

Wesley United Methodist Church
January 17, 2016
"The Most Difficult Commandment."
Mark 12:28-34

Firefighters on Canton, OH, rushed to the home of Lisa Ash, a couple of years ago, to extinguish a fire. They pulled out of her oven a smoldering voodoo doll made from cloth and twigs that she said she was using to cast a spell against her neighbor, based on advice she said she received from a telephone psychic line.

There was a segment on 20/20 some time ago that was called "Neighbors at War." It showed how next-door neighbors do battle with each other, fighting, fussing, suing, sometimes even shooting each other because of a barking dog, or a noisy power tool, or a bouncing basket ball. Neighbors at war. Is there a solution? Of course there is.

Jesus was asked, "Which commandment is the first of all?" And Jesus answered, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Here it is: the secret to all human relations. Love your neighbor as yourself.

When William Penn was given land in the New World by King Charles II, he was also granted power to make war on the Indians. But Penn refused to build forts or have soldiers in his province. Instead, he treated the Indians kindly and as equals. All disputes between the two races were settled by a meeting of six white men and six Indians. When Penn died the Indians mourned him as a friend. After Penn's death, other colonies were constantly under attack by the Indians. Pennsylvania was free from such attacks, however, as long as they refused to arm themselves. Many years later the Quakers were outvoted in the State, and the colony began building forts and training soldiers against possible aggression. You can guess what happened. They were immediately attacked. William Penn understood that this is the key to all human relations: Love your neighbor as yourself. How difficult can it be to love your neighbor?

Well, if you ever had a difficult neighbor, then you know. You've heard it said, Strong fences make good neighbors. But Jesus wasn't talking just about the people next door. Jesus taught us that our real neighbor is anyone with whom we have contact. It makes no difference whether our neighbor lives next door or across town or in Zanzibar. If our life somehow impinges on someone else's life, that person is our neighbor. God's world is a giant neighborhood. That is the first thing we need to see. I don't want to sound too much like Mr. Rogers on the children's television show, but if we take the teachings of Jesus literally, we are residents of a giant neighborhood and everyone on earth is our neighbor.

Less than a year after Richard and Judie Wheeler began building their dream house in Winona, Texas, Richard learned he had cancer. For the first time in months, the saws and hammers were silent around the Wheeler home. Then a member of the Wheelers' church stopped by the house they were renting and asked Judie for the plans to the new dwelling. What happened next resembled an old-fashioned barn raising. Members of the church started up where Richard had left off. Word spread through the community, and people began offering their services. Some knew a little about plumbing, while others could install wiring. A local restaurant fed volunteers all the chicken-fried steaks and hamburgers they could eat. As the house neared completion, Richard Wheeler's battle with cancer ended. He never saw the house finished. But Judie, who moved in with their daughters a month after Richard's death, said it had been easier for him knowing that the compassionate neighbors of Winona were taking care of his family.

Wouldn't you like to live in a neighborhood like that? That is Jesus' dream for the entire world. That people shall care about other people. Red people, yellow people, brown people, black people, white people, people of every race, people of every religion, people of every nation, people of every political persuasion. We shall love one another. How difficult can that be? Well, evidently, it's quite difficult. Here, in our own nation a nation fashioned on Christian principles as we like to remind ourselves, we are a nation divided. We are divided by race, by religion, by economic position. What is the solution? How can we have the kind of caring neighborhood that Jesus envisioned?

Well, the key to loving others is, first of all, you need to love yourself. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." So the key to fulfilling the second commandment is to, first of all, love yourself. And there is some truth to this. When people hate themselves they are apt to be abusive toward others. Low self esteem is certainly a factor in bigotry and racial hatred. And so, according to many psychologists, the key to getting people to love one another is to first get them to love themselves.

A teacher who had attended a class on the power of self-esteem, came up with an ingenious way of implementing it. At the beginning of the school year, she would kneel and whisper in her first grader's ears, "You've got to be special to be in my class. I only get the really smart students." Each child reacted with pleasant surprise upon discovering they were "special." She ended up having far less difficulty in her classroom than the other teachers. She also started receiving phone calls from parents telling her they were glad someone finally recognized their children were so smart! It turned out to be a win/win situation. Positive self-esteem raised the children's performance. Children learn what they live.

It is so easy to give in to our emotions; to hate; to seek revenge when someone has wronged us; to ignore the plight of the poor; to wrap ourselves in smug self-satisfaction with the attitude that we have worked for what we have, let others do the same. But there is a man hanging on a cross who says to us, "I have loved you with a love that only can be repaid one way, 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.'" Amen.