March 13, 2016
Lent 5 Using the book Grounded by Diana Butler Bass
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SCOTT TO SING MR. ROGER’S LITTLE NEIGHBORHOOD SONG

"May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight O God, our strength and our redeemer"

While Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood might have been a little on the sweet side --- I found it terribly endearing and was regularly impressed by how he managed to push the envelope with what it meant to be a neighbor and who was included in the neighborhood. He modeled The Golden Rule – the second Greatest Commandment of Loving your neighbor as yourself. He modeled inclusiveness and sincere compassion without the viewers really knowing it, he was subtle and spoke with words as well as actions about the power of kindness.

Jesus’ use of a story that included a Samaritan showing compassion to a man wounded on the side of the road was nowhere near subtle. It was an in-your-face kind of story that packed a punch. Historian Diana Butler Bass writes: “Samaritans and Jews were enemies, two tribes caught in an ancient argument about birthright and ethnicity who lived in segregated neighborhoods. By Jesus’ time they were forbidden to have contact with each other, and violent squabbles sometimes erupted between them. The lawyer who was a Jew surely knew the informal customs and formal laws separating the two groups. Samaritans and Jews were not good neighbors.

Yet Jesus turns the ancient Jewish command to love your neighbor into a story about these hostile groups...Jesus enlarges the sphere of neighborhood and neighbor to include those we deem objectionable.” (Pg. 208)

Jesus’ of course was less concerned about neighborhood as a place and more concerned with how we act as neighbor to one another regardless of where we are.

We continue our Lenten season using Diana Butler Bass’ new book, Grounded – Finding God in the World, this week’s theme is “Neighbor and Neighborhood”. In this section she speaks of it as a place and as a way of living in community.
Butler Bass speaks of a neighborhood as an “ecosystem of relationship between people...a shared experience of the natural world we inhabit, and the ways we care for each other and the land...we might neglect or forget this (she continues), but the relationship with those nearby is sacred, a human geography in a spiritual habitat.”

She shares a quote from journalist Peter Lovenheim which causes me to pause and consider some of the things we take for granted about those we live near to:

“On a summer night, if our windows were open, we fell asleep to the same sound of crickets; in the morning, we awoke to the same birdsong and din of distant traffic. We all resided, as it were...on the same farm; our soil was the same; our rainfall was the same; our sunlight, snow, and pollen index were the same. And we moved through this same physical miniworld, most of us, daily for years. Surely this shared physical environment, both below and above the ground, bound us as neighbors.” (Pg. 197)

I suspect that most of us go through our days without thinking like this about our neighborhoods; in reality, some of us might feel very isolated from neighbors. Yet isn’t there truth in it whether we remember it, “feel connected”, or not? Thank God for artists who poets and writers who awaken us to the sacredness of what we take for granted.

What would it mean for us to consider our neighborhoods with this kind of mutuality?

Butler Bass reminds us in her book that all of the world’s religions make neighbors the central concern of spirituality and ethics. All major religions have a way of teaching the same truth that we heard in the story of the Good Samaritan from the Gospel of Luke.

What would it mean for us to live the underlying truth of the Good Samaritan – what we commonly call the Golden Rule – not just in the churches where we gather but in the neighborhoods we call home?

Consider your own experience --- do you know your neighbors? What is your relationship like with them? Have you been a compassionate neighbor? Who has been a good neighbor to you?

While I do not live in Magnolia, I know there has been a rising concern about crime and a move to hire private patrols to watch over the neighborhoods. An additional approach would be to increase neighborly relationships of care and support. Focusing on what we fear usually increases fear, isolation and suspicion of others. Fear “brings out the basest instincts and
narrows our sense of belonging to self-preservation” writes British political scientist Sue Goss, while building relationships actually fosters a deeper sense of connection and safety.

The arrival of Tent City 5 has brought mixed reactions to the neighborhood – that is no surprise. There is a group at the Episcopal Church next door to us that has been taking the initiative to bring together all the Magnolia churches to see how we can work in partnership with each other and the members of TC5. A meeting I attended a few weeks ago had an incredible turnout which included 6 people from TC5. I noted that they were the ones circulating around the room first before the meeting started, trying to introduce themselves and say hello. Face to face opportunities such as these decreases suspicion and fear, and increases connection and neighborliness.

Jesus’ teaching challenges us to understand that neighborly relations are woven into divine love – it is part of what brings God near to all. This ethic is not just whether we are a good neighbor to the person we share the pew with – it is meant to expand outward into all aspects of our lives. Butler Bass writes that the heart of our calling as a church is not to get people into our building and into our pews, but to walk beside them as a compassionate neighbor. While we may wish we had more people joining with us for reflection and community on Sunday morning’s, I believe that our desire to be a good neighbor; to walk beside those in need and provide hospitality is the deepest ethic that motivates us as a congregation. It is reflected in our actions and in the open door policy of our building - let us pray that it will always be so.

In tandem with being a good neighbor to the humans around us – we must be a good neighbor to our non-human neighbors: dirt, sky, and water – to the animals who fly, crawl, and run, who share life on this planet and depend on us for their very survival. This is also part of Divine Love – of recognizing the nearness of God in all creation.

I have a Seattle Times article that I have kept as a reminder about the neighbors I do not see. It is about some of our neighbors that live just off the Seattle’s coastline. It is a neighbor that can
taste with its skin; it can resist a pull 1,000 times its own weight; it can change color and shape, squirt ink and inject venom...Know what it is yet? It is the giant Pacific Octopus. Many of us will remember the horrible and tragic story about the Octopus that was killed back in 2012. They are our neighbors and they need protection. Our own Seattle Aquarium has done studies on how octopuses recognize individual people. They know to approach people who fed them, and move away from those who touch them briskly -- Octopus are drawn to a good neighbor. Octopus keepers were not surprised by these findings of course -- as they knew it already. They knew of their personalities -- they knew how smart and charming they were. They are our neighbors and they need good neighbors --- they need respect, care, and protection as much as any of us.

One of the most important aspects of being a compassionate neighbor is hospitality and empathy. One of the issues that keeps coming up in this interesting election season is the idea of building fences. Much of these comments reflect the tension between hostility and hospitality. While I have no desire to enter into the details of who said what in that regard -- Butler Bass writes in her book about how important it is for us to find a balance between inclusion and order, between welcome and security. (Pg. 215) It is meaningful to have a place, a group, a “tribe” to belong to. It can offer a sense of security and identity that helps us move securely in a broad and complicated world. On the other hand, when tribes become tribal -- like the Jews and the Samaritans -- trouble and even violence can easily erupt.

Jesus direct story challenges the Jewish lawyer to consider the Divine call of empathy and hospitality -- even with the enemy. Butler Bass speaks of the abiding values of hospitality and empathy and their role in keeping neighborhoods a place of openness to the stranger, a place of empathy for the hurting. As people who follow and are inspired by Jesus -- we must challenge ourselves to risk hospitality and empathy on behalf of the greater good even though many will try to tell us that we are naive and weak.
Catholic Priest Henri Nouwen, wrote in the 1970’s that “Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear or do harm.”

Bass writes: “It has only gotten worse since then, much worse in the early years of this century. Thus, what Nouwen insisted then remains true today: one of the primary spiritual needs of our world is to “convert” hostility into hospitality, to turn “the enemy into a guest”...”and not just limited to its literal sense of receiving a stranger in our house, but as a fundamental attitude toward our fellow human being...” (Pg 219-20)

And so we circle back to where we began: Being a compassionate neighbor is as needed as ever; it is one of the most powerful ways of Divine Love being made real in the world. It is not easy. It calls us out. It challenges us to step out of comfort zones whether we are the one giving or receiving...The world cannot afford for us to not seek this path, can it? We will close this morning with a story I happened upon this weekend that gives testimony to the impact that the kindness of Mr. Rogers had on a young boy so many years ago. Let us never doubt or underestimate the power of kindness.

(Scott to read the story)