Who Is My Neighbor?

We are going to think about neighbors today. Although the word “neighbor” is used in quite different ways—both in the Bible and in common parlance—in this instance I am thinking of those who live around us, on the same block or in the same apartment building.

I want to begin with something of a survey. I have ten questions. In your mind, or on paper, if you like, I want you to answer each question. I suspect that our responses will be quite revealing.

1) Do you know the names of everyone who lives on your block or in your apartment complex?
2) How about their children’s names or grandchildren’s names?
3) Have you been in your neighbors’ homes and have they been in yours?
4) If you needed a tablespoon of vanilla, would you more likely go to a neighbor to ask for some, or would you get in your car and go to the store?
5) Have you ever borrowed any tools from a neighbor?
6) Would it surprise you, and perhaps even seem odd, if a neighbor knocked on your door and asked you to hold a ladder while he gets leaves out of the gutter of his house?
7) Would you know if one of your neighbors were ill?
8) If you ever felt unsafe in your home, would you likely call a neighbor or someone who lives farther away?
9) If you were putting on a big party to celebrate a birthday or anniversary or graduation, would you be sure to invite your neighbors?

Finally:

10) If you were scheduled to preach at Memorial Church at Harvard and if on that particular Sunday your wife were out of town with your family’s second car, and if it is your habit to show up on time but also to cut it a little close, and if you could not find your car keys anywhere, and it’s too late to call a cab, and time is running out, and your heart is beginning to race, would you feel comfortable knocking on your neighbor’s door to ask to borrow their car for the morning?

And, no, in my case that last question is not a hypothetical one.
So how did you do in this little survey? And how did your neighbors do? Did it reveal that you have rich relationships with your neighbors? Do you look out for one another? Care for one another? Or, is it clear that your neighbors are more like strangers who live in proximity but not community?

I must confess that my own responses to my own questions are quite revealing. There was one instance when I did knock on my neighbors’ door on a Sunday morning to ask if I could borrow their car to get to my preaching engagement. They immediately agreed, almost as if they get requests like that on a regular basis. I was so grateful. I even got an upgrade. The car I borrowed was an Audi.

But other than that, I seldom relate to the people who live around me, no less rely on them, or express care for them. I say that in a spirit of confession. As a person and as a pastor, I greatly value community, friendship and mutual care.

So why don’t I know more about my neighbors? And why don’t I interact with them more frequently or more deeply? Well, perhaps it is because I spend so much of my time immersed in the community that is Village Church. Or perhaps it is because I spend a lot of time trying to keep up with far-flung friends and family through phone calls and e-mail. Or perhaps it is because I live in a neighborhood where there are so many families with young children and my children are grown. But even as I offer these possible explanations—or are they excuses?—they don’t entirely satisfy me.

Obviously, this may not be your experience. You may have close relationships with your neighbors. But there is no question that an increasing number of people in our culture do not relate as closely to their neighbors as they once did. According to Harvard social scientist Robert Putnam, the frequency with which Americans spend a social evening with neighbors is less than half what it was 50 years ago.

And we don’t have to turn to scholars and researchers to know that something has changed. At a gathering of Village Church folk yesterday, someone said, “As a boy, during the summer, my parents shooed me out of the house at 8:30 in the morning and didn’t expect me to come home until 5:00.” Or did he say, “expected me not to come until 5:00?” In any case, where was he? In the neighborhood. Mostly outside, but also in and out of friend’s houses. Something like that still happens in some neighborhoods today—actually, I live in one of them—but it is increasingly rare, and particularly among the affluent. For the most part, those of us who have more money live in poorer neighborhoods—that is, poorer in having any sense of neighborhood, of community.

I just finished a book that I commend to you: *In the Neighborhood* by Peter Lovenheim. But it wasn’t the title that caught my attention. It was the subtitle: *The Search for Community on an American Street, One Sleepover at a Time.*

Before we get to the sleepover part, I need to tell you that Lovenheim was forced to consider the deficiencies of his own affluent suburban neighborhood in response to a tragedy that occurred on his street. A mother of two young children was shot and killed by her husband in their home and then the husband killed himself. The children burst from their house screaming and ran to a neighbor’s house for help.
Obviously, that event rocked the neighborhood, but in addition to the sadness of it all, what affected Lovenheim was the realization that he knew very little about his neighbors. They were both successful physicians, both of whom liked to play tennis and work in the yard. Their two kids seemed nice and well-adjusted when he would occasionally have them in a car pool.

What he learned, only after their deaths, is that the father had showed signs of an unbalanced mental state for some time. The mother would often call her best friend and express concern about what he might do, but she lived 20 miles away. The night of her murder, the mother repeatedly left messages asking her friend if she and her children could come stay her because she did not feel safe. But the friend couldn’t be reached and the mother decided to go home, in spite of her misgivings.

After hearing about how the events of that horrible night unfolded, Lovenheim was haunted by questions: Why hadn’t the woman sought refuge or help from her neighbors? Why hadn’t she knocked on his door, or the door of another neighbor, and simply said, “I don’t feel safe?” Why did she call that one friend over and over again and not once turn to someone close at hand, a neighbor?

He ended up with an answer to his questions that he did not like. He concluded that a contributing factor to the woman’s death—or, at least, a possible one—was the isolation she felt in his affluent neighborhood. As one of his other neighbors put it, “Here, ninety-nine percent of your day you’re behind closed doors. And you’re hidden behind three layers of protection: a front door, an alarm system, and you have thousands of square feet to spend time in.” The irony, of course—the tragic irony, in this case—is that all of the trappings of affluence that promise to protect us from the outside world are part of what may have left the murdered woman so vulnerable.

In any case, in response to this tragedy, Lovenheim decided to get to know his neighbors, to spend time with them one-by-one. He thought, what better way to get to know your neighbors than to sleep over? He remembered the sleepovers from his youth, how there was a kind of intimacy about it, the whole experience of sleeping under the same roof, and particularly when you woke up and encountered one another first thing in the morning. You learned things about the families who hosted a sleepover, things you wouldn’t learn at a picnic or in a carpool. So, he began to reason, won’t I have something of the same experience as an adult if I sleep over at my neighbors’ homes?

And, yes, he did approach a number of his neighbors and asked if he could sleep over and, yes, about half of them agreed. Most of the book is a recounting of what he learned behind the doors of his neighbor’s homes. There was a real estate agent considering leaving her husband, and the recently married couple, and a brave single mother with terminal cancer and the lonely retired doctor. Eventually, by entering home after home, through what I think of as Lovenheim’s pollination of neighborliness, the lonely old doctor learned about the young woman with cancer, and began to drive her to her doctor’s appointments while other neighbors watched her children. And over time, something at least resembling a true neighborhood began to emerge.
In the Hebrew Bible, the word most often translated as “neighbor,” rea, can mean different things. It can refer rather broadly to a friend, tribesman, fellow Israelite—pretty much anyone who is not a close relative or a foreigner. So the injunction found in the Hebrew Bible, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is a broad charge to treat with compassion the people you encounter each day.

But the same word rea also has a narrower meaning, referring to someone who lives close by. That is the meaning retained in our English word neighbor, which derives from the word “nigh,” meaning close by, and “boer,” meaning farmer or dweller.

When Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” he responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. By doing that, Jesus broadens the definition of neighbor to include the foreigner, the one with whom we would not normally associate. A neighbor is anyone who acts with compassion in response to another’s need.

And that is an important charge and reminder. So there have been occasions when I have preached on just that theme. In one sermon a while back I said this:

When people use the expression, “Charity begins at home,” or some more sophisticated equivalent, it is most often to set the limits on the scope of our concern. Because most of us do not get much past the beginnings of charity, charity can begin and end in the same place—at home, or very close to home. The more telling question is not, “Where does charity begin?” but “Where does charity end?” Does it end with our family, our community? Or does it end only when it reaches the person in need, no matter who that person is or where that person lives?

So I have preached that sermon and that’s an important sermon. But today I am preaching a different sermon. Today I am asking if we are caring for the very people who are around us, our neighbors. You see, I am convinced that sometimes it is easier to care for people who are something of a distance away. Humanity can look a bit better and our sympathies can be more easily tapped with a little distance. People up close are sometimes harder to deal with. There is a reason why Jesus said, “Love your neighbor,” because sometimes that is hard to do. G. K. Chesterton once observed that it is not coincidence that Jesus says both, “Love your neighbor” and “Love your enemy” because often those are the same people.

And notice that in scripture we are not told to love our friends or our family. That is assumed. But we are told to love our neighbor. That is not assumed and in our culture today increasingly it seems clear why it cannot be assumed.

When someone asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” it was a probing question. He was asking how far his compassion should reach. In essence, he was asking, “Who do I need to care about and care for?” Today, for many of us, the question, “Who is my neighbor?” might sound quite different, more along the lines of, “Who is that person who lives next to me? Do I know her name and her children’s names? Could she turn to me in a time of need?”

In most instances, we do not choose our neighbors and scripture is filled with teachings about how we are to treat those we did not choose, the ones we are stuck with. In
reading scripture you get the impression that there is a lot at stake in how we treat the ones we are stuck with. And there is a lot at stake because, you see, when we love the ones we did not choose, the ones we are stuck with, we have a chance to reflect something of the love of a God who is stuck with us all.