



August 25, 2019

Sermon Series: The Art of Neighboring

From Stranger to Acquaintance to Friend
Pastor Vern Christopherson

John 6:1-14 NRSV

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" ¹⁰Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

We are proud owners of a puppy at our home in Minneapolis. His name is Harry. Harry came into our lives in late March, and things haven't been the same since. Let me just say, if you want to get to know your neighbors, a puppy can be a great place to start, especially one who plays in the front yard.

My daughter Ingrid gets all the credit for raising Harry. She writes, "Almost everyone is a friend in Harry's eyes. Neighbors walking by with their dogs, his favorite postal carrier Rose, students heading to the nearby high school...all are met with enthusiasm. Harry runs to the fence to say hello and pauses for anyone who will pet him. He loves meeting new people, and on walks he insists on going in the direction of those people and especially their dogs."



There are many neighbors that Ingrid and Harry have been meeting since March: Katie who teaches education studies online for the University of Wisconsin. John and Anne who enjoy having a cup of coffee in the morning on their porch in their bathrobes. Anne is a writer and John is her editor. Susan who's on oxygen and can't get out much for walks. She was the first neighbor who invited Ingrid and Harry into her yard. She wanted Harry and her dog, Ruby, to get to know each other. Susan is in relatively poor health, but she recently took in her teenaged granddaughter because - as she put it - "I needed her more than her parents did."

Of course, if you aren't ready for a dog at your house, you could always try about having a baby. I've heard that works pretty well too in getting to know your neighbors. Or maybe you could just go for a long walk and say hello, or bake some cookies for the new folks down the block. One of the goals in this sermon series is follow through on Jesus' second great commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." And here's what we're asking: What if Jesus had our *actual* neighbors in mind. If we don't know those neighbors, is it possible for us to put in some effort, and over time to move from stranger to acquaintance and maybe even to friend?

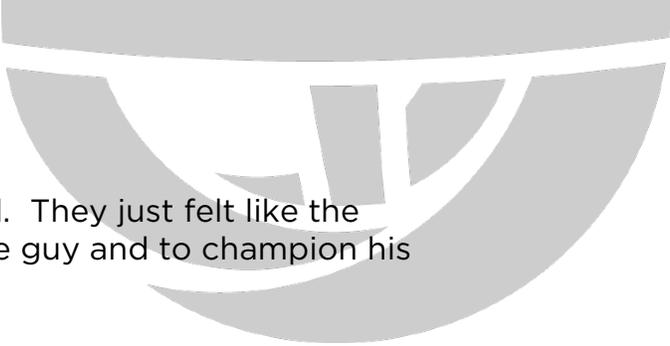
In our Bible reading for today, we hear the story of the feeding of the 5000 from John's gospel. The story can be found in all four of the gospels, but John tells it a bit differently. Only John has Jesus himself distributing all the food. And only John mentions a boy who shares his lunch of five loaves and a couple of fish. Jesus takes that lunch, blesses it, and suddenly there's more food than they know what to do with.

Now, it's easy to start imagining things about a story like this. We can imagine the parents coaxing their son forward by saying, "Don't you want to be a nice boy and share your lunch with these nice people?" Or, we can imagine the boy being tempted to go off and eat his lunch by himself. Truth be told, we don't really know what happens, and why. Perhaps, as the day wears on, Jesus simply puts out a call for food and the boy is more than ready to respond.

What we do know is that the boy gives what he has, as little as it seems, and God makes of it something far greater than we can imagine. Being a good neighbor can be like that. What we give can change the world. Little things matter. They really do.

Mel Frederick of Zumbro died this past week. Mel lived at The Waters for the last five years. He made lots of acquaintances and friends there. In case you don't know, Mel was a state senator in Minnesota for 20 years. He got involved in any number of helping situations. He didn't do these things





to get his name in the paper or to get re-elected. They just felt like the neighborly things to do...to speak up for the little guy and to champion his or her cause.

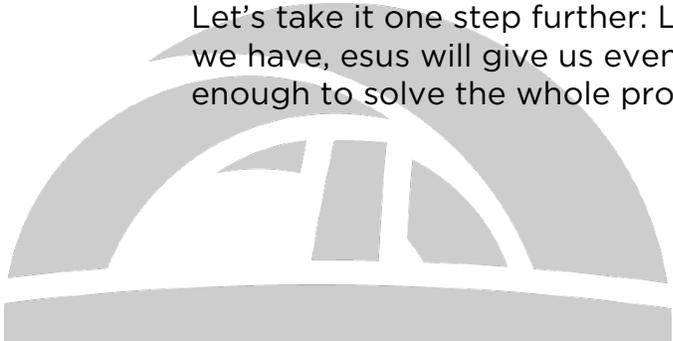
I sat down with Mel's family to plan the funeral. They said their dad never missed a hand to shake, a parade to attend, or a county fair to visit. Again, these efforts were not self-focused. They were about caring for people.

One day a woman named Marcia approached Mel. She had a paraplegic son named Tony. Marcia was troubled because she wasn't able to get a sticker for her car indicating the need for handicapped parking. That made it very difficult for her to take care of her son. Marcia brought her concern to Mel. He worked on her case for months on end. He asked her to testify before a senate sub-committee. Mel was determined to keep at it until he brought change. Sure enough, that change finally came. Marcia and Tony ended up incredibly grateful to a Minnesota State Senator who was willing to fight for the little guy. In the process, they had moved from being strangers, to acquaintances, and even to friends.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Sometimes that neighbor lives right next door. Sometimes he or she lives two counties over, and you are brought together by life's circumstances. esus is telling us that being a good neighbor is exactly the kind of life that can change the world. Little things matter, as little as sharing five loaves and a couple of fish. They really do.

Notice that ohn mentions *much grass* in our story. What's that about? It seems to be connected with the point made earlier: esus takes the boy's lunch, offers a blessing, and shares it with those who have gathered. In the next chapter, we'll hear about esus as the Good Shepherd. The pasture for the sheep, with plenty of grass, signals provision and abundance of life. And this abundance is clearly present as esus feeds the five thousand. It involves the basic necessities of life. And beyond that, it often involves relationships and security.

Please know that this sermon series is not specifically about introducing our neighbors to esus, and to the abundance he offers. If that somehow happens when we get together with others, so be it. No, this series is about *building bridges of understanding and peace*. It's about *reaching out with compassion*. It's about *loving our neighbors as ourselves*. It's about - hopefully - *moving from stranger to acquaintance to friend*.



Let's take it one step further: Like that boy in our story, when we give what we have, esus will give us even more to share. Even if what we have isn't enough to solve the whole problem, we do what we can in the moment. We



trust that God will provide enough to supply the need right in front of us, and we assume God will do it for the next need as well. The fact of the matter is, if we don't give, we might not get a chance to see God doing a miracle.

We all have opportunities to be good neighbors. Enny Bruenger of Zumbro had an opportunity this past week. On Thursday night Enny sent an email to Pastor Lisa thanking her for last week's sermon. She went on to share a story of something that had happened in the meantime.

Enny wrote: "Pastor Lisa, I've been intending to connect with a family across the street since last fall, but I've been so busy and preoccupied that I didn't take the time to do it. A week before your sermon, some end-of-summer goals were coming to mind, and meeting those neighbors was near the top of my "to do" list.

My plan was to make them a cake. Then I heard your sermon and was feeling convicted. I went to the store and bought aluminum cake pans. I was telling myself, 'This week I will do it!'

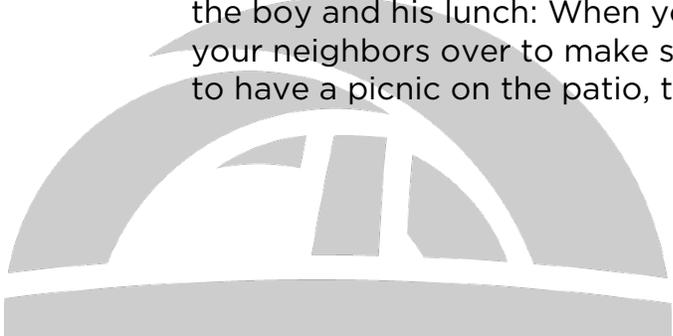
"Sunday night at 11 p.m.: I was up with a restless kiddo. We noticed a firetruck and ambulance across the street. Someone in the house was hurting. I prayed for them, and I watched as someone helped by paramedics got into the ambulance and went away. Suddenly I was wondering, 'Now what can I do?'

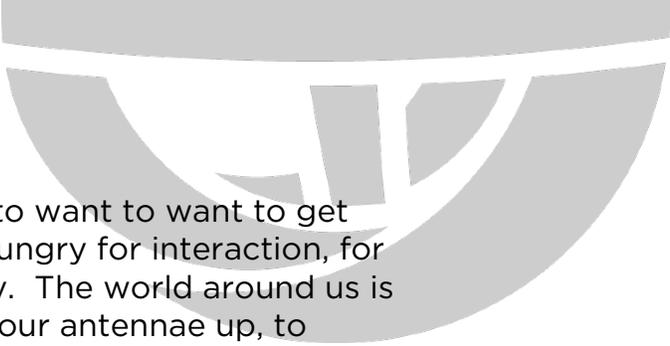
"Monday morning: I wrote a postcard introducing myself and my family, telling them I saw the ambulance, and was concerned. We wanted to meet them when all was better. I put the postcard and a box of tea in their mailbox.

"Thursday evening: The doorbell rang. A couple was standing on our doorstep, the couple from across the street. They introduced themselves, and so did we. It was a touching moment. We found out the woman was dealing with a serious medical condition.

"All in all, there was a lot of gratitude and good will in our first meeting. The kingdom of God had come near. More than ever, I'm convinced that God is alive and real and working in our lives."

As I hear Enny's story, one of the lessons I take from it is much the same as the boy and his lunch: When you have a chance, just do something! Invite your neighbors over to make smores, to watch something together on TV, to have a picnic on the patio, to come and meet your dog.





It's so easy to assume that people are too busy to want to want to get together. But these days plenty of people are hungry for interaction, for relationships, for security – just like in ohn 's day. The world around us is lonelier than we know, so it's important to have our antennae up, to purposefully look for ways to engage with people who live close by.

Granted, we all wish we were a bit more of something – smarter, funnier, friendlier. Often we have a hard time recognizing what we *do* have to offer. When it comes to neighboring, it's important to figure out how we can make a difference in the lives of others. It might be as simple as remembering their names, and giving them our time and attention.

Now, that might not seem like much, but when we give from what we have, something sacred happens. God uses the small things and multiplies them into a miracle in someone's life. And maybe, just maybe – like Ingrid and Mel Frederick and enny Bruenger – we will move from being a stranger, to an acquaintance, to even a friend. Amen.

