

## Neighbors: 1. Who is my neighbor

Luke 10:25-29

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Pastor Steve Richards and

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### Pastor Richards:

“It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor?” If you watch PBS, those are the opening words to Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood. For my children, it was Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, and most days they would watch and often I would watch with them as Fred Rogers invited us into his home, introduced us to people in his neighborhood, and asked us to be his neighbors too. And we wanted to be his neighbors, which is why we gathered in front of the television most days.

For the next three weeks, I want to focus on this one word – neighbor. What does it mean to be a neighbor? And who is my neighbor? That’s the question in Luke 10. That’s where we see what neighborly love looks like. Jesus is traveling from the region of Galilee to Jerusalem, teaching and healing and performing miracles. In Luke 10, he is confronted by an attorney, an expert in the Law of Moses. He approaches Jesus with a question. It’s not that the attorney doesn’t know the answer, he is the expert. He already knows the answer, but he has “an axe to grind.” He wants to discredit Jesus – to trap him into saying something contrary to what is found in the Law of Moses. “Jesus may be a rabbi, but I’m an attorney. I’m the expert when it comes to the Law.” And he asks: **“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

Jesus hears the question and also the tone of this question, and he knows the man is an expert in the Law. He knows his trying to trip him up, but Jesus patiently listens to the prosecuting attorney and then responds with a question of his own. Jesus pushes back. That’s Jesus’ way. He doesn’t provide quick answers even when the questions are easy. He likes to ask questions because if we will struggle long enough with the questions, we will find the answers. And so, Jesus asks: **“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”** In other words, what’s it say in the Laws? And the attorney does not hesitate. He has the answer. He can’t help it. He repeats verbatim the exact words that are found in the Law: **“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;’ and ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”** And Jesus looks at him – and I love this – Jesus says, “You are correct!” Of course he is. He’s the expert. It’s like a game of cat and mouse – only they both are in total agreement. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He’s pushing. What he says next is not to be missed. Jesus doesn’t say, “Mr Expert in the Law, you got the answer right – Peter, tell him what he just won!” Jesus doesn’t say, “Right answer. You are the smartest, the best legal expert in the Law of Moses.” Jesus does not applaud him for the right answer. Jesus pushes the attorney beyond what he knows and says, **“Do this and you will live.”**

You want eternal life? It’s not just knowing. It’s not just believing. It’s not just having the right answer. It’s doing. And when you do, you will live. A life of faith is doing what we say. It’s taking words and putting flesh on them. And that’s the secret to eternal life. The attorney is caught off guard. He asked what he thought was an easy answer – one that would trip up Jesus and now he’s in the hot seat. And Luke tells us: **He wanted to justify himself...** He has suddenly been drawn into this conversation and he wants to justify himself – to get out of this spot – to get free. He wants to know what to do. Who do I need to love and not love? **...Who is my neighbor?**

And once again, Jesus does not answer the question but launches into a story that we know as the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man travels this hazardous road between Jerusalem and Jericho when he is attacked by robbers and left for dead. A religious leader walks by but doesn't stop to help. A second religious leader walks by but he doesn't stop to help. These were the good guys. But then a third person, a Samaritan stops. And immediately, the image the attorney has is this guy will finish off what the robbers didn't complete. Think of the person who is your political opposite or moral opposite, the last person on earth you would want to get close to. That's the Samaritan. And he stops – and surprise, surprise, he doesn't just help, he goes beyond what is expected. He doesn't just get the injured man to the emergency room, he pays the guy's hospital bill! Who does that? A neighbor does. A neighbor is the equivalent of mercy and generosity and compassion. Do this and you will live.

This story points us to the heart of the Christian faith. It's easy to love the people we like, the people who like us, the people we know, but what about the people we don't know. Five years ago, we commissioned Carol as a missionary from this church to go to Kenya and she found herself in a place where she did not know anyone. Carol...

#### **Carol Erickson:**

Have you ever been the new kid in town? Take a moment to remember what that feels like. Whether you had the experience as an adult or a child, it can be difficult, but more than hard, it is lonely. Now picture with me Africa, and Kenya and finally, Nanyuki. Everything is different. The colors are bright, the music is loud, people are everywhere and the culture and often the language is completely unknown. You are watching people all around you except they have different way of approaching the world, not better, not worse, just different. They have different rules about standing in line and would never dream of burdening you and saying they weren't doing fine if you asked.

That was me the first week of August in 2012. Kathy Welliver and I, along with Susan and Antony, had just moved in to what is now the Imara Home. We didn't know anyone, we didn't know where to get supplies and we didn't know the number of a cab to call to get to town. There was no google or even a phone book. What did happen was our neighbor was good enough to tell us how dangerous it would be for us to stay overnight there without a guard. He painted stories of horror, but he was trying to help. He wanted us safe. WHAT AM I DOING HERE?! I remember that first night, Kathy and I slept with knives and machetes to back up our prayers. It was sometime during the night. when I quietly said, Kathy, you awake?

That's when Kathy said to me, well, you know that God is all you need when God is all you have. I will never forget. As you can probably tell, we were not killed in the night, in fact, we were just fine but we did go out and hire a guard service first thing. Indeed, God had proven himself faithful yet again. While I believe with my whole heart God is all we need and our first responsibility is to keep our eyes focused on Jesus, I believe there is more. Not because God isn't enough but because God is abundant and relational. He gave us himself, but he also gave us each other. Isn't that just like God? He always loves to add a little icing to our cake. He has given us the gift of community. God didn't expect us to go at life alone. He know we need an occasional shoulder to cry on or hand to hold, yet often we pass up the opportunity because we are busy or are private or frankly just can't be bothered. By doing this, we miss the fullness of what God offers. Love God, Love your neighbor --- AND you will live.

I am living proof of this need for community. In the past I was the one who showed up for others, but the tables were turned. Through this God taught me an important lesson. I now see differently the importance of what having community means. This loving your neighbor deal doesn't have to be complicated. I think it boils down to just showing up. It isn't always easy, but the return is amazing. Those first few weeks I was a stranger in a foreign land. Though I know I will never fully understand, I hope I have greater appreciation for what it means to be a minority or an immigrant. When I was clueless, (I couldn't think of a better word because it really just boils down to clueless), the community surrounded me (available) and today I am blessed to call many of them friends.

One example of this community (and my cluelessness) is Nicholas. He is a tour driver and had been an acquaintance for several years. At the time, he was the only driver we trusted so we hired him to take us from Nairobi to Nanyuki that first day. After getting us safely to Nanyuki, he headed home to Nairobi. At the end of the week, we had begun to get settled and our stove was delivered. I do not know about you, but I had no idea how to install a half propane half-electric stove in a Kenyan kitchen. A neighbor kindly called an electrician who showed up a couple hours later. He came with a plastic bag with a screwdriver and breath that warned us that maybe he wasn't coming straight from home. Oh, did I mention, he didn't speak English. Kathy and I stood and watched with horror as he began stripping wires. We tried with hand signals to let him know we didn't want major wires cut. I thought, there goes the 1000 dollar stove we just bought. We had no idea what to do. We were completely helpless. Then we hear someone yell, "Hello!" and walk in the front door. It Was NICHOLAS. He had just happened to have clients that he brought to Nanyuki so he dropped them off and thought he would stop by. You have no idea how glad I was to see him. He came just at the right time, without knowing our desperate need. He was able to talk with the electrician and straighten it all out. I am happy to say we are still cooking on that well used stove 5 years later. What Nicholas thought was a simple hello, met a desperate need. It wasn't fancy or complicated, He simply showed up. In many ways that is what loving your neighbor is all about – about showing up.

Later that same year, our home was attacked during the night. We had a guard at the time, but he was ambushed and beaten. I was sitting at my desk working that night when the guard began to scream the blood chilling Kikuyu call for help. We immediately made sure the house was secured and then we prayed. We called the community patrol and they said they would come as soon as they could, but for us that didn't seem good enough. Even though we knew that our guard was hurt, we couldn't chance opening the doors just in case it was a trap. We had no idea if the robbers were still around. That is when our community showed up. Men from all around us had come running with sticks, rocks and machetes. They didn't know us, but that day they lived out love your neighbor as yourself. They showed up, and I am so glad they did.

I could go on and on with stories that show the importance of wonderful neighbors in the life of Imara. When our car broke down, when I found out I had tumor, when we were trying to figure out how to get our car through a raging river. People who have shown up to help us understand the Kenyan Gov't offices and help us navigate a sea of rules and regulations I am still trying to understand. Friends who have helped time and time again to support, encourage pray and guide as I did my best to figure out how to start an organization in Kenya.

Now please fast forward 5 years. That brings us to today. Did you know it is almost 5 years to the day that I left on for Kenya? Imara continues to be surrounded by amazing neighbors. When I was recently in Kenya I was able to take part in the ceremonial ground breaking for our new building. It was an amazing day filled with speeches, prayer, celebration and of course food. Our neighbors showed up and expressed their support of our project and their desire to

work with us as we grow the Imara Village. We are embarking on a new adventure as we establish the Imara Village. In the last five years many many other have been our support and help in a time of need. We are no longer strangers in a foreign land, don't get me wrong, there is still plenty to learn, but I hope we have become wazungu friends. With our new campus, we will have new opportunities. I have been blessed by those around me during this journey called Imara but it also beg the question: How might God be calling Imara to love our new neighbors? Maybe more importantly, How might God be calling me to reach out with the love of Christ to those around me. Love God, Love your neighbor and you will LIVE

As we celebrate the Imara's five year birthday, we are also celebrating all of you. You showed up for Imara in amazing ways over the past five years. You prayed, you supported, you encouraged...YOU SHOWED UP. Who in your life needs you to show up? It doesn't need to be fancy or complicated. Take a moment to think about who God might be putting on your heart. Pay extra attention this week for opportunities to show up. Keep it simple. Like mother Teresa said, "So small things with great love." Don't worry that you aren't good at it because I know that you ARE. You have proved it by blessing Imara again and again. Love God, Love your Neighbor and you will live.  
See you at the Birthday Party!

### **Pastor Richards:**

Who is your neighbor? Sometimes, we make this story of the Good Samaritan more difficult than it really is. I think Jesus is saying we are to be neighbors to the person next door. Those are the people we pass everyday. We don't stop but we know they are there. We ride the elevator with them. We pass them when we walk the dog. We see them push their garbage bins to the street. They walk down the hallway in our building. We pass them daily, and maybe Jesus is saying the road to eternal life leads right through our neighborhoods. Will we love the people next door? Last summer, I picked up a copy of the book *The Art of Neighboring*. The authors suggest if we are who we say we are the people in our neighborhood would know us and know us to be the most loving, the most compassionate people in the neighborhood. And in their book, they provided this grid. Do we know our neighbors? The center square is you and your household. And they asked 3 questions: 1. What are the names of the 8 neighbors who live closest to you. Can you list their names? 2. What's happening in their lives. This is something more than they live in a white house or drive a red car. What's happening in their lives? Did they just move in? Or do they have a high school graduate? A new job, a new baby, just retired, lost a job, hospitalized. What's happening in their lives? 3. Go deeper. What are their hopes and dreams? If you knew the 8 people who live around you, what would your card look like? And what the authors of the book discovered after leading this exercise in churches across the country is that only 10% of people could fill in the names of all 8 households. Only 3% could fill out the second line for every home, and less than 1% could fill in number 3.

I wonder if Jesus might say, Do this and you will live. To be honest with you, my card is mostly empty. I've lived in my neighborhood for 17 years and as I went through this card, there's a lot I don't know about the 8 people who live closest to me. Maybe you are better at this than I am, but what if we would take the card home. Fill in what we can. Put it on our refrigerator – and work at completing the card. Let's be neighbors. Maybe it's time to bake some chocolate chip cookies and walk down the street or down the hall and say, "I've lived here for 17 years and my name is Steve and I'm embarrassed that I don't know you." I remember Bill Hybels describing how he and his neighbor across the street would wheel their garbage bins to the curb every week and wave to each other. They did this for years until one day, Bill decided to cross the street and introduce himself.

What if God has placed us where we are to be neighbors – to be the Good Samaritans – the ones who are ready to be the neighbors that we want our neighbors to be?

### **Grow, Pray, Study for Week of May 21, 2017**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord Jesus, sometimes we think love is weak, unrealistic and sentimental. Keep showing us its true power, its amazing tensile strength that bonds people together. Amen.

#### **Monday, May 22**

##### **Scripture: Matthew 22:35-40**

One of them, a legal expert, tested him. "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" He replied, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

**Observation:** When asked what was the greatest commandment (which was a lively debate among Jewish rabbis of his day), Jesus chose not one but two. The first was from Deuteronomy 6:4: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind." The second came from Leviticus 19:18: "You must love your neighbor as you love yourself." Jesus said all other commands have ultimate value only as they lead us to more fully love God and neighbor.

**Application:** Long before many of our modern psychological insights developed, Leviticus called God's people to "love your neighbor as yourself." That command implicitly asked: how well can you love your neighbor if you don't have healthy ways of loving and caring for yourself? How well have you learned to nurture and value yourself, outwardly and, even more importantly, inwardly?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, help me to love God with all that is in me—knowing that still falls short of how God loves me. Help me to love my neighbor in the profound ways you call me to. Amen.

#### **Tuesday, May 23**

##### **Scripture: Luke 10:25-32**

A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to gain eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?" He responded, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." But the legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He encountered thieves, who stripped him naked, beat him up, and left him near death. Now it just so happened that a priest was also going down the same road. When he saw the injured man, he crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way. Likewise, a Levite came by that spot, saw the injured man, and crossed over to the other side of the road and went on his way."

**Observation:** The story Jesus told in answer to the lawyer's question is familiar. When we read it, we tend to think of it as a message about responding to people in crisis. But Jesus told the

parable to answer a question about being a neighbor. His main focus was on how neighborly or non-neighborly the people who passed on the road were, not on the specific reasons why the man was beside the road.

**Application:** Verse 29 said, "The legal expert wanted to prove that he was right, so he said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" Are there people in your neighborhood, your community or your world whom you'd rather not think of as your "neighbor"? Have you ever found one or more of the limits you wanted to put on your definition of "neighbor" changing after you got to know the person or persons?

**Prayer:** Dear Jesus, let your story remind me that it's not enough to just recite the right words. Grow in me a heart that notices others, and that actively cares about their needs. Amen.

### **Wednesday, May 24**

#### **Scripture: Luke 10:33-37**

A Samaritan, who was on a journey, came to where the man was. But when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. The Samaritan went to him and bandaged his wounds, tending them with oil and wine. Then he placed the wounded man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took two full days' worth of wages and gave them to the innkeeper. He said, 'Take care of him, and when I return, I will pay you back for any additional costs.' What do you think? Which one of these three was a neighbor to the man who encountered thieves?" Then the legal expert said, "The one who demonstrated mercy toward him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

**Observation:** In the first part of his story, Jesus portrayed two presumably pious men who showed no real interest in acting like a neighbor. Then he made the contrast as strong as possible. He pictured a Samaritan (a group Israelites then regarded in about the same light as many of them regard Palestinians today) who acted with extravagant compassion and caring.

**Application:** We usually apply this parable to the need for us to help others, a big part of Jesus' teaching. But in this story, an Israelite accepted a Samaritan's help, though Israelites usually shunned such help. How open are you to accepting help from others when you need it? Have you ever seen a situation in which asking for or accepting help opened the door to a neighborly relationship?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I don't mind being a good neighbor if it's easy and inexpensive, in time and certainly in money. Help me incorporate the idea of sacrifice into my thinking about what it might mean to be a true neighbor. Amen.

### **Thursday, May 25**

#### **Scripture: Jeremiah 29:4-7**

The LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel, proclaims to all the exiles I have carried off from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and settle down; cultivate gardens and eat what they produce. Get married and have children; then help your sons find wives and your daughters find husbands in order that they too may have children. Increase in number there so that you don't dwindle away. Promote the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because your future depends on its welfare.

**Observation:** Babylon took many Hebrews into exile in 597 B.C., and then destroyed Jerusalem in a final conquest in 586 B.C. In that interim, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to the Hebrews who had already been taken to Babylon. It included today's reading. He offered no false comfort, but told them they should settle down and prepare for a long period of exile. But even as captives in that foreign land, he urged them to live as good neighbors.

**Application:** Jeremiah told the Israelites (on God's behalf): "When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me." (Jeremiah 29:13) In what ways was the quality of their connection with God essential to them being able to live as good neighbors even when in exile? What do you believe it would mean for you to seek God "with all your heart," and how might that shape your ways of relating to others?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, teach me patience and endurance when life is hard. Plant in me the hunger and thirst to seek you with all my heart, and to let you shape every aspect of the way I live my life. Amen.

## **Friday, May 26**

### **Scripture: Romans 13:8-10; 14:10-13**

Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: You must love your neighbor as yourself. Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

But why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on your brother or sister? We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God. Because it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God. So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. So stop judging each other. Instead, this is what you should decide: never put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of your brother or sister.

**Observation:** Paul sent this letter to Roman house churches. In Romans 14-15, we see that these churches differed. Some were mainly Jewish; others mostly Gentile. Their customs and standards of "righteousness" varied. It was easy for them to tear each other down. Paul said God's kingdom calls us to a standard of relating that goes beyond particular rules or laws. "Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor" was a big challenge to people at odds with one another. It was (and is) vital, because "Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law."

**Application:** Paul spoke to disagreements over relatively minor issues (that seemed major to those who felt strongly about them). How do you think some of them might have reacted to the statement that "Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law"? Do you know anyone who is genuinely loving, but in some parts of life acts in ways that you think miss the mark? Do you believe Paul was right, or was he too soft on "law breakers"?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, lift my gaze above particular laws or rules. Amaze me with the splendor of your love, and teach me all of the ways in which living out that love truly fulfills your law. Amen.

**Saturday, May 27**

**Scripture: Colossians 3:12-14; Ephesians 2:19-22**

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

**Observation:** Both Colossians and Ephesians said that God calls us to be people who live in community with others. This doesn't come about because of contracts or policies, though a certain number of those will be necessary. Rather it grows organically as we commit ourselves to living "as God's household." "Love, which is the perfect bond of unity," becomes the force that binds us together and builds us "into a place where God lives through the Spirit."

**Application:** About 100 A.D., a Roman official named Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan about the people called "Christians." His letter called Christianity a crime, and asked how best to stamp it out. Pliny and Trajan, like most Roman officials, saw Christians as a threat to the empire. We have to wonder why any ruler would see people who lived the way these verses describe as a threat. What parts of this passage are most true of your life as a follower of Christ? What aspects of Christian character described here would have the biggest positive impact on the way(s) you relate to your neighbors?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, sometimes I think love is weak, unrealistic, and sentimental. Keep showing me its true power, its amazing tensile strength that bonds people together. Amen.