

Neighborliness

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Rev. Jane Thickstun

When I go out of town, I need to find someone who can look after my kitty. I have three neighbors who have done kitty-sitting for me here. One is a mother with two little children, and when their family went on vacation, I looked after their cats and hens for them. I'm still eating the eggs that I hard-boiled. Their kitties left me a dead mouse on the living room rug one day. I didn't eat that.

I have good neighbors. It's easy to like my neighbors and I'm glad I live near them and have relationships with them. It's not always so easy, however, to like our neighbors and to behave well towards them.

As more and more people are leaving their homelands due to poverty or war, they are finding it hard to settle in places like Europe and the United States. Our nation has so far taken in a tiny fraction of the refugees from Syria and the Middle East. There are people who want to keep out our neighbors from Mexico and Central America so badly, they want to build a wall across our southern border.

In a strongly polarized political climate during a conflictual presidential election season, it can be hard to talk to acquaintances in the grocery store or on Facebook. Maybe not as hard in Ithaca as some places where the red and blue are more mixed together, but we can't assume everyone feels the same politically as we do, even within this congregation. How do we talk to each other about anything beyond the weather?

The classic story about what it means to be a good neighbor is, as Kim mentioned, the story of the Good Samaritan. As a prelude to the story, Jesus affirms that the way to a good life is to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and that you should love your neighbor as yourself. He is then asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replies "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)

In the story of the Good Samaritan, the fact that it was a Samaritan offering help to a Jew takes on much more significance when we know the relationship these two ancient peoples had to each other. They were once part of the same family, united under the leadership of the great kings, David and Solomon. On Solomon's death, however, the kingdom was divided into the tribes of the Northern kingdom and the tribes of the Southern Kingdom. The northern kingdom was called Israel, and the southern kingdom was Judah. Judah contained Jerusalem and the house of David and had a more secure monarchy, but Israel was larger and more prosperous. A

real animosity developed, such as can only develop between people who were once close. By the time of Jesus much later, the northerners were called Samaritans after the major city of Samaria. The Jews were people from the southern kingdom of Judah. Both claimed to be the true descendants of the nation of Israel. By New Testament times they were so divided that the Gospel of John says that ‘Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.’ (John 4:9).

So Jews and Samaritans were arch-enemies. And yet it was the Samaritan who tended to the Jew, not the priest or the Levite, members of the Jewish religious elite. These men had no time or inclination to help one of their own in need, but someone who might be considered an enemy found within himself the compassion and generosity to take care of this stranger, even sparing no expense.

In America today, we can see examples of such compassion and generosity when disaster strikes. The outpouring of help has been quite impressive in response to hurricanes like Katrina, Sandy and Irene. We don’t only help out when the disasters affect our American neighbors, but for situations abroad as well. Think about the tsunami in Japan, the earthquake in Haiti, the typhoon in the Philippines, the list goes on and on. We can be good neighbors in such circumstances.

I read something, though, that suggested that our generosity is increasingly being tied to the perception of the sufferers being innocent victims. People give for victims of natural disasters, but they’ve lost interest in chronic problems such as poverty, which is sometimes seen as self-inflicted suffering.

Who is our neighbor? Our neighbors are those unfortunate victims of Katrina’s wrath, but our neighbor is also the woman at the shelter whose husband beat her. Our neighbor is the young man who has ended up in jail because he never learned proper ways to handle conflict. Our neighbor is the homeless person in the commons asking for our change. Our neighbor is the family member we haven’t spoken to in years who is now dying of cancer. Our neighbor is the colleague at work who is sabotaging everything we’re trying to accomplish. Our neighbor is the writer of a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, who ridicules some firmly held belief of ours. Our neighbor is the supporter of political candidates who are challenging our most deeply held values.

Some of these neighbors may seem harder to love than others.

Jesus says the way to a good life is to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Problem is, most of us don’t love ourselves very much.

I believe that’s what the first part is about—loving God is a theistic way of saying loving our better nature. Loving that part of ourselves that is divine and that remains the core of our being; loving that essence that is us— no matter how much we mess up, how badly we behave, how much we hurt others, no matter how much we block our connection to our deeper Selves through addictions. That divine spark is still within each of us no matter what we do, and that makes us worthy of love.

We need to love ourselves—that tender, caring, creative, beautiful, magnificent divinity within each and every one of us—and we need to love it with all of our heart, all of our soul, all our strength, and all our mind.

I believe if we can do that, then loving our neighbor comes more easily.

Once there was an old and very wise man. Every day he would sit outside a gas station in his rocking chair and wait to greet motorists as they passed through his small town. On this day, his granddaughter knelt down at the foot of his chair and slowly passed the time with him.

As they sat and watched the people come and go, a tall man who surely had to be a tourist -- since they knew everyone in the town -- began looking around as if he were checking out the area for a place to live.

The stranger walked up and asked, "So what kind of town is this that we're in?"

The older gentleman slowly turned to the man and replied, "Well, what kind of town are you from?"

The tourist said, "In the town I'm from everyone is very critical of each other. The neighbours all gossip about everyone, and it's a real negative place to live. I'm sure glad to be leaving. It is not a very cheerful place."

The man in the chair looked at the stranger and said, "You know, that's just how this town is."

An hour or so later a family that was also passing through stopped for gas. The car slowly turned in and rolled to a stop in front of where the older gentleman and his granddaughter were sitting. The mother jumped out with two small children and asked where the restrooms were. The man in the chair pointed to a small, bent-up sign that was barely hanging by one nail on the side of the door.

The father stepped out of the car and also asked the man, "Is this town a pretty good place to live?"

The man in the chair replied, "What about the town you are from? How is it?"

The father looked at him and said, "Well, in the town I'm from everyone is very close and always willing to lend their neighbour a helping hand. There's always a hello and thank you everywhere you go. I really hate to leave. I feel almost like we are leaving family."

The older gentlemen turned to the father and gave him a warm smile.

"You know, that's a lot like this small town."

Then the family returned to the car, said their thank yous, waved goodbye and drove away.

After the family was in the distance, the granddaughter looked up at her grandfather and asked, "Grandpa, how come when the first man came into our town you told him it was a terrible place to live and when the family came in to town you told them it was a wonderful place to live?"

The grandfather lovingly looked down at this granddaughter's wondering blue eyes and said, "No matter where you move, you take your own attitude with you and that's what makes it terrible or wonderful."

It can be harder to see the divine in some people than in others. We all have people who push our buttons. Someone who pushes my buttons like no other is my sister. I once heard someone say that our siblings know how to push our buttons because they installed them!

Some people may see the world so differently from how we see it that they seem downright dangerous to us. I'm thinking politicians here.

We have red states and blue states and within each state we have people who see God's hat as red and people who see it as blue. We are building up walls between us and ceasing to speak to each other.

We need to oppose actions and behaviors that we believe are harmful. We need to do everything we can to make sure the candidate who best represents our values wins the election. But we also need to find a way to talk to our neighbors about the very things that divide us, without animosity or hostility.

President Obama said recently, "Some may be more to blame than others for the current

[political] climate, but all of us are responsible for reversing it.” (Facebook)

Sometimes it’s hard to see the good in others because we feel threatened and our fear takes over.

Fear is the opposite of love. Fear is what keeps us from being the trusting, loving creatures we were born to be. The more we let our fear rule us, the less we are able to speak or behave in a loving manner.

These are real fears I have, and while it’s perfectly OK and natural to be afraid, when I speak from my fears, I am not speaking lovingly. When I speak from my fear, I can say things I regret later.

It is possible for me to address these issues without bad-mouthing anybody. What I need to do to act in a loving manner to these neighbors or any neighbors, is to seek to understand them. This doesn’t mean agreeing with them, or letting them have their way. But my fears can be stilled by finding understanding of those who think differently.

Once we know our neighbors—people who are different, have different needs or think differently—once we know them and are in relationship with them, they become less intimidating, less foreign, more understandable.

A former congregant in my parent’s generation once told how he came to accept gay people. He used to attend the UU camp in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, where he got to know Keith Kron, who is now a minister and the UUA’s Ministerial Transitions Director. It was through knowing Keith, he said, that he realized gay people are all right.

When we know a person, it’s harder to demonize them; harder to polarize our views on an issue and to believe in our own absolute rightness. Knowing people’s stories helps us to understand them.

At the Waffle House in the reading, there are a bunch of guys who come from different walks of life, have different opinions and different needs. Yet because they see each other nearly every day in a public place, they’ve established certain standards for how they’ll speak to each other. They don’t talk too loudly, they don’t interrupt, they don’t attack each other verbally. They bring humility and good will to the conversation. They can overcome their fear of liberals or conservatives or what have you, because here is one right in front of them; it’s just good old Joe. They can overcome their fears by being in relationship with their neighbors, and they can be in relationship because they have overcome their fears. It goes both ways.

Fear is a natural and useful emotion—it tells us when we are in danger so that we can protect ourselves. But because we all experienced some wounding in childhood and developed fears and protective behavior around those wounds, we experience a lot of fear that doesn’t serve us well, and in fact hinders us from being the whole, open and loving people we wish to be. Fear can be overcome by love.

Story of your experience with Joanna Macy. Wanting to be known

The more we can love ourselves, the more we can recognize that divine core within ourselves, the more we can love others and recognize the divine core within them. Namaste. Seeing that we’re wonderful, beautiful, loving and beloved, which we all are, gives us a sense of peace and trust that everything is, at bottom, OK. If we can approach others with the confidence that we are a loveable person, then we can deal with them without fear, without animosity, we can speak to them with respect, and indeed, even with love.

May we all feel that confidence that we are loveable, may we love our god within with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and may we reflect that love for ourselves in the love we show our neighbor.