

As I've shared previously, I grew up 2 hours due east of Coronado, in El Centro, California. More specifically, most of my childhood was lived at 2096 S. 11th St. [Slide] Our home was on a corner lot near a cul-de-sac where I had good group of playmates. Directly across the street was the Galindo family with 3 daughters and 1 son. Mark Galindo was a good friend even into community college years! Next to the Galindo's was the Gaede family. I think they had 1 older son and 3 daughters. I spent many of my youngest years in the Gaede Nursery School which they ran out of their home. Next to the Gaede's was the Escalera family with 2 boys, Steve and Mike, who were about the same age as my brother and me.

At the very end of the cul-de-sac was a house which abutted the Interstate. People moved into and out of that house fairly quickly because of freeway noise, so I don't remember the names of the children who lived there. Next door was the Moore's. Their son was an only child and I always felt a bit envious of all the cool stuff he had. (When I became a Deputy Probation Officer, I ended up visiting with him in jail where I learned that his childhood was not as idyllic as I'd imagined!) Next to the Moore's was the Harden family. It seemed that Bobby Harden and I could find any reason to end up in a scrape, but we quit having fights after his dad was terribly injured in a crop duster crash. I don't recall the names of the people in the house next to the Harden's. I do recall two daughters' and that the dad had a tattoo he regretted. Next door, and caddy corner from us, were the Taylors. They had several children but just one, Eric, was close in age to the other boys on the cul-de-sac.

All of us attended the Desert Gardens elementary school. After school, we'd gather -- along with other boys who lived nearby -- for baseball, or hide-n-go-seek, or football in what we dubbed our "11th Street Stadium." During the summer, we'd spend lots of time swimming, but I notice that the pool in our backyard is gone, as is the pool that had been in the Moore's backyard...

...

Welcome to a new 3-week series on the theme: "Would You Be a Neighbor?" The impetus for this series is a book; *The Art of Neighboring* by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, which points out that when Jesus was asked to sum up the most important commandment of Scripture, he said: "Love God with everything you've got and love your neighbor

as yourself." (Remember, these words are quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures. The NT did not exist. Specifically, the Great Commandment is drawn from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, two books of the Bible most of us probably haven't spent much time reading!) In *The Art of Neighboring*, Pathak and Runyon invite us to consider this question: "What if Jesus actually meant what he said? That we should love our *actual* neighbors. You know, the people who live right next door."

...

What strikes me about this question -- about loving our actual next-door neighbors -- is how novel a concept it introduces into my thinking about the Great Commandment! But that too is strange, isn't it? That this commandment, which Jesus identifies as the most important, might include the call to love our ACTUAL next-door neighbors AND that this would be a novel -- 'out of the box' -- sort of concept? Let me ask, when you heard the reading from, specifically the call to love our neighbor, did you picture your actual next-door neighbors?

Pathak and Runyon write: "If we are not careful, we can become numb to the power of [Jesus'] Great Commandment. [We can begin to define our neighbors metaphorically], in the broadest of terms: [Everybody is our neighbor]. They're the people across town, the people who are helped by the organizations that receive our donations, the people whom the government helps... The problem is, however, that when we insist we're neighbors with everybody, we often end up being [actual] neighbors with nobody."

To put in another way, if you were charged with the crime of loving 4 or 5 or 6 of the neighbors who live closest to your home, would there be enough evidence to convict?

...

Let's look at our gospel reading. Luke 10:25 tells us, "Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" As Jesus so often does, he responds back with a question, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" This legal expert is happy to answer, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." Now, don't miss that it is not Jesus who said this! It's the lawyer. (In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus -- not the lawyer -- speaks the Great Commandment, which makes me wonder if it was

Luke or Matthew who got the story a little wrong?) Regardless, in Luke's version, Jesus affirms the lawyer, saying: "Do this, and you will live."

Here's where things get a bit tricky. Most interpreters say that the lawyer then asks a follow up question of Jesus seeking a loophole: "And who is my neighbor?" But I suspect the question is genuine. [As you heard] the 'love your neighbor' part of the Great Commandment is from Leviticus 19:15-18. And if we read carefully, these verses use several words to describe who 'a neighbor' would include: the poor, the great, your kin, your people, and your neighbor. From Leviticus it seems that a neighbor is somehow part of your family, tribe, or community. So the lawyer who quotes this text to Jesus may really want to live a scripturally obedient life, and so he asks how Jesus defines 'neighbor'?

Jesus again answers indirectly, telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Following the parable, and when asked by Jesus, the Lawyer concludes that it is the Samaritan who was neighbor to the man beaten at the side of the road because he showed the man mercy. When Jesus says again, in Luke 10:37, "Go and do likewise" the fact is that Jesus has never answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus turns the question around and invites the lawyer 'to go and do'; to be a neighbor. Because observant Jews despised Samaritans, we correctly conclude that Jesus' teaching expands the Levitical parameters of who 'a neighbor' includes. Jesus' parable asks, "Will you be a neighbor" to the one you come across who needs your mercy and tenderness, even if despise them?

...
Let me say 3 things about this. First, when Jesus radically expands the definition of neighbor, he is not setting aside the other definitions of neighbor that the lawyer knew from Leviticus. We're correct that, in telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus was expanding the scope of who is included as a neighbor. Our mistake is failing to see that our immediate and actual neighbors are among those we are also called to love.

...
Second, Jesus did not call us to just know our neighbors, but to love our neighbors. Nonetheless, many of us do not actually know our neighbors and so this is our first step: to make the effort to get to know our neighbors!

In your bulletin is a handout that looks like a tic-tac-toe sheet. In the middle is your house,

surrounded by 8 empty boxes. I want to invite you to think about, and then write down, the names of your 8 closest neighbors in the part of the box that has the letter 'a'. (Now this is your homework, but I suspect most of us will not be able to fill in all 8 boxes.) Where there is the letter 'b', write down some facts you know about your neighbors from actually talking to them, like where they work or where they grew up... (Confession: I've actually spoken directly with just 3 of my neighbors since I moved here a year ago in July, so I have some work to do!) Where there is the letter 'c', write down some in depth information you might like to know about your neighbor. Again, the point of this exercise is that if you don't actually know your neighbors, you won't be able to 'love' them. (Over the course of this 3-week series, I hope we'll all be able to fill out more of the card!)

...
Third, I want to invite you to imagine the potential impact of coming to know, and then loving, our actual neighbors...

Last week, in Alan Kinzel's message, he shared the illustration about a monk who, as a young man, set about to change the world. When he discovered he could not change the world, the monk decided he might at least change his nation for the better. When his efforts proved futile, he began to focus on changing his town. When he discovered he could not change his town, he set his sights on changing his family. Finally, realizing he could not change his own family, he decided to focus all his efforts on changing himself. As he began to change himself for the better, he saw how this impacted his family, which spilled out in a way that began to bless his town. The monk then realized that the way to change the nation and world, begins with a willingness to first change ourselves. And I'd argue that one profound change Jesus invites all of us to make, is to be a loving neighbor.

Over the next two Sundays, we'll explore some of how we begin to change ourselves, but of this I am sure; if we heed Jesus, and begin to change ourselves by practicing love for our actual neighbors, our families will be blessed, our church will be blessed, our town will be blessed, our nation will be blessed, and I have to believe that our world will be changed for the better. I hope you agree that this would be a good thing; but it starts with each of us deciding to follow Jesus by loving our neighbors who live right next door. Amen.