

Love Your Neighbor
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Years ago my family and I lived in Hershey, Pennsylvania in an area known as *Little Italy*. We lived in a row of houses that were built especially for chocolate makers that immigrated from Italy at the beginning of the 20th century to work at the chocolate factory. (We lived three blocks from the factory, and yes, when the wind was blowing in the right direction, the aroma of chocolate was apparent whether the windows of our home were open or shut.)

When we moved into our home, my husband, our first three children and I were warmly embraced by our neighbors, especially when we introduced ourselves and they learned that our last name was Italian, and in spite of the fact that we would not be joining them for mass on Sunday mornings at St. Joan. When the weather was warm, our neighbors sat on their front porches, and during the fall and winter, we were often invited in for a cup of coffee with a bit of anisette for the adults and pizzelles for everyone.

The neighbors on our street and the town of Hershey were *neighborly*. We could borrow an egg or two when needed, borrow tools and get help with minor repairs on our house, drop into local stores to be recognized and called by name, and often offered advice about most everything whether requested or not. We enjoyed the three years we lived there, and we loved our neighbors.

While I continue to look back with fond memories, I think the love for neighbors that the Romans scripture calls us to is so much more than what I just described. It gets messier since we're likely to relate with others from different backgrounds, ways of thinking, ways of living their lives.

The letters attributed to Paul were written to early Christian communities populated by Jews and Gentiles who were struggling to define what it would mean to live in ways that reflected Jesus. Whether or not to eat "unclean meat" was frequently debated by Jews, but was not considered to be important to Gentiles since they didn't follow any dietary restrictions. As a matter of fact, for centuries eating only vegetables allowed devout Jews to eat at a Gentile table. However, when Jewish Christians chose to abstain from eating meat at community meals, conflict sometimes developed, even though the unity of those early Christian communities was symbolized by unity at the community table. Adding to that, some biblical scholars have argued that Gentiles had developed a superior attitude toward their Jewish brothers and sisters, and chose to ignore and dismiss their Jewish heritage.

These conflicts among others, led early Christians to question whether they were bound to obey the law? If so, did that mean all or just some of the mitzvah, the Law of Moses, that includes 613 laws as commanded by God? Paul's response - *Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law*, or more succinctly said, love your neighbor because love fulfills the law. This idea of neighbor was not limited to those who lived close to you in proximity, or members from their personal faith communities. According to the Christian mystics this love had two aspects - love of God and love of neighbor. The love of God was inseparable from the

love of neighbor, because God had become the neighbor. This love, *agape*, should be a distinguishing characteristic of Christian communities.

The law helps to set standards for acceptable behavior that allows communities to thrive, and protect members of communities from harm, and what the law cannot accomplish, love can. Love transforms hearts, and those who embody love do no harm to their neighbors.

Love builds communities, communities that strive to protect and do what is good for their neighbors. Love lives in the forms of justice and right relationship, establishes egalitarian practices, subverts covetousness and greed. The fulfillment of love becomes the measure of the law, thereby serving God and neighbor, not the other way around.

In our modern context are we loving our neighbors? I think we must with regularity ask whether or not *agape* is the distinguishing characteristic of our faith communities. Do we find the love of neighbors demonstrated in our local communities, the nation, the world in which we live? Do we strive act in ways that protect the health and welfare of those within our communities, and those outside?

We only need to watch our daily news feed to see and hear about those who continue to live under oppression, who live in constant fear, are used and enslaved, and desperately wondering if they will ever know another way of life. Far too many people are hungry, in need of adequate housing and health care. Far too many are treated unjustly because of their gender, skin color, age, ethnicity, income level, education, faith tradition. Far too many are lonely and isolated. All are God's children, our brothers and sisters, our neighbors, and we need to love them, not just in word, by demonstration.

I'm afraid we are not very unlike the early Christian communities still struggling to understand what it means to unconditionally love one another and reflect the Christ, still holding onto the differences in how we think and power differentials to continue dividing us, still struggling to define who are then neighbors we will choose to love. Yet if we carefully read the Roman's scripture, should it be that difficult to define neighbor?

Jesus showed us how to love and relate with our neighbors. The gospel of Matthew says, *I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'*

Around the world, at this very moment, some 821 million people are hungry. This number has decreased over the past decade, but hunger still kills more people than AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. Some 21,000 people still die every day from hunger or malnutrition.

And people are not hungry because the world does not produce enough food for everyone. According to the World Hunger Education Service, over the past 30 years, there has been a significant growth in food production, and improved access to food, has reduced the percentage of chronically undernourished people in developing countries from 34-15%. The principal problem is that many people still do not have sufficient resources to buy or grow enough nutritious food.

It's easy to believe that we can't really do anything about it. There are systems at work that support the oppression of people, holding them back from the ability to realize a more equitable standard of living, have resources that provide better access to nutritious food; safe and affordable housing, adequate healthcare. There are systems

that have no problem with discriminating against people because of their age, skin color, gender, ethnicity, income level, education, faith tradition. But remember, systems are made up of individuals, and if we seriously embrace and live out our faith that teaches we must life up and protect those who are oppressed, we can find ways to begin breaking down these systems.

How? As individuals we can *speak up* when we witness discriminatory language or other behaviors against people. *Stand up* and say Black Lives Matter. *Write* to your legislators to challenge the unfair treatment and abuses perpetuated by governmental laws and policies, and be sure to vote. *Make a donation* to the Emoja Project and support the food security program. *Broaden* your social circle. Befriend not just those who are like you. *Avoid* supporting businesses that discriminate through unfair hiring policies, insufficient salaries and the lack of benefits. *Pray*. Ask the Spirit to touch the hearts and minds of the communities with whom we associate, our nation and the world to turn away from oppressing of others, and show us ways to uplift and protect our brothers and sisters.

Although I said loving your neighbor was much more than my experience of living in Hershey, Pennsylvania, I think it does begin with neighborly behaviors, such as waving at one another, greeting each other with smile, knowing them by name, and when this pandemic passes, having coffee and sitting at a table together.

Love God. Love you Neighbor.