

RECONNECT WITH YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Matthew 25:31-40

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
16 October 2022

His teenage children were embarrassed when their dad told him what he'd planned to do. And the first night that he actually left the house carrying an overnight bag, his daughter yelled at him, "Dad, you're crazy!"

But Peter Lovenheim was determined to get to know his neighbors. It started for him when there was a tragedy in their neighborhood, in a suburb of Rochester, New York. He realized that few of his neighbors knew each other, that while they lived in physical proximity to one another, they were not what you could legitimately call a community. Honestly, many of them didn't even know each other's names.

A tragedy had occurred, and it hadn't really affected any of them. That woke Lovenheim up. "I don't want to live this way," he decided.

He wrote this, "Maybe my neighbors didn't mind living this way, but I did. I wanted to get to know the people whose houses I passed each day - not just what they do for a living and how many children they have, but the depth of their experience and what kind of people they are."

"What would it take", he wondered, "to penetrate the barriers between us?"

He remembered how much he'd enjoyed sleepovers at friends' homes when he was young - not just the fun of staying up late - but how it happened that when you had breakfast in the family kitchen the next morning, you'd start to get a feel for what your friends' family was like.

So Lovenheim, a writer, began emailing and calling his neighbors. In a couple of cases, he just knocked on doors. He said to his neighbors, "Would you let me spend the night in your home, get to know you, and write a little bit about your life?"

A surprising number of them said yes.

He spent the night with his 81-year-old neighbor, a widower, retired surgeon, who said, "You can come over, but I warn you, my life is boring." That visit ended with the two of them sharing spare keys and promising to look after each other, and Lovenheim hearing about a life that was far from boring.

He visited a recently married young couple, a single parent, and the home of two doctors. Eventually he met a woman living three doors away, who was seriously ill with breast cancer and in need of help. Lovenheim figured out a way to build a supportive community around her; he recruited people to drive her to medical appointments and help with child care. They finally became a real neighborhood.

We spent the last 2 1/2 years learning to be socially distant from one another. Staying six feet apart was hard to get used to, but we did it because we knew it was safer. We followed the rules not only for selfish reasons, but out of respect for one another, especially those whose health was vulnerable.

Keeping our distance from each other didn't only occur at the height of the pandemic. We have taught our children how to stay safe. Preschoolers learn "stranger danger." We were forced to do this because we've learned about the behavior of predators of all kinds.

Two weeks ago, Beau and I spent nine hours on zoom, in a required session for all UCC clergy on the topic of boundaries. We were forced to do this because we now

know that some ministers have used their position wrongfully, sometimes criminally. It can damage people for life when their trust in a spiritual leader is horribly betrayed.

You hear enough stories about bad things that happen in the world, and you're tempted to retreat into your home and play it safe.

And then we hear the words of Jesus, "The most important commandment is this - love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." What does it mean to love our neighbors when we don't know their names? What does it mean to love our neighbors and still maintain safe boundaries?

Here's a story Jesus told about what's important to God. "At the appointed time, the Promised One will come in glory, escorted by all the angels of heaven, and will sit upon the royal throne, with all the nations assembled below. Then the Promised One will separate them from one another, as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be placed on the right hand, the goats on the left."

It's a story about judgment, there's no way around it. It's a story that reminds us, that - no matter how much we talk about God's grace and forgiveness and unconditional love - and all of that is real - it is also equally real and true that God has expectations for us. There's a right way to live and a wrong way to live.

Jesus goes on:

The ruler will say to those on the right, "Come, you blessed of God! Inherit what has been prepared for you from the creation of the world! For I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

naked and you clothed me. I was ill and you comforted me; in prison and you came to visit me.”

Jesus is talking to the good guys, the sheep, the guys on the right. They're getting into heaven! You might think they'd be whooping and hollering and high-fiving each other - “Yep, that's us. We did all those good things!”

But that's not their response. They're totally confused, looking around at each other quizzically. “Huh?” They ask the ruler, “When did we see you hungry and feed you or see you thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you as a stranger and invite you in, or clothe you in your nakedness? When did we see you ill or in prison or come to visit you?” And the ruler replies - “The truth is, every time you did this for the least of my sisters or brothers, you did it for me.”

Oh yes, now they remembered acts of kindness in their lifetimes.

The good guys were good, not because they were trying to get into heaven, not because they were trying to impress anyone, but because they allowed God's unconditional love to flow through them. And they were, they **ARE** humble.

What's important to God, according to this story, is the way we treat one another.

I read this passage over every day this week. I didn't have time to start writing my sermon until Friday, but I kept reading it over, letting it marinate in my mind. When I read it Thursday morning, this word popped out at me - the word “see.” When did we **see** you hungry? When did we **see** you thirsty? When did we **see** you as a stranger? When did we **see** you ill or in prison?

Living the humble compassionate life God asks us to live begins with seeing one another. Looking into one another's eyes. Noticing. Paying attention. We can't know

how to help anyone if we don't slow down, ask questions, and listen. It's all part of seeing. It's hard to love the neighbor that we haven't seen.

What would it be like to remember that everyone you encounter is a beloved child of God? The coworker who steals your ideas. The neighbor who plays music too loud late at night. The family member who annoys you. The friend who takes you for granted. The guy on I-90 begging for a handout. The candidate whose commercial you detest.

Do we really see them, look for that trace of the divine in them? Do we try to put ourselves in their shoes, and wonder what their lives are like?

Imagine a world in which we do not judge one another, but leave the judging to God. Instead, we just focus on seeing, on listening, on being as empathetic and humble as possible.

Usually when we hear this story, we hear it as a story about heaven and hell. This is what happens at the end of life. We're judged by the way we've treated one another in our lifetimes. But Jesus always talked about heaven, or the kingdom, as something we can begin to experience **now**.

We don't need to live in any fear of God. We can find heaven here on earth when we engage in acts of compassion and justice. And conversely, a life of selfishness and judgmentalism feels like hell, right here.

One of the best gifts of the church is that it allows us to do so much more together than any of us could do alone. And knowing that we are making a difference in the lives of hungry neighbors, homeless neighbors, immigrant neighbors, sick and lonely neighbors brings us hope.

There are so many ways that our combined efforts create neighborliness. Our Stephen Ministers look their care receivers in the eye, often face to face, but always by intently listening. Many of our members reach out to those who are ill and grieving, sending cards and notes. One of our members creates as many as 50 handmade cards for each season. Another one studies the prayer list each week and makes contact with someone new, every single week.

Once a month, a group of volunteers gathers in our kitchen, makes dinner for 50 or 60, and delivers it to the Haven Center Homeless Shelter.

All of this mission and ministry is made possible because of your financial and prayerful support. Some of you have more money to give, some of you have more time to give. If we each give what we're able, if we each give until we feel that we are tasting that heavenly life, then our ministry and mission will continue to thrive and we will be the church God needs us to be in this time and place.

One of the best ideas this church ever had - and the credit goes to my predecessor, Dick Bucey - is the Good Neighbor Thrift Shop. Started as a way to help us raise money to support the UCC wider global mission, it has grown and expanded in every way over the decades. Every penny of the Thrift Shop proceeds, after expenses, goes to mission projects - we now are able to support our mission partners in some extraordinarily generous ways.

It would be enough if we just sold items and donated the money, which we do. But the Thrift Shop goes above and beyond.

One of our volunteers is in regular contact with many different agencies in the area about what their needs are and how we can help. Other volunteers keep their

eyes open for her as they sort clothes, and they put items aside as they go through thousands of donated articles each week. This volunteer then stores items in her basement until there's enough of a load. Last week, 30 children's winter coats, along with snow pants, hats, gloves and boots were delivered to one of the sober living facilities that houses women with children. Another 15 women's coats were taken to another facility. 35 winter coats were delivered to the warehouse for the Lorain City Schools after we received word of children showing up on these chilly fall mornings with no coats. Another volunteer washes hundreds of donated blankets a year and those too are given where most needed - many to our sister church, St. Paul's UCC in Cleveland.

More volunteers are needed, both in the shop, and to wash and store clothing. Contact me or the shop if you want to help!

The Thrift Shop is not just a business with a good cause. In itself, it is a way for us to see one another, eye to eye and face to face. Some people shop for bargains because it's a hobby, and some people shop there because it's the only place they can afford. We try our best to treat everyone with dignity and respect. And love.

In a world that is so polarized, where we lob labels and judgments upon one another...in a world rife with loneliness and despair, in a world of so many needs of all kinds...to every problem, the answer is the same. Love your neighbor as yourself. Look one another in the eye and know that we are seeing the face of Christ in every one. Rich or poor, Democrat or Republican.

When will we learn that looking out only for our own best interests is leading us in the wrong direction? None of us is free until all of us are free. None of us is truly fed until all of us have enough food.

Thank you for supporting this church, which is a base camp for mission. Thank you if you support this church financially...through your prayers...through volunteering...If you have ever helped with a Mission Team project, a Haven Center meal, donated to the food drive, or gone on a mission trip through this church - please stand. If you work at the Thrift Shop, volunteer at the Thrift Shop, please stand. If you donate or shop at the Thrift Shop, please stand.

Thanks be to God that we are able to find ways to be neighborly. May our efforts continue and grow, leading to an expansion of heart and spirit in each of us. Amen.