



September 8, 2019

Sermon Series: The Art of Neighboring

Opening Doors
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Philippians 2:12-16 NRSV

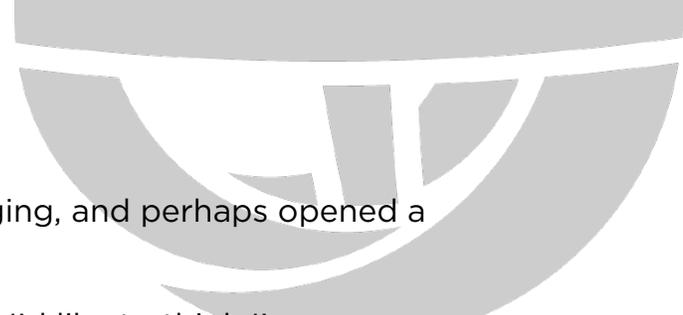
¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴Do all things without murmuring and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. ¹⁶It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

From time to time I head out to the golf course as a single golfer. When I do, I often get paired up with other golfers. We introduce ourselves. Along about the fourth hole, one of them will ask me, "So, what do you do for a living?" Normally I pause and then answer, "Umm, I'll tell you, as long as you promise not to let it ruin the rest of your round."

By now they're very curious. I have opened a door: "I'm a pastor, a Lutheran pastor, at Zumbro Lutheran Church." Often they get a look of panic on their faces, as if to say, "Uh oh, what have I said or done in the last three holes that I wish I could take back?" I try my best to reassure them, "It's fine. You're not going to offend me. We're out to have some fun." Eventually, after a couple more holes and a few wisecracks about how hanging around with a holy man might actually help their game, my playing partners are mostly able to relax - mostly - and enjoy the rest of the round.

We've been reaching out to our neighbors over the last five weeks. We've been taking Jesus' words to heart: "Love your neighbor as yourself." It's been exciting. I've enjoyed hearing your stories. Hopefully, we've learned a



few names along the way, done some encouraging, and perhaps opened a door or for our neighbors.

I'll admit: Doing this as a pastor can be trickier. I'd like to think I'm easy-enough to be around, but there's a certain segment of the population that, when they find out you're a holy man, they suddenly seem to start racking their brains to remember what they learned in Sunday School.

I share this not to complain, mind you, but as a possible insight into what Paul is telling the Philippians. Paul started the church there, but now he's absent from them. Churchgoers are asking, "How are we supposed to behave when the preacher is not around? What did we learn in Sunday School?"

Just a hunch here, but Paul doesn't seem quite as easygoing as me on the golf course. He lays it on the line for the Philippians: "Beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling..." Yikes! Clearly, as Paul sees it, this Jesus stuff is not easy. I wonder if the Christians in Philippi, all brand-new believers, hear these words and - like my golfing partners - are suddenly racking their brains over what they've said or done since Paul left.

Let's be honest, we come to a passage like this and it's easy to feel like we don't measure up. Who am I to try loving my neighbor? I'm nobody special. I have a hard enough time just trying to love my family or friends or colleagues at work. But to love my neighbor *as myself*? Pastor Shelley took it a step further last week: What if our neighbor doesn't vote or worship or raise their kids or take care of their yard like we do? Then what?

How far are we supposed to take this neighboring business? I said in the Big Idea Guide: "It's one thing if your neighbors want to borrow a cup of sugar. But it's quite another thing if they ask to borrow your car. Imagine this scenario: Your neighbor gets into a loud and heated argument with her husband? You hear things crashing in the kitchen. A few minutes later your neighbor knocks on the door. You open it. She asks if she can sleep on your couch for the night. What do you say? Is that okay? Are there ever limits to our neighboring?"



These questions hit home for me. Maybe you too. As I've shared before, my mom died when I was a freshman in high school. About that time, my dad started having little neurological spells. He didn't lose consciousness, but he wasn't really with us either. Those spells lasted maybe 30 seconds, a minute, two minutes. We noticed them most often in the pulpit, but we



worried that they might be happening in other places too. And since my mom was gone, we weren't at all sure that our dad was getting the medical care he needed.

One day our car wasn't working. My dad asked to borrow the neighbor's car. The neighbor said yes. Not long afterward, my dad ran that car through the ditch and into a fence. I'm guessing it was during one of those spells. Now, the neighbor was a member of the church. He'd seen those spells himself. Should he have said no to my dad's request? What are the limits of our neighborliness, and how do we know?

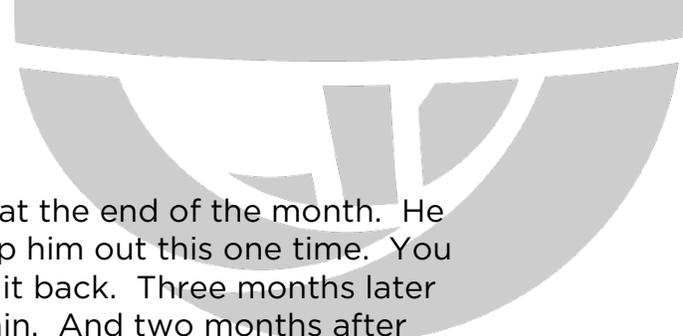
Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. As followers of Jesus, it seems like the Christian thing is to do everything possible to say yes to people, to open a door, to try to accommodate them. But what if the neurological spells are getting worse? What if our neighbor wants to sleep on the couch, not for a night but for a week? Is it always the Christian thing to say yes?

Paul's words are challenging: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," and he seems to imply, "work it out whether the preacher is there or not..." But then Paul adds an encouraging word: "For God is at work in you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." What the second half of this verse communicates to me is that we won't always know the exact right thing to do in relating to our neighbors. There's going to be some fear and trembling. But if we're paying attention to the voice inside, we trust that God will help us figure things out.

Truth be told, relationships need boundaries. As the saying goes, "Good fences make good neighbors." These boundaries help us set limits. They help us better define what belongs to us and what belongs to our neighbor.

The book, *The Art of Neighboring*, asks us to view a boundary in our neighboring as the difference between being responsible *to* a person and being responsible *for* a person. I find that helpful. The book explains: Being responsible *to* our neighbor is healthy. It means we are responsible to love them, to encourage them, to pray for them, to serve them. But - and this is an all-important distinction - being responsible *for* our neighbor is often unhealthy. It means attempting to take responsibility for their well-being, for their finances, for their happiness, for their success, for their spiritual journey, for the strength of their marriage, for their parenting, and so on. This is a helpful distinction, but it's not necessarily neat and tidy. We have to work at it.





Imagine your neighbor is running short of cash at the end of the month. He feels a little sheepish, but he asks if you can help him out this one time. You open a door. You say yes. He promises to pay it back. Three months later he hasn't paid it back. And then it happens again. And two months after that, yet again. It's not a lot of money...just a \$100 each time. You want to be helpful. It feels like the Christian thing to do. But a part of you wonders if it's the right thing to do.

What does it mean to be responsible *to* your neighbor, but not *for* your neighbor? This might sound simplistic, but there's a difference between you yourself being put on the hook to provide a solution, *and* you helping that person find a solution for himself or herself. Should our neighbor in South Dakota have had a heart to heart talk with my dad about his medical care? Should you encourage your neighbor on the couch to find a good counselor, and maybe provide a recommendation?

We run into problems like this regularly at church. A person from comes asking for financial assistance. We do what we can. But if it happens a second, and even third time, we give that person the phone number for the Lutheran Social Service Financial Counseling Office. It's local. It's helpful. And they provide guidance far beyond what we can offer to help people make better choices. As pastors, we do everything but pick up the phone and make the call for them. We're trying to be responsible *to* our neighbor, but not *for* our neighbor.

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.... As you're opening a door to your neighbors, you're not always going to know the exact right thing to do. A holy man or woman is not always next to you. So, then what?

Again, from *The Art of Neighboring*: "The hardest part about loving others is that you can always do more. You can always give more time, [more] energy, and [more] money to those in need. But you can't be everything to everyone.....

"At the end of the day, good neighboring must be an exercise in asking God what to do in any given situation. It's about being on our knees in prayer, asking for discernment to help in the situations we encounter. God doesn't ask us to do everything, but God does ask us to do something - which [often feels] much better than doing nothing" (p. 142).

And don't forget: "God is at work in you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." Amen.



