

Luke 7:37-50

Sept. 10, 2017

**Love Your Neighborhood:
FAITHFULNESS OVER FEAR**

Last week I talked about how our culture is rapidly changing around us – we no longer live in “Christendom” where we assume everyone goes to church, or has some notion of basic Christian beliefs, or has a biblical worldview. In such an environment it is easy to become hesitant to “show your colors” so to speak. One reaction to the changing environment is to withdraw in fear, kind of live in a Christian ghetto. That’s the “scared” reaction. But Jesus has called us to a “sacred” task ... a way we might call “proactive gentleness.”ⁱ It’s is a sacred calling as we are “... *chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus ...*” 1 Peter 1:2. Yes, obedience to Jesus.

Endless News

I wonder if the news media in this country has not helped to foster a culture of fear and suspicion. With 24 hour news we can turn on the TV, tune in the radio, or look on the internet, and there’s some disaster, or horrific crime, or terrible accident, or outrageous incident being reported on, and then commented on, and on, and on. There’s some down-right cringe-worthy stories out there, about downright cringe-worthy people. The natural reaction is to say, “Man, we live in a crazy sick world.” True enough, there are some really messed up people out there.

When we’re exposed to that kind of news on a regular basis, it begins to affect how we view people. We may start to think that those really crazy or sick or dishonest people are all around us. But the reality is those people are the exception. Are there really that many more whackos in the world than in previous generations? (The answer is “yes” simply because there are more people in the world, but the actual percentage may be lower.) Or has technology made it so much easier to broadcast peoples’ brokenness than in the past?

Never Take Counsel of Your Fears

It is very easy to view the world outside our door as a whirlwind of mayhem and danger – and quite a few people do. There’s a great sense of security in sitting in front of the TV behind our locked doors – letting news people and various “reality” shows tell us what life and people are like out there. Unless we actually meet, in person, the people in our neighborhoods we may begin to think they’re all like the crazy people highlighted on TV. But it’s not true. Many of our neighbors aren’t that different than you and me. They want to enjoy life, to live in harmony with others, and have friends they can count on.

Perhaps you recall the story in the O.T. (Numbers 13) about the Israelites' entry into the Promised Land after their escape from slavery in Egypt. They get to the border of the new land – Canaan – and as God commanded Moses sent in 12 spies to check it out. They came back and reported: ***“We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey ... Yet the people who dwell in the land are strong ... the people we saw in it are men of great stature ... and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them,”*** Numbers 13:27-28,32-33. And so the Israelites were afraid and didn't step into the new land. They wandered in the wilderness for the next 40 years.

Then, 40 years later the Israelites approached Canaan again. Only Joshua and Caleb were left to lead a new generation. It is very telling that they found an ally in the new land in the woman Rahab who said to them: ***“I know that the LORD has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below,”*** Joshua 2:9-11. The Israelites earlier had been in fear of the people in the Promised Land, seeing them as giants and themselves as grasshoppers. But all along the Canaanites were living in fear of the Israelites!

We may be afraid but things are not always as they seem. When we are following God into our neighborhoods, keep in mind that it is often our neighbors who need to be rescued from fear. Someone must break into that atmosphere and God has given us an invitation to go forward, not backward.

Fear has a way of distorting our perspective and keeping us from doing God's bidding. I guess this story isn't politically correct these days ... it's about General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate army in the Civil War. He was looking over maps with his top generals, and every time one or more of them made a proposal about moving troops here or there, General James Longstreet would respond, “General, I fear if we do that...” After several such responses Lee turned to Longstreet and calmly said, “General, it is wise to never take counsel of your fears.”

Our fears can easily get the better of us. Fear can overwhelm the faithful keeping us from stepping into God's preferred future. Much of our fear might better be called timidity that keeps us from being more like Jesus. We're afraid to make the first move, like walk over to the neighbor and introduce ourselves, or ring their door bell and offer some cookies or a pie. “They might think I'm weird ... or too forward ... or casing their house...” You can always find a reason not to make contact: “I'm an introvert and surely there is someone on the block who is more suited for this;” or “This isn't the right time. I'll take the initiative to

meet them next week (or next month, or next year). Let's take hold of the power of the Holy Spirit. *"For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline," 2 Timothy 1:7.*

What if my neighbors spurn my attempts to greet them, or even introduce myself? Awkwardness, maybe a long silence ... that's probably the worst we'll get. Never fear, God is with us. Never take counsel of your fears. Take counsel of the Holy Spirit.

Taking It Outside

It's pretty obvious that we have to get out of our houses to meet our neighbors. I know, during the summer months we tend to hibernate around here, what with triple digit temperatures for weeks on end. But cooler temperatures are coming, and that is a prime opportunity to take some of your living outside – preferably to the front yard of your home, or the common area of your apartment complex. At the very least we can wave to the folks in our neighborhoods as we drive by, and look for those who do come out into their yards. One of our church members here wrote me a note on the communication card in response to my sermon a couple weeks ago. He said, "Fire your gardener." He meant do your own lawn work so that you're out there where you can see your neighbors and they can see you! You may find yourself standing in someone's driveway talking, or lending or borrowing a lawn tool. As I said last week, relationships take time, so we've got to be ready to give time. No doubt God is already at work in your neighborhood so we need to simply slow down and be aware of what He is doing. When you develop real relationships with people you begin to discern how God is already moving in their lives, and that's when we can develop trust for one another.

Okay, I know some of you are thinking: "Now wait a minute Pastor, we can't just go out there and walk up to everyone we see on our block. Who knows what they're up to or where they're coming from?" I get that. Here's the thing: we have to balance our fears and discernment – that's just prudent. When it comes to meeting your neighbor for the very first time you don't want to abandon your discernment, throw all caution to the wind. Caution is justified when you encounter strangers. This will take a little time. By the way I am not expecting anyone here to get to know their neighbors in the next two weeks... geez we've had a heat wave, people aren't outside as much. Remember my chart? (*Show neighborhood chart – mine & the template we've made. Have template available in Narthex.*) I'm still working on it, and it may take all year ... maybe the same for you, just don't let it go a decade.

Isolation = Fear = Isolation

In their book, *The Art of Neighboring*, authors Pathak and Runyon tell of their friend who runs a homeless shelter. Their friend mentioned to them that many of the people in the shelter are there because of isolation. They become distanced from family, friends, and neighbors. Their isolation instilled fear in them ... fear that they wouldn't be accepted, or liked, or approved. Isolation springs from fear and fear is expanded in isolation.

Jesus tells us, *"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love,"* 1 John 4:18. You see, the opposite of love is not hate, but fear. The genius of good neighboring is that it combats isolation, which can easily breed fear. As you and I look upon the people in our neighborhoods we ought to ask ourselves, "Is my assumption about that person correct? Maybe if I got to know him/her I would feel different, or know reality rather than my assumption."

Last week I spoke of the "soft difference" – this is what perfect love is about. And who has perfect love? Jesus Christ does and that brings us right back to the 1st commandment: to love God with all we've got. When we stay close to Him, His love will flow through us and that's what we want to share with our neighbors. *"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us,"* 1 Peter 2:12.

I think it was theologian George Hunter who shared this observation: The Church started as a fellowship where people could be known and know the very presence of God. Then the church moved to Greece and became a philosophy ... To Rome and became an institution ... To Europe and became a civilization ... To America and became an enterprise. All along people still longed for fellowship.

"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander," 1 Peter 3:13-16

Let us not forget: God is with us, we have the courage of the Holy Spirit to call on, and our neighbors want to be known and respected as much as we do. They too need the love of God. Overcoming fear with regard to meeting your neighbors is hard work, but worth it. There's a lot of peace that comes and you grow into the person who isn't controlled by fear, but by the hope and power of God.

"For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself" Galatians 5:14.

ⁱTim Chester & Steve Timms, *Everyday Church, Gospel Communities On Mission* - "Loving the Culture." (Crossway: Wheaton, IL, 2012), 44.