

Sermon for Sunday, September 1, 2024
Deep Life of Overflow—Loving Your Uncomfortable Neighbor

1 Peter 3:13-17
Matthew 5:43-48

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We've been edging our way (and I've been warning you) toward this sermon for several weeks. In a time when we all have opinions about many matters and we are also aware that there are folks who deeply disagree with us, well, how then do we love our uncomfortable neighbor?

It is my intention to share some stories that will present nuances about how we think about our uncomfortable neighbor. We are going to ease into this topic by considering the uncomfortable neighbor who has a personal life situation that makes *them* uncomfortable and then that situation makes us uncomfortable.

Let me give you an example: My husband Mark and several other engineers were hired for a new team with a specific work assignment at IBM in 1980. The engineers were mostly recent college grads and fairly young. Most were married but none of them had children yet. All of us were new to Rochester and we did a lot of things together socially. One of the couples was the first to become pregnant. Jan carried the child until nearly full-term and then one day the baby stopped moving. She went to her ob/gyn and to their great dismay it was determined that the baby had died. A few days later she delivered a stillborn baby girl that they named Angela. You can imagine the grief that filled that household...it was their first child. But we, her friends, being young and inexperienced, didn't know what to do or say to them. Later her husband told the guys in the work group that she felt like a pariah. No one was coming to see her or talk to her—she was alone.

This was a neighbor that was uncomfortable and we didn't know how to love her.

This example is perhaps close to last week's theme of loving our comfortable neighbor in that it is an example of loving someone that we are friends or acquaintances with: our comfortable neighbor. But I want to emphasize that one way to think of the phrase is to consider how we love a neighbor who is the

uncomfortable one; the one who is grieving or sorrowful while we personally are not. How do we love someone enmeshed in personal tragedy? How do we love "our uncomfortable neighbor?"

Now let's pivot to think about a different sort of uncomfortable neighbor: a homeless person.

Recently Rita Pearson told me a story about an interaction she had with a homeless woman. The scene played out like this: Merle had a dentist appointment in downtown Red Wing. As Rita and Merle approached the door of the office a woman approached them and asked for help. Rita told her that she had to get Merle inside for his appointment—which she accomplished. But after getting him settled she went back outside and engaged the woman in conversation. Rita was candid with her: she didn't have any money. But the woman was just grateful that Rita took the time to listen to her story.

And maybe that's exactly what we need to do in either of these two situations. Maybe that's how we love our uncomfortable neighbor: by giving of our time and providing a listening ear.

Many of us are familiar with the Biblical story of Job. He had a startling number of tragedies occur in his family: from loss of wealth to the death of his children. In the midst of this travail friends come to comfort him. They try to rationalize the troubles and mostly they say that it must be Job's fault; that he surely must have done something awful; some terrible sin to cause all of these troubles. (Which Job steadfastly denies) Bible commentators generally say that the best thing that Job's friends did was to sit for days in silence with him. I would agree. From that example I would simply say that the most important thing that any friend can do is listen. That's how we might love not just our comfortable neighbor but also our uncomfortable one.

When we encounter someone who has a vastly different opinion on a topic (any topic) we might ask an open-ended question like: Clearly you feel very strongly about this matter, help me to understand how you came to this conclusion. In asking the question this way you are not giving up your opinion or belief. You are seeking to understand their point of view. You are walking for a brief time in their shoes. And maybe you learn something that you didn't know.

I would also say that you have to be intentional in your listening. You must not be crafting a rebuttal to their statements while they

are speaking. (This is really hard to do!) It is far better to acknowledge your “listening” by asking a follow up question that repeats a phrase that they said and asks for more detail. How do we love “our uncomfortable neighbor?”

My final example is a story that came out of WEW conversation. It’s a story of sacrificial action. Sid told a story about being in disagreement with a homeowner over the bill for repairing the roof. After some haggling Sid finally said, “Pay the difference to your favorite charity.” It occurred to me after he told this story that sometimes we followers of Jesus have to take a humble stance and stand before the uncomfortable neighbor in a manner consistent with the example of Jesus.

What did Jesus do when he was arrested? He told the disciples to put away their swords.

What did Jesus say when he was on trial? Very little.

What did Jesus do when he hung on the cross? He used the little strength that he had left to speak comforting words to the criminal hanging next to him—his uncomfortable neighbor.

And he gave up his power, and his glory, and his honor, for the salvation of humanity. How do we love “our uncomfortable neighbor?”

The apostle Peter taught in his letter that we are to allow God to build us into *a holy priesthood*. 1 Peter 2:4-5 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, *to be a holy priesthood*, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

In the same paragraph he emphasizes that “*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people*, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

My friends, when we follow Jesus we are granted admittance into a holy priesthood and we take on the task of being representatives of Jesus. We are the human face of Jesus in the world. And like Jesus we are called to put away our swords. We may be called to use our words in defense of God but, as you well know, sometimes actions speak louder than words. So when things go south our job is to use the little bit of strength within us to care for the people around us. Think about the comfort Jesus’ words brought to a dying man on a cross: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Would you be able to say something like, “Today you will be with Jesus in Paradise?”

Even to your most uncomfortable neighbor? To the homeless person whose presence is setting your teeth on edge? To the client who insists upon taking advantage—who has no interest in your business’ wellbeing and simply wants to be a winner in some “cosmic and imaginary war where they come out on top.” Can you be a humble servant of Jesus and through your actions demonstrate your membership in the royal priesthood of God?

Jesus taught “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;”

It is absolutely true that God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” Sometimes we want to put our fist up in the air and say, “God this just isn’t fair.” God’s response is “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Strive to love those that you disagree with knowing that God loves them just as much as God loves you. Recognize that God gives all people freedom to choose. And sometimes those choices are beyond our understanding. God gives each of us the freedom to choose. And our challenge is to choose to follow Jesus and to live in the shadow of his example.

I recognize it’s hard. I know that I fail frequently. You don’t need to have me chastise you because you are probably deeply aware of your own failings. But we gather here each week to confess our failures before God, to hear the words of forgiveness and to be strengthened for the week ahead, trusting that with the help of the Holy Spirit within us we will be strengthened to love our uncomfortable neighbor just as readily as our comfortable one. Amen.