

AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

“And who is my neighbor?”

I looked up the word “neighbor” in a dictionary. Here’s the definition I found. A neighbor is “a person living near or next door to you.” That’s the classic, traditional, pretty simple meaning of that word.

A neighbor is someone who lives close by, and you greet them cheerfully and ask how they’re doing when you’re getting your mail from the mailbox and they’re out walking their dog. “Howdy neighbor! It’s good to see you!”

You run over to a neighbor’s place across the street or a couple of houses down from yours to borrow a cup of sugar, or to ask if you can use their electric drill for a project you’re doing, or if they would give you a jump start when the battery in your car is dead.

If your neighbor is elderly, maybe you take your snowblower over and clear their driveway after a heavy snowfall, or rake the leaves in their yard in the fall. Because that’s what neighbors do, right? They watch out for each other.

And, if you’ve known them long enough and have come to genuinely trust the neighbors living near to you, you might even dare to ask if they would watch your children for a little while so you can go to a doctor’s appointment. And you feel comfortable leaving the kids in their care.

The people we call “neighbors” are probably very likeable. If they weren’t, would we even think of them as a neighbor? Our neighbors—at least the ones we feel close to—probably have a lot of the same interests we have, and share some of the same political views we hold. They may make about the same amount of money we make and drive the same class of automobile we drive. Maybe they even worship in the same church we worship in. In short, part of our definition of what a neighbor is might be, a neighbor is a reflection of us. When we look at them, we see someone very much like ourselves staring back. Isn’t that right?

But a neighbor of ours doesn’t necessarily have to live across the street or a few houses down from us. Even if they’re from away, as long as we’re comfortable with them or like them, we will accept them as a neighbor of ours.

When I first came to this church to be your pastor back in 2008, it really

intrigued me that you called your coffee time after worship “Neighboring.” That’s actually a wonderfully Christian concept. I think Jesus would very much approve of the name, because it strongly implies that anyone who comes downstairs after church for fellowship and refreshments is our neighbor. It’s an invitation to whoever wants to do so to join us down in the vestry, whether they’re a friend or stranger, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, agnostic or atheist, a Scarborough resident, an Out-of-Stater, or an immigrant who has just arrived in our country and can barely speak our language, because they’re all our neighbors. They’re welcome here. And we have a Christ-ordained responsibility to love them, to care for them, and to not pass by them if they’re lying in a ditch on the side of the road.

“And who is my neighbor?” a lawyer asked Jesus. To that question, Jesus responded in so many words, “Anybody and everybody—particularly those who are in urgent need of help.

I think about the asylum seekers that are so desperately trying to come to this country, and the politicians and citizens who are desperately trying to keep them out. I think about where those asylum seekers have come from and what they have been through—the terror, violence and despair they have experienced and still are experiencing. They have, symbolically or literally, been beaten and robbed, violated and left half-dead on the side of the road.

And yet they’re being vilified and rejected by some people for simply trying to escape alive and find a safe harbor to raise their families and live their lives. They’re often maligned as though they’re subhuman. As though they’re animals. And some of the cruel, unchristian things people are saying about them really upset me. They’re going to bring disease here with them. They’re going to suck up our tax dollars. They’re going to take all our jobs. If they don’t want to be separated from their children, then they shouldn’t come here.

In response to such comments I have to ask, as a Christian and a pastor: Could those asylum seekers be the very ones Christ is talking about in his parable about a man who was beaten and robbed and left half-dead? Could they be our neighbor? And are we passing them by as they lay broken and bleeding on the side of the road?

Every Christian should take that question to Jesus in prayer, and really listen to what our Lord has to say in response. Or do we even have to ask him?

Let me say at this point, for the sake of clarity, that I’m preaching from a moral, humanitarian perspective. A theological perspective. A “What would Jesus do?” “What would Jesus think of us?” “What would Jesus say to us as his followers?” perspective.

I acknowledge that the ethical, humanitarian, Christian perspective I'm preaching may challenge and go against the perspectives of some people. And if it does, I guess that's a risk I must take. Because my responsibility as a Christian pastor and teacher is to preach the message of Christ I believe the Holy Spirit has helped me to discern and wants me to proclaim, and sometimes that message is difficult and painful for the world to hear. As my homiletics professor at Bangor Seminary used to say, "A preacher's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted."

"And who is my neighbor?" A man named Stan Dale wanted to find out. Stan teaches a seminar on love and relationships called *Sex, love and Intimacy*. Some years ago, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, he took a group of twenty-nine people over there for two weeks, to try to learn what the people of the Soviet Union were really like. He wrote about an experience he had.

While walking through a park in the industrial city of Kharkov, I spotted an old Russian veteran of World War II. Such veterans are easily identified by the medals and ribbons they still proudly wear on their shirts and jackets. This isn't an act of egotism. It's their country's way of honoring those who helped save Russia, even though twenty million Russians were killed by the Nazis.

I went up to this old man sitting with his wife and said, "*Droozhba, emir*" (friendship and peace). The man, looking at me as if in disbelief, took one of the buttons we had made for the trip that said "Friendship" in Russian and showed a map of the United States and the U.S.S.R. being held by loving hands, and he asked me, "Americanski?"

"*Da, Americanski. Droozhba, emir.*"

He clasped both my hands as if we were long lost brothers and repeated again, "*Americanski!*" This time there was recognition and love in his statement. For the next few minutes he and his wife spoke in Russian as though I understood every word, and I spoke in English as though I knew he would understand. You know what? Neither one of us understood a single word, but we surely understood each other. We hugged and laughed and cried, all the while saying, "*Droozhba, emir, Americanski!*" I love you; I am proud to be in your country. We do not want war. I love you!"

After about five minutes we said goodbye, and the seven of us in our little group walked on. About fifteen minutes later, after having walked a considerable distance, this same old veteran caught up with us. He came over to me, took off his Order of Lenin medal (probably his most prized possession), and pinned it to my jacket. He then kissed me on the lips and gave me one of the most loving

hugs I have ever received. Then we both cried, looked into each other's eyes for the longest time, and said, "Dossvedanya" ("goodbye").

"And who is your neighbor?" Jesus is asking us, right now.

Maybe today, in these divisive, angry and dangerous times, our neighbor is, and must be, for our own survival, the Russians. The North Koreans. The Iranians. The Mexicans. Undocumented immigrants. Asylum seekers.

And maybe it's also the person who lives on our block that we don't get along with. The co-worker who disses us behind our back. The person sitting in the pew next to who you don't know and are hesitant to introduce yourself to.

"And who is my neighbor?"

That's a good question; an important question; a question followers of Jesus are called to ask themselves and answer every day. Here's my response.

If a despised, abhorrent Samaritan can come to the aid of a hated, loathed Jew and consider him a neighbor, then the answer Jesus is surely looking for from us is, "Everyone is our neighbor. Everyone." Amen.