

Who Is My neighbor? Who Is My Friend?

John 15: 12-17; Luke 10:25-29

Neil Dunnivant

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina

July 22, 2018

Hot Dish and Hope Sunday

I think we have all figured out by now that there is really only one way to drastically decrease war and human violence, injustice, oppression, inequality — what used to be called man’s inhumanity toward man.

And that is to cease the *us* and *them* mentality. The hungry and the full. The haves and the have nots. Rich and poor. Black and white. Christians and Muslims. Republicans and democrats. Liberals and conservatives. Legal and illegal. No more us and them. Just us. We are all in this together and connected in ways far deeper than we want to admit.

The lawyer asks Jesus — “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. You all know the story. The outsider, the enemy, is the only one who stops to help. The man is stripped, beaten, and half-dead, and his own people, his own tribe pass by on the other side.

The Samaritan stops to help. The First Pres member is mugged in downtown Greensboro. Who comes to his aid? Not the bankers and lawyers and insurance executives. The African cab driver. The Mexican construction worker. The homeless guy. The Muslim chef.

Jesus asks, “Who do you think proved neighbor to the man?” The lawyer says, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said: “Go and do likewise.”

But being a neighbor, a real neighbor, is far more than helping out or showing mercy. It means treating as an equal. Believing one *is* an equal. It is

understanding that it is not just us and them but only us. It means understanding that we are all connected and united as God's creatures. Neighbors are not charity cases. They are sisters and brothers. Fellow citizens of Planet Earth. All God's children.

These are highly radical ideas that go against our strong instincts to be tribal, to divide into groups, to feel superior, to defeat and conquer, to feel safe as part of a smaller group who will protect me from "them." We enjoy hating "them." It makes us feel special to be a small "us" who are superior or different than "them."

Even some Native American tribes did not see themselves as fellow Indians. The Comanches did not recognize any other tribes even as people. If you see someone who is not a Comanche you kill him. He is not supposed to be here. The earth is not for him.

Tribalism runs deep in human nature. It has created great beauty and diversity as well as great misery and destruction.

I have tried in my own small way to practice what I preach. I have enjoyed the company of many different people from many cultures and walks of life. The older woman in a little Indian village in central Mexico who calls me every New Year's Eve and speaks to me in a beautiful slow Spanish because her native language is the Indian language Pèrepucha. Or Gerardo also in Mexico who named his daughter Kate after my wife who I communicate with on WhatsApp several times a week. And of course Felix Ndayisenga from Congo and his family. Felix is now being ordained as an elder in our church. These relationships enrich our lives beyond our understanding and begin with the commitment of us and the denial of "them."

And then Jesus took up the issue of friendship in John's gospel. A friend communicates deeply and clearly and does not hold back valuable information. "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what the master is doing. But I have called you friends, for ALL, all that I have heard from my father I have made know to you."

Along with all the meals we have served at Hot Dish, I really believe these last ten years have made us better neighbors and friends.

We have come to understand that we are all in this together — that we are only *us* and not us and them.

Perhaps friendships have been made that have led to deep full sharing.

We have come to see more clearly that chronic hunger and unemployment and homelessness are not easy fixes and require deep sacrifice and sharing as well as failures, trial and error, frustrations, and lots of learning and humility and courage from everyone — everyone — those who need the help and those dedicated to the helping.

As it turns out, even the helpers and those needing the help, is a false division — just another us and them.

As Jesus tells us in so many ways, we are all needing help and fully capable of helping. We all have something to give and we all have things we need help with. Our wounds. Our blind spots. Our sins. Our ignorance. Our prejudices. Our false assumptions.

I profusely thank everyone who has contributed to these last ten years of neighborliness and friendship. Thank you for your generosity of time and money and most of all for your willingness to go on this journey of discovery of *Who is my neighbor? Who is my friend?* Embracing the us. Denying the them.

Amen