting trying to pull it together so quickly. He said, "We have been needing to do this, and it will all be fine." He was right. The night of the party it rained – hard at times, but the neighbors came anyway. The newest renters didn't attend, we still need to reach out to them, and others were out of town. But over a dozen of us spent a great evening telling stories and enjoying the goodies everyone brought to share. The next day, one of the newer owners on our street came by with a thank you note. It read, Dear Tracy and Jay, we want to thank you for the wonderful evening with our neighbors; what a great group of people! Thanks for sharing your home, good food, and yourselves. We really appreciate being part of this neighborhood." He offered to help host when we get together again. For me, it was lesson learned, or confirmed. (PAUSE) But you know what, we haven't hosted another gathering since then!

So how might God be calling you to meet your neighbors and begin to love them? Does an elderly neighbor need some yard work or basic repair work done, or just someone to share a cup of coffee with? Does the single parent need some help repairing the family car or occasional babysitting? Does the dog next door need walked or loved on when the family is away all day? As we get to know the people around us, I imagine the answer will become clearer.

As we close today, I leave you with the words of Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen. He wrote, “In a world so torn apart by rivalry, anger, and hatred, we have the privileged vocation to be living signs of a love that can bridge all divisions and heal all hounds. May it be so for each of us and all of us. And all God’s people said, Amen.