

Like a Good Neighbor-Knowing and Loving your Neighborhood

We've all heard the State Farm Insurance jingle, and if you haven't before, now you have. "Like a Good Neighbor, State Farm is There." Fun fact, that jingle was written by Barry Manilow back in 1971. So for 44 years, State Farm has been encouraging and reminding us that the mark of a good neighbor is presence; when a need arises, a good neighbor will be there.

Several months back, a large tree that sat on the edge of our neighbors property, split down the middle, with half of the tree falling beside our driveway, miraculously not hitting any of our vehicles, or the electric lines, or any people or animals. I was at work during this time when I received a text from my brother-in-law volunteering to help clean up; this was before I knew anything had happened. When I came home to see the damage, the neighbor whose tree it was came over and talked to me about how they would be getting a tree company to come in and cut the rest of it down. I also found out from my roommate that sometime shortly after it fell Tim Siegenthaler came trucking down the street to see what had happened and how he might help. I'm fairly certain Sam Park also volunteered his chainsaw and time. And for the next week after the tree had been cut down, friends and family of our neighbors were out in their yard helping to move the wood. To me, all of these actions demonstrated State Farm's neighbor qualification, presence.

I wonder, if a "good neighbor" is someone who comes running in a time of need, would our culture consider the Church a "good neighbor?" Would West Liberty consider Oak Grove to be a "good neighbor?"

In our Scripture today, Jesus has several things to say about the church acting as a good neighbor to Jerusalem and to the world. Specifically, he uses the images of SALT and LIGHT to explain what it would mean for Disciples of Christ to KNOW and LOVE their neighborhood. Like SALT, the church needs to be a necessary, functional, and involved part of its neighborhood. And like LIGHT, the church needs to be a visible, attractive presence of GOOD NEWS to the community. This morning, we are going to explore these images of SALT and LIGHT and discover ways in which the church acting as SALT and LIGHT can know and love the neighborhood with the love of Jesus.

What is Jesus' View of the Church in the Neighborhood? The church is to function like Salt and Light, two important, distinct and understandable elements in their society.

1) Salt:

Firstly, it's interesting that Jesus uses the element of SALT. Jesus was really a very down-to-earth savior; though His teachings may not have always been easily and immediately understood, he always told stories about common elements of everyday life. Salt was an extremely important part of a New Testament person's life. It served several purposes to the people in Scripture, as it does today. Firstly, it was used to flavor foods. In nearly all cooking, salt is a key flavoring ingredient. Without it, food may end up tasting dull or bland. Secondly, it could be used as a preservative. Remember that up until recently, people didn't have refrigerators or ways to preserve their food using cold. So in order to keep meat and other products they had to use salt to preserve it for eating later. Now, we don't really know

which purpose of salt that Matthew may have been referring to, if any specific purpose at all, though I do find the uses of salt for flavoring and preservation to be really intriguing. What we do know is that useful salt was indispensable to Jewish people, and useless salt, such as that found in the Dead Sea, was better thrown away. In that same way then, the people following after Jesus needed to be key players in the lives of the people surrounding them.

So what does it mean for salt to be useful?

***Illustration: Have a salt shaker sitting next to a bowl of food (something that needs salt). Say something like “one of salt’s purposes is to flavor food.” Salt is a key ingredient in adding bold flavors to any dish. Now, if I were to have the salt shaker placed outside of the bowl of food, is it serving its purpose? No! It needs to be a part of the food in order to add that much needed flavor.” Now, place the salt shaker in the bowl of food, with the salt still inside. “Okay, now the salt is in the food, it should taste better right? I mean, it’s certainly better than it was, at least now the salt is with the food. But it’s still not doing its job; in order for the salt to actually flavor anything, it needs to mingle with the food, to stick to the food, to become a part of the food.” Now shake the salt out into the bowl. “Now, finally, the salt is serving its purpose. Now it’s flavoring the food because it is becoming fully joined to the food.”

If the church is to be like salt, it cannot sit outside of the neighborhood. It needs to join with the neighborhood. And it cannot join in the neighborhood but still put up barriers between itself and the people. If we truly hope to bring the Gospel to the neighborhood around us, we need to join with the people, become part of the community, know and understand it, be transformed by it and at the same time transform it.

2) Light:

The second element Jesus talks about is LIGHT, another common, easily understood part of all life. He tells the disciples that they are to be like a city on a hill, whose light could be seen from all directions as a guide. He sees the disciples’ light as being something that illuminates and brings glory to God. Additionally, he warns against hiding that light by bringing up the obvious, why would someone hide a lamp under a basket?

So what does it mean for the church to be visible in the neighborhood? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in “The Cost of Discipleship” that the church is “a visible community, their discipleship visible in action which lifts them out of the world.” In **1 Peter 2:9**, Peter also affirms that we have been called out into from the world, not just to be distinct, but to be guides to the unbelieving world back into relationship with God. ^a *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”*

Transition: So, if we as a church are called to be SALT and LIGHT to our neighborhood, what are some steps that we can take in order become a more present, involved, and visible part of our community? How can we learn to KNOW and LOVE our neighborhood in order to function as SALT and LIGHT?

HOW TO BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR:

1) Notice Your Neighbors:

How well do we know our neighbors? Are there some we know better than others? Are there some that we overlook? Are their needs in our neighborhood that we are blind to? In **Luke 6:19-26**, Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man, who every day, passed by a poor neighbor living on his doorstep, and in the end received his reward for ignoring his neighbor.

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’”

If we hope to be SALT and LIGHT to our neighborhood, we need to first get to know our neighborhood. That means we need to learn to notice and recognize our neighbors; Unlike the rich man, we need to see the need that sits right on our doorstep. Sometimes this might be a financial need; it may also be an emotional need or a physical need. And it most definitely is always a spiritual need. Do we notice our neighbors?

2) Tear Down the Fences:

Secondly, in order to KNOW and LOVE our neighbors we need to tear down the fences that separate us. Think about this: what are the purposes of fences: to define boundaries, to keep things in, to keep things out, to beautify, to fortify and to protect. I spent some time this week looking through a Smithsonian exhibit online about the history of fences. What I found was pretty interesting. Fences are a very European and Western phenomena, used originally to keep livestock from eating the different vegetables being grown. When Europeans came to America, fences were used to claim territory that wasn’t originally theirs and mark boundaries. (Show Slide of paintings of Jamestown before and after settlers came. Notice the difference between the communities when the fences are in place. Creates boundaries, sense of division and looks imposing.)

Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about fences in his “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” saying:

“The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said "This is mine," and found people naïve enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody.”

When we use fences to claim territory and keep others out, we send a definite message that ours is a place of privacy and exclusivity. So, what kind of fence do we place between our church and the neighborhood?

-Chainlink; we can see what’s going on outside of us, but it’s not very inviting for others to come inside

-Privacy: you can only enter if you adhere to the laws of the owner of the house; it is meant for others not to see us or us to see them; we want our own space, free from the sights, sounds, and interactions with the neighborhood around us.

-Do our fences have a padlock, or a keycode? Are they lined with barbed wire?

If we hope to be SALT and LIGHT to the neighborhood, to be involved and be a visible presence by knowing and loving our neighbors, we need to tear down our fences.

3) Transform Your Neighborhood and Be Transformed by Your Neighborhood:

The early church struggled immensely with its identity. Since Christianity was originally a religion of Jews, disciples struggled with whether or not a person needed to adhere to Jewish laws in order to be a part of the community. Peter especially struggled with violating cultural laws in order to bring others to Jesus. In **Acts 10:9-16**, Peter has a dream that God placed before him a sheet of animals to kill and eat, but it was filled with animals considered ritually unclean according to Jewish law and therefore unfit for Peter to eat. After refusing to eat these animals, the voice from heaven said to Peter, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

God was trying to prove to Peter a great lesson, that His Kingdom and Gospel weren’t meant for the Jews alone, but for all people. And that to expect Gentiles to perform specifically Jewish practices in order to receive the Gospel was wrong. Peter was creating false barriers between the Kingdom of God and non-Jewish people; he wanted to be like salt to the world, but he didn’t want to let the world transform the way he understood how Jesus’ Gospel would best be given away. So in this way, he was like a salt shaker placed in food, not really good for anyone. He was keeping up his fences. But God called for transformation.

Even Jesus was transformed by His neighborhood. Remember, Jesus is God come down from heaven and taking on human skin. He therefore took on a human identity, while remaining fully God. God, in His infinite wisdom, decided that the best way to relate to us and for us to relate to Him was if He came in our form and experienced life as we experience it. God’s essential nature wasn’t changed in this, but He became a part of a culture and society in order to share His Kingdom news.

One of the reasons that missions failed in many African and Asian countries in the late 19th, early 20th centuries is because when missionaries would take the gospel to other cultures, rather than work at adapting to their culture or being transformed by their neighborhoods, they would basically teach the people about a white, European influenced God, which spoke very little to the people of different cultures. Why would an African villager need to worship in style and respect a way of life that was not their own? The Gospel is not tied to our specific culture, rather it is meant to infiltrate all cultures.

In the same way, if we come into our neighborhoods expecting to change them without ourselves being transformed, we will be no good to anyone. If we hope to simply copy and paste our Mennonite Christian heritage on top of a people not connected with the historical Mennonite church or the church period, then we are setting the Gospel through Oak Grove up for failure. If we expect people to act like Christians before they come into our church and accept Jesus, then we are acting as elitist as Peter and the Pharisees. It is arrogant to go into any place and assume that you have everything to give and nothing to receive. There are numerous examples in Scripture of untraditional, non-Jewish and non-Christian people teaching truths about God; a primary example would be The Good Samaritan, in which the hero is not only not a Jewish religious person but was part of the people most despised by the Jews.

This isn't to say that we are allowing the culture to change the gospel, but rather that in becoming a part of our neighborhoods, we let them become a part of us. Their concerns become our concerns. Their joys become our joys. Their hopes become our hopes. We learn the rhythms of the neighborhood and how to celebrate the seasons with the neighborhood. We get to know what works and what doesn't work, and we share the Gospel through the ways needed. But we can't know any of this if we stay outside of the neighborhood.

When Jesus spoke of the "City on the Hill," it would've invoked the heavenly city of Zion spoken about in Isaiah 2:1-3, in which all nations would come to Zion and bow before God. In this way, Jews did not expect that they had to bring the gospel to others. But if you consider the City on the Hill working with Jesus' great commission in Matthew 28, Christians are to go out and share the gospel with others. We as individuals and a church are a City on a Hill, but we need to bring that light out rather than expect others to approach us. In going out and transforming neighborhoods, we like Jesus are also allowing our hearts and methods to be transformed for the best good of the neighborhood.