

“Go and Do Likewise”

A sermon engaging domestic violence by Jay Kieve

Y'all remember Randy Klein, right? No? What about his brother, Jonas? They lived on Stonehenge Drive. Come on, you remember, their dad worked for Coca-Cola, and they had every flavor of Fanta in their 'fridge!

Oh right, I forgot that we didn't all grow up in the same suburban Atlanta neighborhood. I'll give you the rundown. I lived here and Randy and Joe lived two houses to the right. Mr. Saunders lived between us. Donald and his siblings lived on the other side of us and Larry on the other side of him. In fourth grade, I got into a fist fight with Larry. Gina lived in the neighborhood, too. So did schoolmates Anita, Kevin, Richard, Leigh; and adults, the Odom, the Parkers, and the Carters. Brian, whose nickname was “Beef,” lived at the end of the street.

You see, I can still answer the lawyer in Luke's question, “Who's my neighbor?” All of those folks lived around me for the decade between second grade and college. It seems like an easy question, doesn't it? I bet you could answer that question, too. You probably recalled the names and saw the faces of your neighbors as I named mine. For me, thirty-five years ago, it was the people I played Whiffle Ball and touch football with. Now it is Luna and her Great Dane, Ballew; James, our veterinarian; and Casey.

Still, it seems like an easy question from the lawyer, until Jesus answers it! Did you notice what Jesus did?

“Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus ... ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’” That's an odd question. Usually, we don't have to do anything to inherit something, other than live longer than someone else. But I think we know what he wonders, “What must I do to be in God's good favor and gain eternal life?” Jesus responds to the question like an irritated teacher (I've heard this tone!). “What does it say in the book? If it is in the book, it might be on the test! ... What is written in the law? What do you read there?” The lawyer clearly knows his legal stuff because he answers with a combination of Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” “You have given the right answer; do this and you will live.”

See, that is nice, love of God and love of neighbor leads to eternal life. I've got it, just love God and neighbor; love God and Randy Klein. Just love God and Larry...our fight was a long time ago, so OK, I can do that.

But the lawyer can't leave the answer as it is, he wants to “justify himself.” I guess he wants to make sure he doesn't miss out on eternal life on a technicality, so he asks a follow-up question: “Who's my neighbor?” And that is when Jesus tells him the story, we all know so well.

A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and was ambushed by robbers who stripped him, beat him, and left him half dead. A priest saw him but crossed the road and passed him by. A Levite saw him but crossed the road and passed him by. When a Samaritan drew near and saw him, he dressed his wounds, put him on his animal, and took him to safety. The Samaritan nursed him overnight and then offered to pay whatever bills mounted in the coming days for his care.

Who is my neighbor? The word “neighbor” has meant the same thing for a very long time. Two-thousand odd years ago the Greek word recorded in this story, which we translate as “neighbor,” meant “near” or physical proximity. Our word “neighbor” means the same thing. It is from a 10th-century Middle English word (hence the odd arrangement of vowels and so many consonants in a row) that also means “close proximity.” Randy and Larry were my neighbors because they lived near to me. Same for Kevin, Luna and Ballew, and “Beef.” Neighbor has meant the same thing for ages, and the same thing for the lawyer...until Jesus tells him the story!

Jesus turned it around. Usually, someone is our neighbor because we perceive them as close to us. Where we are determines who our neighbors are. The focus is on us and the circle of neighborly proximity is drawn around us. But who did Jesus say the neighbor was? Look closely, the Samaritan, not the half-dead man. “Which of these three was a neighbor to the injured man?” “The one who showed him mercy,” the lawyer replied. That is the Samaritan, the one who Jesus said, “came near him” (v. 33), went to him. Jesus has flipped on its head our perception of neighbor. Jesus redefines neighbor as a person we can move toward.

This is revolutionary. The lawyer wants to know, “Who is my neighbor?” Who is in my circle of proximity that I must love? Jesus’s story and reply indicated, it is not about your circle, Mr. Lawyer, it’s about whose circle you can move into. The right question is no longer, “Is the injured man my neighbor?” With Jesus, the question becomes, “Can I move toward the injured man and become his neighbor?”

For too long it has been too easy for good religious folks, for priests and Levites, for preachers and elders, and Christians to move to the other side of the street. To move away from someone—physically, culturally, emotionally, religiously—and use our distance to imagine they are not our neighbors. But Jesus turns all of that upside down. The question is no longer, “Is that person close enough to me to be my neighbor?” Now the question is, “Can I move close enough to be a neighbor to that person?”

The circle of neighborliness is not drawn around us, we must move into the circle of the person in need. “Who was a neighbor to the injured man?” The one who moved near to him and showed him mercy. Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.”

“Go and do likewise.” Loving God and following Jesus become loving neighbors. I believe that moving near to others in love and showing mercy will change the world. We can’t be satisfied with a world where people move to the other side of the street to avoid people in pain. We can’t imagine that if we close our eyes in denial, we gain distance and are relieved of neighborliness.

We are surrounded by people injured and in pain who need Gospel neighbors. As many 20 million people a year in the United States suffer domestic violence, which means their intimate partner physically assaulted them.¹ But domestic violence isn’t limited to punches and kicks, perpetrators also exert control by socially isolating their partner, controlling all the household finances, and even coerce reproduction and sexually assault. Intimate partner violence accounts for 15% of all violent crime with more than 20,000 calls to domestic violence hotlines per day.

People experiencing domestic violence need good neighbors. They need people to move near to them by learning about the dynamics of abuse and responding with compassion. People who have been harmed by an intimate partner need neighbors who support local domestic violence prevention and response agencies with generous donations and volunteering. Victims of domestic violence need neighbors in churches who, when they teach about marriage and divorce, see the experience of violence as faithful justification for ending a covenant relationship. Loving

¹ All statistics from <https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS>, accessed 8/9/2023.

God and following Jesus become loving neighbors by moving near to people experiencing violence at home.

The world is in pain. See and move near, become loving neighbors, and show mercy. Loving God and following Jesus, "Go and do likewise."