

Loving Our Neighbor

Our Family Values:

John 13:34-35, 1 John 3:18

August 2, 2009

Wesley J. Gabel

Bethany Church

Sunday School starts on August 30th. If you haven't had the privilege to lead a Sunday School class, you've missed a great deal of fun. I've nearly collapsed to the floor laughing over some of the antics of some middle school youth in class. The younger kids are just as funny. One day a Sunday School teacher said that God loves everybody. A seven-year-old girl scrunched up her nose and said, "He couldn't have met my brother."

It is easy to have good feelings about a brother or sister who treats you well. It is easy to value, appreciate and act kindly toward those who value, appreciate and act kindly toward you. However, when God gave the command to love our neighbor in Leviticus 19, he wasn't speaking about loving the ideal neighbors. The Law of Moses says:

Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:17-18, NIV)

Don't hate your brother in your heart? Rebuke your neighbor frankly? Don't seek revenge? Don't bear a grudge? That sounds like trouble. I don't think we are talking about loving an ideal neighbor. On the contrary, God commands us to love people who offend us deeply, individuals we could hate in our heart. He calls us to love individuals who place us in jeopardy, who, if we don't frankly rebuke, could make us guilty of complicity. We are to love individuals who put us in an awkward, uncomfortable spot. We are to love as ourselves, people we could seek revenge on, persons who without our forgiveness, we would begrudge.

Last Wednesday night the Bethany family had over 30 people watch the Minnesota Twins defeat the Chicago White Sox. It was a wonderful night until I arrived back at our parking ramp and found I had three flat tires. Of the hundreds of cars there, only two others sat in the ramp with their tires slashed. After the police report, the tow truck, the shuttle to the airport and the car rental, I (and the party I transported) returned home for three hours of sleep. Since I've opted with car insurance to carry high limits, high deductible and pay low premiums, I incurred a substantial financial loss. Nevertheless, it is not that difficult for me to love these neighbors. I don't live with them every day. I'm not annoyed constantly or offended continually. I can trust God to do something redemptive, pray for them, forgive and move on.

It is far more difficult to love a neighbor who troubles you every day. If you live each day with awkward tension, if daily you see the annoyance, if others know your neighbor and tempt you with truthful gossip and a slanderous exaggeration here or there, it is much more difficult for you to love your neighbor than for me to love my vandals.

Now, how do you actually love these neighbors? How do you love yourself? Don't you do things for your own benefit and pleasure? Don't you defend, excuse or ask forgiveness when people comment on your faults? Don't you desire and request patience and mercy? Don't you act both in word and deed to care for and value who you are?

Jesus took our call to love our neighbor further. After washing the dusty feet of his disciples, he said:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34-35, NIV)

Jesus' command to love is not new, but his instruction on how to love is entirely new. No longer is the standard or touchstone how we treat ourselves. Some of us loathe ourselves.

Some of us are impatient, uncharitable and speak slanderously about ourselves. Some of us have been mistreated and we continue the mistreatment toward ourselves. After all, what we give is limited to what we have already received.

No, the new standard for love is Jesus' love of us. Does he slander us? No, he is our advocate. Does he condemn us? No, he laid down his life for our forgiveness. He made his life agenda our redemption and restoration as God's children. He understood that he was sent to us for our benefit. He accepted his relationship with humanity as divinely given; and therefore, he suffered from us patiently, witnessed to us honestly and served us sacrificially in love.

Bethany belongs to Jesus. He owns us. He is our Lord. He is our Vision. He is our counselor and commander. We belong to Jesus. If you are one of us, then you belong to Jesus too. Together *we are on his mission*. Together *we are his mission* in this world. At the core of what we do and say is this value:

Loving our Neighbor: *We value all relationships as God-given and our call to love one another.*

Art Marben was an old-school-kind-of high school principal. He was retired by the time I moved into his community. The stories of him were legendary. He was one of the most respected and beloved persons in the community. He was also one of my church leaders. He had a paddle at the high school and was not afraid to use it. Those who experienced his discipline felt loved. When I discussed his relationship with students, he always talked of their positive qualities and amazing potential. I never heard him once degrade or focus on the negative. He did not continece destructive gossip. He told me, "I never felt I had the right to control another person's opinion." He went on to say that when he incurred enemies, "I try to kill them with kindness." For me, Art not only served as an example of honesty and genuine love. He also

gave me ideas of how to truly value those who disagree with or oppose my leadership. I learned first to embrace their presence as a divinely-given relationship for blessing; and second, not insist they agree with me. Third, like Art I was called to invest in them with every word and work that God gives me wisdom to do.

Do you remember Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan? The one fulfilling the will of God was not the priest or Levite on religious business. It was the person with corrupt doctrine, the disreputable Samaritan, who stopped and cared for the wounded soul in his path. Jesus does exactly that. Jesus was not too self-absorbed to notice the wounded around him. He went out of his way to care for those who it is easier to ignore. Loving and serving wounded, broken people is his life agenda. What is your life about? Are you led by Jesus' Spirit? Are you Jesus' apprentice? Do you ignore or initiate contact with those about you?

I've talked with pastors of growing churches who've initiated, but then later invited disruptive parishioners to leave. I'm not condemning them. I don't know their circumstance or path; however, in recent years I've been more apt to invite those souls to lunch. On a number of occasions, there have been breakthroughs because I initiated contact, listened and talked honestly and caringly. Sometimes, the souls leave.

This next week, with National Night Out, you have an opportunity to initiate contact with your neighbors. Some of them may bother you. Have you shared a meal together? Are you their advocate when gossip is spread about them? Do you truly love them as Christ loves you? I've fallen short. The Lord Jesus, however, paid the price of our sins; and as we repent and trust him, he is raising us to a life fueled by his love and directed by his Spirit. Let's ask the Lord to heal our hearts, and make us healers that value every relationship as divinely given and as an opportunity to express Christ's redeeming love.