

Who Is Your Neighbor? **Joshua 3:7-17; Matthew 22:36-40, 23:1-7**

In a time when computers, social media, mass transportation, and air travel to all parts of the world allow us to eat each meal of the day in a different city or even on a different continent, how do we define who our neighbor's really are?

In a time when neighbors, in America at least, are people we rarely see, thanks to garage door openers and busy lives, or are thought of as primarily as nuisances with barking dogs and noisy children, how can we possibly LOVE our neighbor's?

And, when most people in the world find it difficult to define what it means to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind", and do not love themselves, how then, are we to love our neighbor?

These are some of the questions that come to my mind as I read the passage that comes from the Gospel According to Matthew 22: 37-39. For this reason, during the month of November I will use these verses as the foundation for a series of sermons considering the overriding question: WHO IS YOUR NEIGHBOR?

Love thy neighbor was, in part, Jesus' answer when the Pharisees, the chief religious sect of the day, asked Him about the greatest commandment in the Law. In asking Jesus this question, their aim was to test Him. However, his answer stunned them: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

Jesus was summing up all the law in these two statements. If we love the Lord God with all our heart, soul and mind, loving our neighbor is the natural result. The question is, who is our neighbor and how do we love him or her? Looking at what Jesus had to say, in Matthew 5:43, "You have heard it said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

OK, that means Jesus says our neighbor includes enemies and persecutors! But how do we love someone who is actually hateful toward us? Is our neighbor more than the person who lives next door? Someone who lives in the community? Might our neighbors be all of the folks who came to Community Fun Day a couple weeks ago? Perhaps we don't agree with their life style. Maybe we don't speak the same language they speak. And, what about Nathan, who does not believe I can or should be pastor of this church because I am a woman, is he my neighbor? Can I love him?

When we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, we grow to recognize that everyone is part of God's Creation. How is that possible? Paul writes in Romans 13:8-10:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments: You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet, and if there are other commandments are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Loving your neighbor is not as hard as it may seem. It simply means respecting others and regarding their needs as desires as highly as you regard your own. However, it may require some help from God through Christ. You see, the way we love our neighbor, even those that are hard to love, is by getting to know Christ, the living Word of God, more intimately. Growing closer to God, loving God with our whole hearts, our whole souls, our whole minds, our whole selves, equips us to love ourselves and to love others.