

If you have never seen The Andy Griffith Show or if you are not a fan of it, you're missing a good thing. Hang in there with the rest of us as I describe a scene from one of my favorite episodes called Mountain Wedding. Briscoe Darling didn't make it into town very often. But he had wandered down from the hills to Mayberry to talk with Sheriff Andy Taylor. Briscoe had not yet experienced Deputy Barney Fife. Barney was a bit high strung. Briscoe wasn't so sure he should be talking to the sheriff with Barney being present. That's when Andy introduced him as his deputy and asked Briscoe what brought him into town. "Trouble", Briscoe replied. When Andy asked what kind of trouble, Briscoe told him about a strange and weird character named Ernest T. Bass. You see, Briscoe had a daughter named Charlene Darling. She was married to Dud Wash. Andy officiated their wedding. But Ernest T. Bass didn't seem to care that she was married. He was declarin' for her. Andy asked Briscoe, "Well, can't you and your boys handle him?" Briscoe replied, "Well, we thought about killin' him. Kinda hated to go that far." That's when Barney Fife chimed in, "It's a wise man who knows not to take the law into his own hand." And now Barney's law-enforcement talk was confusing poor Briscoe. He asked Andy, "He arguin' with me?". Andy clarified, "He's agreeing with you." Briscoe replied, "Just so's I know where I stand."

They planned to come out the next day and see what they could do. As Briscoe turned to leave the sheriff's office Barney hollered out, "Adios amigo". Briscoe looked at Barney then at Andy and asked, "He one o'ours?" Andy simply replied, "sure". Then Briscoe looked back to Barney and said, "More power to ya."

He one o'ours? Nobody says it quite like Briscoe Darling. But we all ask that same question. It's a dangerous question. I'm not picking Briscoe. He was a good country man. And he wasn't out of line to wonder about Barney. Barney was a nut. Still, a question like "He one o'ours?" assumes that being different requires division. We are quick to assess if someone is one o'ours or if they ain't. But the truth is that we can be different without being divided.

The lawyer in Luke 10 asked his own version of this dangerous question when he asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" We are going to wrestle with this question in pursuit of our goal of Neighboring Well!

It is not a bad question, it's just dangerous. This question can be asked in two very different ways. It can be asked exclusively, to minimize our neighboring responsibility. This is the way we ask it if we are looking to cross people off of our neighbor list who are not one o'ours. Or it can be asked inclusively, to maximize our neighboring impact. This is the way we ask when we genuinely want to know who our neighbor is so we can be a better neighbor to them. The lawyer asked the question with an exclusive, love minimizing tone. Jesus responded with an inclusive, love maximizing tone. The question suggests a minimal neighboring that we must guard against. The response calls us to a maximal neighboring.

Minimal Neighboring

The human impulse is to minimize love. It requires more than we are comfortable giving. The lawyer was the one who announced the verdict of “love your neighbor as yourself”. Only it was troublesome to his case if it was interpreted too broadly. Like a good lawyer, he looked to reduce the judgment by carefully defining terms, looking for loopholes, and identifying the minimum requirements. To keep things under control he asked, “Who is my neighbor?”

Recall the relationship between justification and justice that we considered in the first sermon. Self-justification produces limited justice. Christ’s justification produces overflowing justice.

When the lawyer asked the question, he was inviting Jesus into an ongoing discussion that existed in the Jewish community about the meaning of “love your neighbor as yourself” in Leviticus 19:18. It was not a novel question. It is easy to discover creative interpretations of scripture when the other interpretation doesn’t fit your preference. The context of Leviticus 19:18 presents several laws for treating your neighbor with justice. A neighbor is identified as the poor or sojourner (v.10), the deaf or blind (v.14), the rich or poor in court (v.15), and a brother (v.17). Then verse 18 has the key phrase, “sons of your own people”.

Leviticus 19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

A common interpretation identified the neighbor who was to be loved as coming only from, “sons of your own people”. It was, conveniently, right there in the text. They felt justified in asking “He one o’ours?” to determine if love was required.

It was easy for the Jews to justify exclusivity. God had chosen them. He called them to be a separate people. He commanded them to not intermarry with non-Jews. He did all this, not to minimize their neighboring experience but to keep them from being led astray. The Old Testament is sprinkled with commands to extend love to the foreigner. They mistook their call to be set apart as a call to minimal neighboring.

Jesus targeted this minimal neighboring error in the parable. He chose people who the lawyer would have identified as “one o’ours”, a priest and a Levite. Then he portrayed them as the bad neighbors. They had excuses. They had priestly rules about cleanliness and touching dead things. They passed by, perhaps with the courtesy to utter “more power to ya” as they crossed to the other side of the road.

The Jews had become masters of building walls as relational barriers. There was a 4.5’ tall wall in Herod’s temple separating the outer court, also called the court of the Gentiles, from the inner court. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded that, “There was a partition made of stone...Its construction was very elegant; upon it stood pillars, at equal distances from one another, declaring the law of purity, some in Greek, and some in Roman letters, that ‘no foreigner should go within that sanctuary’” (*Wars*, 5.5.2). He tells us that there were 13 of these stones spaced along the wall. Two of these stones

have been found by archeologists. They do have the prohibition that Josephus wrote about. These stones also include one additional sentence that Josephus didn't report. After the prohibition for foreigners to enter the stones read, "Whoever is caught will be personally responsible for his ensuing death."ⁱ This was a wall of minimal neighboring. The outer court was fine. They were kept at a distance. Inner court was off limits. Can you imagine if we put up a sign in our lobby that said, "All are welcome to visit in the lobby but only Adventists are allowed in the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will be personally responsible for his ensuing death. Happy Sabbath!"

We don't have the sign. We have been guilty of communicating these minimal neighboring messages to people in the outer court of our church. We have kept people at a distance and made high barriers to entry.

We are all wall builders. We all have the natural inclination toward minimal neighboring. We build walls between ourselves and those people who don't look like us, think like us, vote like us, worship like us, interpret COVID statistics like us, think about vaccinations like us, share hobbies like us, have a standard of living like us, prefer Microsoft products like us, or eat a vegan diet like us. Love gets hijacked by our need to ensure that they are one o'ours. If they aren't, we feel freed of our call to love them.

The Jews took their dividing wall seriously. Paul was arrested when it was believed that he took a gentile into the inner court (Acts 21:16-30). Listen to what he had to say about the wall in Ephesians 2.

*¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has **broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility** ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

We all have the natural inclination toward minimal neighboring. We intrinsically look for ways to reduce love. We easily build walls of division. God tears them down. He expands love. He calls us to maximal neighboring.

Maximal Neighboring

We slip into “us and them” thinking when we make dividing walls with other fellow humans. Think about this. Jesus is God. The difference between us and God is a legitimate “us and them” distinction. He has the right to think that way. Instead of alienating us, he became one of us. He died to reconcile us to Them (the trinity).

Jesus modeled and taught a maximal neighboring that was foreign to the lawyer. After portraying the lawyer’s own people as poor neighbors, Jesus portrayed the man’s enemy as the protagonist. He was drawn into the uncomfortable experience of thinking of a Samaritan as a good guy. Jesus was stretching the man’s minimal mind to a maximal neighboring possibility.

To feel the weight of what Jesus was doing here it is helpful to understand a bit of history. The Jews and Samaritans had a long history of not being good neighbors. Nearly 1000 years earlier the kingdom of Israel was divided under the rival leadership after Solomon. The southern tribes followed Rehoboam and the northern tribes followed Jeroboam (1 Kings 12). Jeroboam built Shechem in the region of Samaria, but he had a problem. Their worship was tied to the territory that belonged to his rival. His people would need to return to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. He knew he would lose them if they returned. So, he introduced idol worship as an alternative to keep them in Shechem. The northern tribes retained the name “Israel”. The southern tribes took the name “Judah”.

Scripture tells us that “there was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all the days of his life.” (1 Kings 15:6). And also, beyond their lives. The kingdom never reunited. The remainder of the story, in the books of Kings and Chronicles, jumps back and forth between these two separate kingdoms. Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 BC. The 10 tribes were lost to history. But some of the individual descendants of these tribes were left in Samaria. These Samaritans intermarried with foreigners and became despised by the people of Judah as “half-breed” Jews.

The kingdom of Judah was also taken captive. Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians in 539 BC. Unlike the people of Israel, the people of Judah returned from their exile. When they did, the people of Samaria were among those who opposed their work on the wall in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:10; Nehemiah 4:2). They didn’t neighbor well! The animosity between the groups is illustrated when Jesus spoke with the woman at the well. The text says that the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans (John 4:9). The woman declared, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” For the Jews the temple mount was the holiest place on earth and for the Samaritan Mount Gerizim was. The Samaritans developed their own version of the Torah (claiming it was the only valid one), they dismissed the “writings” and “prophets” sections from the Jewish scriptures, and they established their own place and form of worship. To the Jew, the Samaritan was worse than the Gentile. They were half-breed apostates.

Jesus tells the parable so that the Samaritan is the good guy. Samaritans are human too. They are one o'ours.

Jesus has a big neighborhood!

Jesus taught, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' (Matthew 5:43) Who do you suppose was saying stuff like that? The Jewish leaders! This was their reduced definition of love and neighboring. Then Jesus exploded it by saying, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). He taught that the enemy is a neighbor too. The least of these is a neighbor too. (Mathew 25:40; Luke 6:27-36).

Bob Goff published a book called *Everyone Always: Becoming Love in a World Full of Setbacks and Difficult People*. The two-word title, *Everyone Always* is the simple answer to the question, who is my neighbor?

Desire of Age, Page 503

Thus, the question, "Who is my neighbor?" is forever answered. Christ has shown that our neighbor does not mean merely one of the church or faith to which we belong. It has no reference to race, color, or class distinction. Our neighbor is every person who needs our help. Our neighbor is every soul who is wounded and bruised by the adversary. Our neighbor is everyone who is the property of God.

Let's make it practical. Prioritize the people in your path!

Our world is big. The world we personally experience is relatively tiny. If everyone is my neighbor, that's a lot of neighbors. Let's put some numbers to it. As of Monday, January 24 at 3:54pm, there were estimated to be 7,922,563,694 people on the planet.ⁱⁱ

For simplicity of calculations, let's drop the 22.5 million (even though they are all one o'ours) and say that there are 7.9 billion people. That's a big world. Now consider our relatively small personal world. The British psychologist, Robin Dunbar, calculates that each of us can have 3-5 close friends that we interact with weekly, 12-15 people in our "sympathy crew" that we interact with monthly, and a maximal of 150 people that we can truly know.ⁱⁱⁱ He argues that it is not a matter of preference or personality type that limits our friend group, the limitation is cognitive. Our brain is not wired to know more people. Imagine you have 5 close friends, and 15 in your sympathy crew. That is 20 people you are close to out of over 7.9 billion people in the world.

Researchers at York University find that the human brain can remember up to 10,000 faces. This facial vocabulary does not include knowing names, just recognizing faces.^{iv}

If you could recognize 7,900 faces you would be on the high end of the spectrum. Each face you recognize would be one in a million. Do the math. 7.9 billion divided by 7,900 is one million. For every face you recognize there is one million that you don't. This small group would include your bank teller, the sweaty guy you see at the gym on Tuesdays, the celebrity faces you recognize on the magazine in the checkout line, The kids in your child's classroom at school, the pictures of your teacher and classmates in your 4th grade yearbook, and the person at church that you don't know the name of but you

know their face and you know that they always sit in the front left. If your brain recognizes having seen their face before it is a one in a million experience. If you are looking at my face right now you know me better than you will ever know 99.9999% of people in the world. That is six 9's. There is a 9 in the ten thousandths spot of a percent.

It is impossible to calculate how many people we will interact with in our lifetime. Here is the calculation I have found floating around online. "On average we live for 78.3 years. Most of us remember people we meet after age 5. Assume we interact with 3 new people daily in cities, 365 days in a year plus leap years days is 365.24. In total it will be $(78.3 - 5) \times 3 \times 365.24 = 80,000$ people."^v Let's say you are an overachiever, and you interact with 100,000 people in your life. For every person you interact with there is 79,000 you will never have any contact of any kind with.

They are all a part of Jesus' neighborhood. But they are not part of our personal world. So, what does a good neighbor do with these facts?

They might all be my neighbor, but I can't be a neighbor to them all. We are called to be a neighbor to anyone, but we can't expect to personally impact everyone. It is impossible. We can't spread ourselves that thin. We could spend every bit of ourselves serving and still only reach a tiny sampling of the people out there. While we are at it, we will lose our health, family, sleep, and personal wellbeing.

Notice a key principle from the parable of neighboring well in Jesus' big neighborhood. Jesus says, "But a Samaritan, as he journeyed..." He is portrayed as going about his normal business. The good Samaritan wasn't on a mission trip. He wasn't on a crusade to save the world. He simply shows love to the person in his path.

We should be willing to help anyone but not expect to help everyone. The fact that everyone is included in your neighborhood doesn't mean that you can do good to everyone, but you should do good to anyone. Focus on the "anyone" in your path, not the "everyone" else who are not in your path.

How do I know when I am called to be a neighbor to someone? When they are in my path! That is the only requirement.

Don't be overwhelmed by all the people you will never interact with but be engaged with those that do cross your path. You may not be able to shovel the driveway, but you may be able to share a smile with them. You may not be able to give them four hours, but you might be able to give them five minutes. We can't be present everywhere. But we can be fully present where we are. Don't try to share yourself with the whole world. Instead, bring your whole self into the world around you.

The word neighbor has within it the letters "neigh" which is related to the word "nigh" which means "near". The word traces back to the Old English word "neahgebur" (neah meaning near and gebur meaning dweller).^{vi}

Everyone is one of ours but not everyone is near us. Nobody is excluded as our neighbor but the people our path are the ones we can be a neighbor to. Anyone you see or hear or interact with is someone in your path.

This principle is summed up so well by Andy Stanley, “Do for one what you wish you could do for everyone.”^{vii} That is so good. Do for the people along your path what you wish you could do for everyone in the world.

The tiny world we experience can become an exciting adventure of neighboring well. Remember, that person you recognize at the grocery store is one in a million. That makes it a special encounter. God has placed them in your path when there are a million others he didn't. You may not know them, but relative to the global population, you are incredibly close to them. Your small interaction with them could be something meaningful. Can you shift your thinking to see the privilege of every interaction? What will you do with the one-in-a-million opportunity you have in every human interaction?

We can ask the question, “Who is my neighbor?” in a different way! Ask the dangerous question, but do it with a sense of curiosity, adventure, and love.

Getting to know who your neighbor is exciting, and it is not all that hard. My daughter suggested that we make something nice for our neighbors. We looked at the abundance of citrus we brought back from Arizona and decided to share some. It was simple, and we got to know someone better who God has placed in our path.

I spent less than ten minutes looking up demographics about Palmer Alaska on Fact Finder.com. Here are some things I learned about our neighbors.

- 28.1% are under 18
- 75.1% are white
- 1.1% are Hawaiian or native islander
- 8.6% are Native
- 2.9% are foreign born
- 79.7% were living in the same house a year ago
- 21.4% have a bachelor's degree or higher
- 12.5% live in poverty

When we are engaged with the people in our path we will find people in need and people who can help us with our needs. We learn about the drug problem in our valley and about the organizations that are working to help. We will find people who will help us on our journey to know God and we will find people who are searching for the God we have found.

I shared the beginning of the Mountain Wedding episode. The rest of the story is just as good. Andy and Barney went out the next day. Before they got around to solving problems, they played some music. Andy didn't figure he would have time, but Briscoe informed him, “you got time to breath, you got time for music.” Dud suggested they play, “Don't hit your grandma with a great big stick”. But Charlene said, “Aw Dud, that one makes me cry.” They didn't need to go looking for Ernest T. because he was a pest and as they said, “a pest will find you”. He did. They learned that Ernest T. Bass didn't

consider the marriage valid because they were married by a justice of the peace and not a preacher. They scheduled a preacher wedding for the next day. Earnest T. interpreted that as a sign of hope, he still had 24 hours to woo her with his ways. Charlene wasn't having any of it, even though he could do 17 chin-ups, was saving up for a gold tooth, and was the self-declared "best rock thrower in the county." The next rock he threw through the window had a note on it, "You might have a preacher and you might have a wedding, but you might not have a bride. Ever think of that?"

Andy had an idea to prevent him from stealing the bride. And, sure enough, during the wedding the next day, Earnest came and stole the bride. When the wedding veil was lifted Earnest learned that the bride he stole wasn't Charlene Darling. It was Barney Fife wearing the bride's dress. The discovery took just enough time for the preacher to marry Dud and Charlene to the reluctant satisfaction of Ernest T. Bass.

Did you happen to notice that Barney played a key role in fixing Briscoes problem? Could it be that the person you feel the need to disassociate with is exactly the person you need? Ever think of that? When we choose to neighbor well, we will find that the person we are skeptical about is indeed one o'ours.

i <https://theancientpathblog.wordpress.com/2013/05/29/the-dividing-wall-of-the-court-of-the-gentiles-in-herods-temple/>

ii <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>

iii Friend by Dunbar, <https://www.indiebound.org/book/9781408711736>

iv <https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2018/research/never-forget-a-face/>

v <https://blog.adioma.com/counting-the-people-you-impact-infographic/>

vi <https://www.etymonline.com/word/neighbor>

vii <https://twitter.com/andystanley/status/1105084218101641217?lang=en>