

## Loving Neighbors (Part Two)

### *Love your neighbor as yourself*

Reflection 19 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

Jesus’ Story of the Good Samaritan ends with his asking, “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man?” The lawyer replies, “The one who helped him.” He still can’t say, “The Samaritan!” And Jesus says, “Go and do likewise,” because that’s what it comes down to: Go, and do likewise. Discussion’s over; do something.

But the question is not who your neighbor is; it’s to whom you’re a neighbor. Whom are you a neighbor to? Whom do you take care of? Whom do you look out for? It’s not who is a friend to you; it’s to whom are you a friend? It’s not who speaks to you, it’s to whom do you speak? It’s not who reaches out to you; it’s to whom do you reach out?

And Jesus is really saying: Be a neighbor to everyone, regardless of how different they may be from you, or even if you just came across them along the way. It’s all about smashing boundaries. In fact, this whole section of Luke from which this story comes is about overcoming discrimination and prejudice.

So, be a neighbor to everyone, but especially to the person who needs help right in front of you: the unpopular kid at school, the disturbed older woman who doesn’t fit in, the motorist on the side of the road with a flat tire, the people with the junky yard, the teenager in a crisis pregnancy, the man who gets upset every time the ball lands in his back yard, the guy mowing your lawn who’s escaped from warlords in Central America, the Syrian refugee families churches in our towns have sponsored – whoever needs help.

This, this, is what’s central to living a life of love. And it’s not rocket science; it’s nothing more than doing to others what you would have them do to you – if you were in their circumstances what you’d hope someone, someone, please, someone, would do for you.

So let’s take it one step further. Caroline Simon, in her excellent book *The Disciplined Heart* says that to love anyone – and certainly our neighbor – is to see them as God sees them, not as our fears tell us to see them, not as dog whistle politics tells us to see them, not as our nationalist sense of self-preservation tells us to see them, but to see them as they are. It could be summed up this way. All people are people. Everybody’s a somebody.

The author William Kennedy illustrates this wonderfully in his Pulitzer prize-winning novel *Ironweed*, the story of Francis Phelan, a self-described “bum” in Albany. One day Francis and his friend Rudy come across someone laying prostrate in a vacant lot beside the mission they frequented.

“Hey,” Rudy said, “That’s Sandra.”

“She dead?”

“She’s just drunk,” Rudy said, standing up. “She can’t hold it no more. She falls over. She’ll freeze there and the dogs will come along and . . . .”

“If she’s drunk she can’t go inside the mission,” Francis said.

“That’s right,” said Rudy, “She comes in drunk, he kicks her right out. He hates drunks more’n he hates us.”

“She a bum or just a heavy drunk?”

“She’s a bum.”

“She looks like a bum.”

“She’s been a bum all her life.”

“No, “ said Francis, “Nobody’s a bum all their life. She hada been somethin’ once.”

“She was a whore before she was a bum.”

“And what about before she was a whore?”

“I don’t know,” Rudy said, “ . . . Before that I guess she was just a little kid.”

“Then that’s somethin’. A little kid’s somethin’ that ain’t a bum or a whore.” (pp. 29-30)

To love your neighbor is to see them as God sees them. In the end, it’s to respect them. To respect another person is to take whatever time it takes to see their original goodness. Respect literally means “to look again,” to take a second look, to not settle for first impressions or casually dismiss people from our lives.

It’s to see them as God sees them, whoever they are, whatever they’ve done, even however responsible they are for their own mess, whoever they are, Hispanic, Asian, black or white, rich or poor, old or young, gay or straight, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, bum on the streets or the guy in the corner office. You are a neighbor to them. You are a Christian. If they need help, give it. Go to them, bandage their wounds, pour on oil and wine, get them to a safe place and take care of them without any thought of reward, even if you lose a few days’ pay. It’s a critical part of learning to live a life of love. It goes directly to our credibility as Christians. See them as they can be. See them in their God-given destiny. Respect them. Take a second look. Love them as yourself. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Accept them. Realize that they are likely driven by the same hopes and dreams you are. Likely they’re more afraid of you than you have any reason to be afraid of them. Open your heart and your lives to them. Whatever other commandments there may be are summed up in this one rule: Love your neighbor as yourself.

As followers of Jesus we are called to a lifetime of being a neighbor, seeing people in their neediness, bandaging their wounds, taking them to a safe place and caring for them, however different they may be from you. Personally it takes more than I've naturally got. Left to my own resources, I'm back to: Who is my neighbor? Who is a real neighbor to me? But with Jesus, I can do better. I can be reborn. Over and over I can be reborn. I can start over. I can rediscover the Spirit of God inside myself and in my neighbor. And with Jesus, we can make this a better world for everyone. All people are people.

– Dale Pauls