

## “Block Party” May 3, 2009

In a Family Circus cartoon, Billy is asking a question very much like the one the religious man asked Jesus in our Bible passage. Billy asks, “Does ‘love thy neighbor’ mean the people on BOTH sides of our house?” When Jesus asked, the religious man cited the most important commandments, saying, “**That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.**”

Jesus gave him an A+ on his response, but the man persisted. Our passages says, “**Looking for a loophole, he asked, ‘And just how would you define ‘neighbor’?’**” in other words, “Do we have to love the folks on both sides of our house?”

Jesus told one of his stories—the one about the Good Samaritan. Probably most of us know about him, since he was the one who actually helped the man who was injured. The priest and the Levite passed the poor guy by, but not the one who was considered an outcast by society. When Jesus finished the story, he asked his questioner, “Which one was the neighbor?” Of course, the man answered, “The one who treated him kindly,” and Jesus told him to go and do the same.

Given that story, it seems that we can define the word “neighbor” quite simply as “**one who treats another kindly.**” If we look up the word “neighbor” on dictionary.com, that type of definition is actually the fourth one, following: “**a person who lives near another, a person or thing that is near another, and one’s fellow human being.**” I really believe the third one—one’s fellow human being, along with treating another kindly are more in line with the way Jesus wanted us to understand “neighbor.”

However, I don’t think that’s the way most of us think of it. When we hear “neighbor” and “neighborhood,” we tend to think geographically, and try to picture those who live next door or across the street. Our image of a neighbor is fairly limited in scope. I suppose some of us might broaden our definition a little bit to include our friends, or the people who come to The Garden. We might even consider those who live in the same community that we do as our neighbors, but I doubt that many of us would stretch much beyond that.

And yet, Jesus makes it pretty clear that our neighbors may well be the ones we least expect, the ones who would never make our list of neighbors. And I think he intended to do that very thing. If a neighbor is our fellow human being, and one who treats another kindly, that certainly expands the dimensions of our neighborhood, doesn’t it?

Phil Gulley and Jim Mulholland, in their book *If God is Love*, state that loving our neighbor is the primary core principle of Jesus. They write, “**When we limit our understanding of neighbor to our church, denomination, nationality, or religious persuasion, we take Jesus’s**

**name in vain. When we lift up this commandment of Jesus—to love our neighbor—we draw all people to God and one another...The chief difference between traditional Christianity and gracious Christianity is an insistence on seeing every person as our neighbor, now and forever.**”

Whoa! *Every person?* Really? “Surely not,” we may be thinking. How could Jesus mean those who don’t like us are our neighbors? How could our sworn enemies possibly be neighbors? Gully and Mulholland respond to that by saying, “Their disregard does not alter Jesus’s command one iota.” In fact, Jesus even told us that we’re to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. That’s not a very popular concept—I can tell you that for sure. Sometime during the first Gulf War, I preached on that passage at St. Luke’s, and I thought I was going to be thrown out of the church!

No, including everyone as our neighbor is not typically something we like to hear, but that’s precisely what Jesus has said. Not only do we not like to hear it, the thought of actually doing it seems almost incomprehensible, but that’s really what it takes to follow Jesus. Radical love and total inclusiveness is the only way. So how do we begin?

I believe that it has to start with little steps, and close to home. Indianapolis has even had an opportunity to begin to practice neighborliness with the Extreme Makeover project that took place the end of March and early April. You may recall that a father by the name of Bernard McFarland and his sons who live on Oxford Street were selected by the TV show to have their home totally redone.

I followed the story mostly online and, to be quite honest, was pleased for the most part with the response of his physical neighbors. The ones who were quoted seemed to be thrilled that he was given such an opportunity, because they knew him as someone who cared about the neighborhood and about helping the kids in the area. Many of them realized that this experience would draw attention to some of the much-needed improvements that the Martindale-Brightwood area so badly needs.

In my opinion, some of the best news that has come out of this story is that helping to revitalize this area has become a project in which more and more individuals and groups are becoming invested. A library is being built there; more than 1500 trees will be planted; houses are getting fresh coats of paint; abandoned houses are being torn down; new landscaping is going in; alleys are being paved and streets are being cleaned up. This is being neighborly, and treating another kindly—someone that most of the workers and volunteers have never met, nor will they ever meet him and his family.

Of course, there are the cynics, and to be honest, I became a little angry and frustrated just reading some of the comments to the online articles. There has been a lot of skepticism and negative thinking. Let me tell you—that’s not the kind of thing Jesus talked about. It’s about treating another kindly—pure and simple. It has everything to do with how we

treat another, and absolutely nothing to do with what happens after we extend kindness. Being a good neighbor does not mean keeping score, or checking up. It's just giving of ourselves to help another—no strings attached. Remember; that commandment says “LOVE” your neighbor as yourself, and love is unconditional!

How can we think about being neighbors and not think about Mr. Rogers? After his show went off the air, he wrote a little book entitled, *The World According to Mr. Rogers: Important Things to Remember*, and one of the important things to remember is, of course, what it means to be a neighbor. At one point, he wrote, “In every neighborhood, all across our country, there are good people insisting on a good start for the young, and doing something about it.” That’s being a neighbor.

At another point, Mr. Rogers ruminated on an interesting thought. He wrote, “The more I think about it, the more I wonder if God and neighbor are somehow One. “Loving God, Loving neighbor”—the same thing? For me, coming to recognize that God loves every neighbor is the ultimate appreciation!” Frankly, I’ve never thought about it that way, but I really like the idea that God and neighbor are one. Since God loves everyone, we are to do no less. That’s what it means to be a good neighbor.

I really like something that Will Durant wrote in *The Story of Civilization*. “Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, staling, shouting, and doing things historians usually record—while, on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry, whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happens on the banks.”

So, I guess there are a couple of things for us to think about today: Who are the people in our neighborhood? And “How’s the story on the banks going?” How’s it going in our neighborhood?

Closing:

Nikolai Berdyaev said, “Bread for myself is a material question. Bread for my neighbor is a spiritual one.” I think he was right on target. The most important this is to love our neighbor, and that, indeed, is a spiritual question for us to consider.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.