

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Neighbor: Sneetches”

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We’re in the second half of our series “Neighbor,” during which we’ve been talking about what it means to be and to love one’s neighbor, as an answer to that all-too-present question of, “How do we live as people of faith in a world that seems to do nothing but divide and alienate?” The first few weeks since the new year, we spent a bit of time in one of Jesus’s parables, called the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And in that time, we learned not just the calling to help those who are, in a sense, bleeding and left for dead on the side of the road, but that being a neighbor, as the Samaritan was to that man, maybe something challenging or even offensive to us. But that’s what it means to follow this calling from the Lord to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. It’s not meant to be easy. It’s a different way.

We were blessed last week by how our youth led us in worship and in particular in how our senior speakers preached, yes preached, about what they saw it to mean to love your neighbor. And this week, we take a turn to the more practical. As in, we’ve been spending a good bit of time exploring just what a neighbor was or who we should consider our neighbor in light of what Jesus taught in that parable. But now we’re asking, well, so what? Consider someone else your neighbor, and therefore as someone we are called to love, but so what? How? What does that look like?

We come to those questions incidentally on a Sunday on which a number of our neighbor churches are joining in what’s being called “Love Your Neighbor” Sunday. You may have seen some of the signs in front of other churches in the area, and we’re particularly grateful for the leadership of Troy Forrester, head pastor at First United Methodist, and more broadly for that congregation’s leadership in joining churches together to proclaim a message of love for our community.

So as we join with our friends, we come to a passage in Scripture in Paul’s letter to the Romans, one that tackles exactly the kind of questions we’re asking: just how then do we live? Let’s go to God’s Word together.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:1-21

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If at any point through this entire series, you've caught yourself thinking, "You know preacher, all the talk about just who is our neighbor and the Good Samaritan, that was good for us to hear, but could you just throw one right down the middle of the plate and tell us how we should try to live as Christians in the world?," then I've got a simple answer for you. Just read Romans 12 over and over again, and do everything that's listed there. "[Don't] think of yourself more highly than you ought to think," in v. 3. "Let love be genuine," v. 9. "Bless those who persecute you," in v. 14. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all," in v. 17. Those are just a few of them. But you manage to get a good grip on living according to all the things that Paul talks about here, then darn it you're well on your way to living as a good neighbor, to living faith out in public. What Paul is talking about here applies not just to how we as Christians live in community with each other—that's a big part of vv. 3 through 13—but also how we as Christians live in a world that may not necessarily share the same worldview, lifestyle, or values—that's a big part of vv. 14 through 21.

If you find yourself wondering how you should interact with that person in your workplace or in your classroom or right here in church or living right next door, especially if and when that person is just kind of insufferable or even hostile, again I say, just read Romans 12 over and over again, and that'll point you in the right direction. You might be thinking at this point, "Well if it was that straightforward, you could've just said so at the beginning of this whole thing and saved us all a bit of time." Well, that's just not how sermons work, is it?

But if you really wanted to save some time, there are a few places in particular you might consider focusing on. The first is a couple of verses toward the end of the passage, both of which are saying something similar. In fact it's one of the verses that Catherine Lackey, one of our senior speakers highlighted last week. V. 16, which says, "Live in harmony with one another." And then a little later in v. 18: "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

Did you hear what they're saying? They don't directly invoke the word of neighbor, but it's all about living with each other, whether it be among those who share your faith, which is kind of where v. 16 is pointing, "Live in harmony with one another," or among those who don't, which is kind of where v. 18 is going, as a catch-all, "So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." With all. And not just with those who are inclined to return the courtesy either: "So far as it depends on you," which seems to say, you should seek to live peaceably with all, even and especially when others don't want to live peaceably with you. "So far as it depends on you."

That gets pretty challenging when you start thinking about it, but it's powerful. I don't know about you, but I find it easy and rewarding to live peaceably with those who also live peaceably. But then if someone isn't inclined to do that, if I find that someone's being rude or unreasonable, oh that's when the barbs come out.

Just the other day, Frances took Jack to a park on a playdate. And Jack, as toddlers do, runs off, so Frances goes to chase him down. Unbeknownst to her, as she's going after him, she drops her car keys. I know, potentially problematic. Well, a little while later, a couple who were taking a walk, come up to the group, and ask, "Does anyone drive a Volkswagen?" Frances says, "Actually I do." Then the lady says, "Are these your car keys?" Frances recognizes them and says, "Oh my goodness. I had no idea. Thank you so much." This is the point in the story when you might think, "Oh this is very nice. A Good Samaritan, so to speak, found some car keys and sought out their owner. What a neighborly thing to do." And it *was* a nice thing to do.

But then the lady keeps going. "You need to *be aware* of what's going on. We've been sounding the car alarm for the past ten minutes, thinking someone would come to check it out. Do you not know what your own car alarm sounds like? You need to *be more aware*." And Frances kept saying, "I know ma'am. Thank you so much for bringing these to me." And the lady keeps on going, "You need to *be aware*," and on and on like that for a few more rounds, to the point that you would almost rather the car been stolen.

Finally the lady leaves, and Frances and Jack come home. She tells me, and then asks, "What would you have said?" I'm thinking, "I don't think we really need to know the answer to that." Of course I would have been courteous and grateful to someone who had found some dropped car keys and went out of her way to find their owner, but would I have stayed that way if that same person turned a good deed into leverage for a chance to lecture someone, "Be aware. Be aware," and on and on like that? Ehh, well a milder version, depending on what kind of mood I was in, probably would have sounded like, "Thank you again. Heard you the first three times. Now move along."

Now some of you might be thinking, "Yeah, in that situation, that's fair. If someone's being rude, a curt, even snarky reply is justified." And in general, I'd guess many would think the same thing. But would that be following Paul's words, "So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all"? Probably not. What Paul's saying would look different.

And that brings us to the second part of this passage that I'd invite you to focus on. It's at the beginning, the first two verses: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

So much we could talk about there. First, and this is getting into why Paul is offering such a practical list of how we should go about life, he says "by the mercies of God, [present] your bodies as a living sacrifice." Another way of saying that is, in response to the immeasurable grace of God in Christ Jesus, which is what Paul's been talking about all up to this point in Romans, offer your very selves, your actions, your agency, up to God as worship. And that's important for us to remember. Everything here that we're talking about. It's not just a to-do list or an instruction manual. It's all because of what Christ has done, "by the mercies of God."

But second, he says "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." "Do not be conformed." The world looks one way, in other words, but those who follow Jesus should look different. Now you might think, well conformity sure sounds like an easy way to live peaceably. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, right? If you look and act like everyone else does, then you'll get along peaceably, right?

Well I don't know. Some of you may have recognized the odd word that's the title of this sermon. "Sneetches." If you hadn't, well "The Sneetches" is an old story by Dr. Seuss. And it's all about conformity and

the problems it can stir, especially things like prejudice, discrimination. The Sneetches were a group of creatures. They were yellow, with long skinny necks, and a big round body. But they were separated into two groups, the “plainbellied” sneetches, that is, those with just a regular belly with nothing on it, and the “starbellied” sneetches, who had a desirable green star on their bellies. “Stars upon thars” as the story puts it. And that green star was a status symbol. The starbellied sneetches used it to exclude the plainbellied sneetches, and you could tell really quickly who was who, because they either had stars upon thars, or they didn’t.

Then along comes a bit of a huckster named Mr. McBean. Sylvester McMonkey McBean, to be exact. And Mr. McBean goes to the plainbellied sneetches and says, “I have this machine, a Green Star-On Machine, and for three dollars, it’ll put a star on your belly.” So they all jump at the chance. And now all the sneetches are starbellied sneetches. Now, however, the original starbellied sneetches didn’t much care for all the plainbellied sneetches now having stars upon thars, not to mention that they couldn’t tell who was who anymore. So Mr. McBean goes to them and says, “I have this other machine, a Star-Off Machine, and for three dollars, it’ll remove the star from your belly.” And they all jump at the chance.

You can kind of guess where it goes after that. One group getting or removing a star in response to the other, until by the end all the sneetches are fluidly running back and forth from the Star-On Machine and the Star-Off Machine, until by the end, nobody knows who is who. Some have stars upon thars. Others have two or three stars. Still others have no stars. And Mr. McBean heads off with all the money. And the whole purpose is to point out the ridiculousness of things like prejudice and discrimination. But there’s also this theme of the dangers of conformity. If we can draw a moral lesson from Dr. Seuss and the sneetches, does that desire for conformity bring about peace and harmony among the sneetches? No.

It’s tempting, to be sure. Just try to be like everyone else. Be the way the world looks. Operate the way the world operates. Go along to get along. But does that bring peace, does that bring harmony? If you want to know the answer just look at whether the world is at peace, whether the world is in harmony. Obviously not. In fact it’s kind of the opposite. As Mary Lyndley Gray, another one of our senior speakers, shared with us last week, “There’s a lot happening in the world that makes it hard to love your neighbor.” All that means, if we’re going to, as Paul is appealing to us, live peaceably with all, if we’re going to love our neighbor as ourselves, it means counterintuitively, it will look different. It will focus on different things. As Will Hairrell, the third senior speaker last week, shared, it “doesn’t just focus on earthly goals,” but heavenly goals. If your hope is to love your neighbor as yourself, it means that a life lived in that way will not conform to the ways of the world, and you will look different. You may even look strange. But it’ll be different in the best kind of way.

What would it look like, if the church across the globe, if Christians around the world, were known near and far for how abnormally patient and generous, and hospitable they were? In a harsh, even evil world, something good, a shining light. No doubt we can think of Christians who are patient or generous or hospitable, but can we say that’s how Christians worldwide are viewed? What would it look like if all across our city, churches were known universally as a place where people live in harmony with one another, as opposed to the conflict and division we see everywhere else? No doubt we can think of some Christians who are harmonious, but can we say that’s how Christians are viewed throughout our city? What would it look like if on your street or in your building, the way your neighbors knew you was, “Wow, they are so kind, peaceful,” so much so that your neighbors thought it was kind of weird? It’d look different, to be sure. But it also might make folks wonder, well what’s the reason for it? Maybe there’s something to this Jesus after all.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.