

Read Luke 10:25-29

“Who is my neighbor?” The question that the Pharisee asked Jesus is still a question that each of us must grapple with on a daily basis.

If we take Jesus seriously that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, then how we answer the question, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ defines who we are called to love.

On the day the Pharisee asked Jesus, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ the Pharisee had drawn a narrow circle around the people which he considered worthy of his love. To the Pharisee, my neighbor was the person who was most like me, who lived the life I lived and followed the same practices that I did. So when this expert in the law- God’s law- asked Jesus ‘Who is my neighbor?’ he was trying to restrict the limits of his responsibility with regard to Jesus command to love his ‘neighbors.’

So who is your neighbor? Who is in that circle you draw which puts boundaries around whom you are responsible for? Well for the majority of life here on the planet earth that has been a simple explanation. Neighbor has been defined as the people who live within our immediate proximity, the people that we encounter daily in our community.

Until the middle of the last century- that’s the 1950’s- most people in the US had little awareness of people outside their community, let alone people across the vast stretches of oceans that separated us from the rest of the world.

But all that has changed over the last 50 plus years. Technology and transportation has allowed us to not only see instantly the lives of other people on the planet; but to have personal access to people all over the world.

Suddenly our definition of neighbor can change. The tight circle that was drawn in the past to define not only who our neighbor is, but for whom we are responsible; has changed.

Let’s make this visual. Here is a circle (hula hoop) that represents our definition of neighbor. Now if all of us here today represent the people that exist on the planet then we need lots of these circles to define the many different neighborhoods that exist. Most people figure that if you are in my circle, then you are my responsibility. Over time we’ve grouped some of these circles together and said we are responsible for these groups.

Well this morning I want you to understand that this circle is not only too small, but its rigid design also tends to lock us into a defined circle of responsibility- it not only keeps people in but most importantly it keeps people out. What we need is a new paradigm to define the circle that is our neighbor, and to whom our responsibility to love is extended.

Here is that new paradigm (rope). This rope not only opens up our circle but it helps us to break out of the preconceived notions of who is my neighbor and for whom am I responsible. [Take the rope around the entire sanctuary. Take away the hula hoops.]

So now who is your neighbor? And for whom are you responsible? Everyone!

Listen to how Jesus put it to the disciples on two separate occasions after his resurrection: First, in Matthew 28:19, 20, *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of the present age.*

So where is the circle drawn by Jesus in the Great Commission? *Around all the nations.*

Now listen to what Jesus said in Acts 1:8, *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

So where does Jesus draw the circle this time? In ever widening ripples that go from our neighborhood, to our country, to our enemies *especially* those people who ignore us, those people who separate themselves from us, those people who are afraid of us, those people we have the most difficulty loving and those people we feel don't love us, and to the ends of the earth.

So who are we, as disciples of Jesus, responsible to love? We are responsible to love our neighbors- those near and far? We can't escape the fact that we live in a global village. That means that the needs of the people on the block, across the country and in the third world are our neighbors.

Two years ago I read a book that I believe everyone should read, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, by Richard Stearns. I've mentioned before how important this book has been in calling my attention to the need of my neighbors near and far. One of the reasons I'm so passionate about our reaching out in places like Derry Street and in Sierra Leone is because this book challenged me and in a way caused me to challenge you as disciples of Jesus.

In the book, Rich uses an alliteration to describe three major impediments to anyone wanting to love their neighbor. He uses it specifically to address our distant neighbors but I think it applies to all our neighbors- near and far.

The first impediment is awareness. Rich says, 'Before one can be held accountable for helping someone in need, there must first be an awareness of the need.' Fortunately, we don't have the problem those generations before experienced in that they could not

see the need. Today, we are aware of needs as soon as they happen. But one problem with the media sharing these needs with us is that we quickly forget or another breaking story surpasses the coverage.

*Compassion fatigue* is the term that was coined to describe what countless pictures of need often create in our lives. We either turn the channel or become indifferent to the needs of our neighbors.

But disciples should never suffer from compassion fatigue because our responsibility is to love our neighbor. And none of us should ever be unaware of the needs of our neighbors.

One of the reasons we do monthly mission activities is to make people aware of needs within our neighborhoods. Recently, Karen Withrow led a number of trips to the Neighborhood Center in Harrisburg. The overwhelming response of many was that they never knew the Neighborhood Center existed or what it did. This is a perfect example of why we make these opportunities available.

I'm excited that four of us will be headed to Sierra Leone in January 2013.

And if traveling across the ocean sounds like too much for you, then join the team that is headed to Red Bird Mission next summer. RBM is an outreach to some of the poorest people in southeastern Kentucky. And don't tell me you are too old to do something; because I had an 80 year old woman go from my last church- and she had a great time!

No one who makes Linglestown Life their home should ever suffer from a lack of awareness to the needs of our neighbors.

The second 'a' is access. Years ago we couldn't access many areas of need. Today, there isn't a place on the earth that you cannot travel to within 24 hours.

Access to our neighbors and their needs is as close as the family in the house across the street or as simple as boarding a plane and making the effort to build a relationship. (we will discuss this at length next week)

When you think of the story of the Good Samaritan, the first two men who walked by the man lying on the side of the road had access; but they choose not to get involved. The Samaritan not only had access to the beaten man but he established a relationship that enabled him to love his neighbor over time.

The final impediment that Stearns mentions is ability. In the book, Stearns makes the case for the myriads of way that we have the ability to meet needs of our neighbors. Specifically he shares how medicine, well drilling, and other economic factors have the

ability to demonstrate genuine love to our neighbors in places like Africa. (remember the story I told about Rachel's well drilling project)

We have the ability to reach out in love to our neighbors. We have the tools, the talent and the time. If such is the case, then we should no more turn our backs on these neighbors of ours than the priest and the Levite should have walked by the bleeding man.

So here is the challenge. How big is your circle? If it still is the size of a hula hoop then it's time to trade it in for a rope. (NOTE: Give everyone upon leaving a piece of rope as a reminder of the call to love our neighbors by expanding the circle.)

Who is your neighbor? I want to challenge each of you to go back and think about the 'AAA' that I shared today.

Have you made yourself aware of your opportunity to love your neighbor? Has compassion fatigue settled in to the point that announcements about Derry Street or Sierra Leone just go in one ear and out the other?

I challenge you to take advantage of the opportunity to get involved in our monthly mission projects, or get details about RBM or even consider going to Sierra Leone. A great opportunity is coming up in early October for you to be a part of the LAHMBs Baby Bazaar.

Once you become aware of a place where you can love your neighbor- take the next step and access the place and put your abilities to work! I don't care what age you are or what skills you have; somewhere out there is a neighbor who needs what you have. Get there and get going!

I think that was Jesus closing thought to the Pharisee who asked Jesus to explain who his neighbor was. Jesus said it so simply, "Now that you know who your neighbor is; now that you know who you are responsible to love, go and do likewise."

Go and do likewise and never draw a circle too small that limits the love you have for your neighbors- near and far.