

**Love Does No Wrong**  
**Sermon 150 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 28, 2022**  
**Mark 12:28-35 & Romans 13:8-10**

Who is the best neighbor you ever had?

What was it about them that made them such a good neighbor?

We have been blessed by our neighbors just about everywhere we've lived. We always try our best to be good neighbors as well. Keeping the lawn trimmed, the cars out of the way, saying hello, and regularly checking in to see how things are going when we run into one another on a walk. We also like to invite our neighbors over for dinner occasionally, we like to drop off bread and jam on their porches from time to time, just our little way of saying, "We see you and we want to share a little bit of goodness with you."

Justin and I used to feel pretty good about our neighborliness until we moved into our current house and began getting to know the neighbors here. There's one family across the street who outdoes anyone I've ever known with neighborly love. They are always hosting dinner parties for the four households that live on our little stretch of the road. And when I say dinner parties, I mean meals fit for any five-star restaurant. Here is an example of just how neighborly they are. A few weeks ago I had a lot of work all piled up. I had evening meetings four nights in a row and all of my coming and going was a bit rushed. Derek, who lives across the street and is often out tending his beautiful garden saw the tired look on my face and reached out with a text. "You ok?" He asked, "You didn't look like yourself." "Yep," I wrote back in a rush, "just busy this week."

The next day there was another text asking, "What's your favorite dessert?" Assuming he was just crowdsourcing and menu planning for the next gathering they would host, I wrote back, "hmm... probably bread pudding"

Two days later there was a text saying, "Whenever you get a break, your bread pudding is ready for pick up... Or, if you want, I can drop it off on your front porch."

That's a good neighbor!

Good neighbors have shown up in all kinds of ways throughout our lives. Sometimes offering a homemade treat and other times offering a quiet presence. Sometimes showing love through acts of service, such as cutting the grass when life happens and you have to leave town without time to prepare or helping you change the breaks when they see you've got your car up on blocks in the driveway. Sometimes good neighbors live next door or across the street and sometimes they live across town but they still somehow show up just at the right moment. Perhaps because good neighboring is more about presence than it is about proximity.

Few themes from scripture reach so far into our "secular" lives as much as the theme of neighboring. Even as I prepared for this sermon I couldn't get the *State Farm* jingle out of

my head: *Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.* Similarly the endless episodes of Dateline offering a plethora of examples of “how not to neighbor” run through the mind. Stories of neighbors resorting to threats and violence over the smallest matters of difference that have grown out of control. Who are your neighbors? Are they more like State Farm? Or more like Dateline? What are they teaching you about love?

Few questions have occupied the theological mind more than those about neighboring. The biblical narrative asks: *Who is my neighbor? How shall we treat our foreign neighbor? What about our enemy neighbor, or the woman neighbor, or the sick neighbor, or the impure neighbor, or worst of all... the sinner neighbor? How shall we treat them?*

Variations on the same theme continue throughout Christian history as theologians and people of faith wrestle with the call of the Bible to love our neighbors - without qualification.

In the first century, Paul says that love is the greatest virtue.

In the fourth century John Chrysostom says: *Love for one another makes us immaculate. There is not a single sin which can destroy the power of love, like fire would not destroy...* he continues, *Let us increase this love in our souls in order to stand with all the saints, for they, too, all pleased God through their love of neighbor.*

In the sixth century, Father Dorotheus says: *Do not require love from your neighbor, for he who requires it is troubled if he does not encounter it. Rather, it is better that you yourself show love toward your neighbor, and in this way bring your neighbor to love.*

The trend continues into the modern era.

In the sixties, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on the Parable of the Good Samaritan saying,

*This morning I would like to talk with you about a good man. He is a man whose exemplary life will always stand as a flashing light to plague the dozing conscience of mankind. His goodness was not found in his passive commitment to a particular creed, but in his active participation in a life-saving deed. His goodness was not found in the fact that his moral pilgrimage had reached its destination point, but in the fact that he made the love ethic a reality as he journeyed life's highway. He was good because he was a good neighbor.<sup>1</sup>*

In the 1970s in Nicaragua, peasants gathered on Sundays to discuss the Gospel in lieu of a more traditional sermon. Their conversations were recorded and are printed in a book called, *The Gospel in Solentiname*. After pages of discussion on today's reading from Mark,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/draft-chapter-iii-being-good-neighbor>

they sum it up this way: *Christ shows us here [...] what the kingdom of heaven is: love among neighbors.*<sup>2</sup>

In the eighties, the North Carolina born evangelist Billy Graham even addressed it in his famous sermon entitled: *Who Is My Neighbor?* delivered all over the country at rallies before thousands of people. In this sermon he said:

*What is your responsibility to your neighbor? In the modern world of transportation and technology the whole world has become a neighborhood, without being a brotherhood. And the whole world suddenly becomes our neighbor... and we have a responsibility to them.*

He goes on to say:

*Throughout history the church has shifted back and forth as to its emphasis on personal redemption and social involvement; they both go hand in hand.*<sup>3</sup>

That history continues to the present day as the church *still* explores the questions: *Who is my neighbor? How am I to engage with them? And what does my relationship with my neighbor have to do with my relationship with God?*

Dr. Emilie Townes says it this way: *When you start with an understanding that God loves everyone, justice isn't very far behind.*<sup>4</sup>

And Dr. Cornell West so famously reminded us in the year 2010, *Justice is what love looks like in public.*<sup>5</sup>

So it seems these two loves, love of God and love of neighbor, are woven together throughout all of Christian history; and they appear in Christian communities from all over the world. Of course, the language of this love has evolved over time going by the names of charity, generosity, compassion, kindness, grace, forgiveness, and justice. Each one rooted deeply in the biblical text; each one found in the ministry of Jesus; each one pointing to a timeless and universal Christian ethic that insists that we take our love of neighbor as seriously as we take our love of God.

There have been countless examples of people who have been good and Godly neighbors. Sometimes neighborly love pours out in the public sphere as advocates amplify the voices of those who are in distress, those who have been marginalized or outcast. And sometimes the love of a good neighbor is a quieter event, a simple act that says, "You don't seem like yourself today. Is there anything I can do to lighten the load?"

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<sup>2</sup> Ernesto Cardinal. *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 531.

<sup>3</sup> [https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=797604911172785&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=797604911172785&_rdr)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/socialjesus/2021/05/inherent-relationship-love-justice-part2/>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

One of the greatest examples of neighborly love is found in Clarence Jordan, the founder of Koinonia Farm in Americus, GA. Jordan was born in 1912. He was a farmer and a scholar of New Testament Greek. As a child, he noticed the racial and economic injustice in his small town and by these, he was greatly troubled. Vowing to create change in order to strengthen his whole community, specifically by improving the lot of the sharecroppers, he enrolled in the University of Georgia and studied agriculture. The more he learned, the more he understood that the roots of poverty were a place where the spiritual and economic held hands. This awakening contributed to his decision to go to seminary, so he enrolled in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky where he earned a Master's Degree in Theology and a Ph.D. in the Greek New Testament. He was subsequently ordained as a Southern Baptist minister.

A few years later, he and his wife befriended a missionary couple, Martin and Mabel England and in 1942 the four of them moved to a 440-acre piece of land in Americus, GA to create an interracial, Christian farming community called *Koinonia*. Bound to equality of all persons and committed to nonviolence, ecological stewardship, and common ownership of all possessions, the Jordans and the Englands lived in harmony with themselves and their neighbors... for a while.

As the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s progressed, the white neighbors of Koinonia began to see them as a threat, and the farm was targeted for boycotts, and violence, and it was even bombed. Through it all, the Jordans and the Englands did not waver but kept on with their mission. Clarence Jordan did not retaliate against his hateful neighbors. He also chose not to participate in the marches and demonstrations of the day. He held fast to his calling to love his neighbors (all of them) by living in a radically different kind of community. Though Jordan did not live to see it all come to fruition, his legacy of neighbor love helped give birth to other organizations like Habitat for Humanity, the Fuller Center for Housing, and Jubilee Partners.

And their work carries on today offering work, respect, hospitality, hope, food, and respite for every neighbor who comes knocking. Koinonia Partners have caught a glimpse of God's answer to the questions: *Who are my neighbors? And how am I to show them love?*

People come from near and far to spend time on the farm. Some stay a week, some stay for months, and all of them experience the love of God through the presence of a neighbor. All of this became possible because a young boy noticed the strained look on the faces of his neighbors of a different race. He noticed something wasn't right, and he began working to find a solution. Clarence Jordan's solution was unique to his gifts, his interests, his resources, and his discernment together with God.

If you and I were to discern with God how we, too, might become good and Godly neighbors, our solutions might look different. But we will never know if we stop asking, stop seeking, or stop trying to discern with God how we might grow in neighborly love...

What would our world look like if we really began to love our neighbors?  
Yes, those who live nearby, but also those who live across town.

Yes, those who share an ethnic heritage, a social status, an economic position but also those with whom - from our view at least - we share nothing in common.

What would happen if we could see their pain - even from a distance - and work to lighten their load?

Maybe it would ding, like a text message coming in asking, "Everything ok? You didn't seem like yourself."

Maybe it would smell like bread pudding, fresh out of the oven.

Or maybe it would look like an intentional community held together by the bond of love - love of God *and* love of neighbor. Neither one more important. Both our highest commitments.

What would it be like to live like that? To be *good* neighbors...

Maybe the Nicaraguan peasants were right... maybe it *would* look a bit like the kingdom of Heaven.