

## REFLECTIONS

### MY NEIGHBORHOOD

Julie Yanekian

September 10, 2017

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Paul says in Romans chapter 13:8-10 *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*

9 The commandments, *"You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet";* and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Do no harm. Love your neighbor. The commandments are summed up in this commandment because if we love something, we won't cause harm to it. Jesus specifies your neighbor, which, to me has, at times been an ambiguous term. Exactly who is our neighbor? Certainly it is the person living beside us and in the next town and even in the next state. The term neighbor doesn't stop with those living in the United States. As Christians, thanks to the Good Samaritan story, we even know that the word neighbor includes people of other cultures and religions, we know that our neighbors include the people of Thailand where they've been suffering from a recent storm, the people inside the invisible prison walls of Gaza in Palestine and the people whose homes are being threatened by the rising ocean water levels due to global warming.

We know the term neighbor includes all people because God loves them all. All humans have the same dignity. They all deserve respect and are all worthy of the same compassion.

As a young child, my parents taught me to appreciate nature, and I enjoyed all of nature's incredible wonders. Reading about one of nature's incredible idealistic, neighborly relationships in Charlotte's web, you may remember this story. Wilbur was a pig and one of his amazing neighbors, Charlotte, a spider, saved his life by writing messages about Wilbur in her web. It's a fictional story, but I learned what the relationship between neighbors should be.

Then I found it fascinating to watch one of our most reviled creatures build a web - a home that catches dinner - one of the most beautiful, natural, practical and useful homes on earth. If you've ever seen a spider web covered in the morning dew drops, then you know what I am talking about. I began to count them as my rhetorical neighbor, but I quickly learned, in school, to be quiet, in order to protect spiders. So many times I admired their crafty walk across the gym floor in silence, because, I knew, my neighbor children would stomp on them with relish.

Another story I enjoyed as a child was Horton Hears a Who. You know the story about the elephant, Horton, and how he heard a cry for help from a tiny community on a speck of dust. He thought there was something alive on that speck and he decided to save them by placing the dust on a flower and protecting it from the other animals who wanted to destroy it. From this story I learned that neighbors could be neighbors of a different sort and that all were worthy of protection and love.

As an adult I learned about an amazing creature. Ants. Ants can build bridges, and homes as intricate as a human's house. They will sacrifice themselves for the common good of the group. There is a kind of ants that farm aphids to get their honeyed nectar. The ants will herd the aphids out of the ant's homes in the daytime and will protect them all day. The ants will even build a shelter for the aphids during the rain. Compassion?

Even more amazing are the leaf cutter ants. These creatures live in colonies as big as four million individuals, building homes underground containing as many as three thousand underground rooms, some as large as a living room. These ants grow a fungus, for food. To feed the fungus, ants climb trees, cut leaves, which are poisonous to them, bring down the leaves and feed it to the fungus. Many times a small ant will ride along on the back of a larger ant to protect the larger ant from a parasitic fly. In turn, the ants eat the fungus.

Amazing intelligence. God's creativity. Obviously these were created with love and care. God loves them. They are God's created ones. God blessed them. Why should I do them harm?

If we listen closely to the story of Noah's Ark, where God tells Noah to build a huge ship and put two of each animal on it and then it rains, we will note after the flood, that God is renewing the divine covenant with not just the humans, but also with the animals; with every living creature.

God has great reverence for nature. Do you know that the word tree is mentioned more than 500 times in the Bible?

Jesus shows us the power of a mustard seed and talks about the beauty of sparrows. "Love the tall trees," saith the Lord. Abraham plants an oak. Jesus goes into the gardens. Jesus says, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed that grows into a tall tree. The Lord created all of the plants and animals and said, it is good.

Do you know tomato plants can feel an insect when it is munching on its leaves, determine what kind of critter it is and send out signals to an appropriate predator who will then come and lay its eggs on the interloper.

Now scientists have proven that plants can learn, communicate, remember, react, discriminate, and make decisions. Can we call them neighbors?

Even Solomon knew that to love God was to know and love what God loves.

Finally, anyone who has been greeted by the purr of a cat or the wag of a dog at the end of a long day, or anyone who has a close relationship to any non-human being will know their presence can be balm to our hearts, minds and souls. In those moments if we are open to their ministrations to us, they preach the Gospel to us. They embody Jesus words, *'Come, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Do no harm and love your neighbor as yourself.*

## **IT'S NOT FOR KILLING CROWS**

Jeff Hornbeck

September 10, 2017  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you.*  
**Matthew 18:20**

Good morning, my name is Jeff Hornbeck and I am here at the personal invitation of the SPC Liturgist and Director of Spiritual Formation and Campus Ministry (my wife), who, despite my solid and repeated resistance, insisted on my presence here today. So it goes, and this is my reflection.

By way of introduction, I am currently serving on Session at SPC where I am the Chair of the Budget & Finance Committee, keeping tabs, along with many others, on the finances of the church during this perhaps now increasingly less uncertain time of transition.

I also brought with me, my crowbar, which I have come to learn, is not used for killing crows. Nor is it a very effective tool for encouraging financial giving. But it is, nonetheless, a cherished gift with a story that I want to share with you.

First the Scripture. As I pondered the readings for today, I became even more reluctant to move forward with this reflection. They begin in the Hebrew Scriptures, with the story of the first Passover and a detailed description of the proper way to slaughter a lamb. So I pondered deeply over the last time I slaughtered a lamb... and found I had nothing to offer on this ritual. Neither did Paul's Letter to the Romans, a lovely passage on how love fulfills the law, nor Psalm 149, praising the Lord, strike me for some reason.

Finally, in Matthew, my least favorite Gospel (I'm partial to the simplicity of Mark in case you were wondering) we find advice on how to respond to members of the church who have sinned against us. I let that go as well, glass houses being what they are. But then I read the final well-known verse of the passage, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them," and with it an invitation to listen.

Usually I interpret this verse from a contemplative or spiritual perspective, but life recently has changed the way I connect with this passage.

Now back to my crowbar. This was bestowed upon me recently from my friend Bill Ashforth. In Spanish, the word crowbar or lever is *palanca*. It is a beautiful word, and there is a type of retreat begun in Spain by the Catholic Church known as Cursillo or Emmaus and other names in the Protestant churches. Part of the retreat involves giving carefully written notes of love and encouragement, meant to remind the participants of God's love for them. These little gifts or reminders are also called *palanca*, meant to help gently pry one open with and to that love.

I want to fill you in on a story that has been partially told to this congregation that involves *palanca*, a story about God's love where two or three come together. On July 31, while vacationing in northern Michigan, I received an email from Catholic Charities, where I periodically help out with immigration and other issues affecting our Latino brothers and sisters. A highly regarded and upstanding family of six had experienced tragedy. After 14 years of steady work with a major firm, and a spotless police record, ICE arrested the father for overstaying his visa. While incarcerated and not earning an

income, their mobile home burned and they had let the insurance expire two months earlier because income had dried up.

The family was materially destitute, but received critical financial support from the Church of Latter Day Saints of Jesus Christ (the Mormon Church) of which they are members. But more needed to be done. Catholic Charities called me because I can communicate in Spanish and have spent my life working in and on Latin America. They needed help soon at the trailer to clean up and assess the fire damage. I put the word out to SPC, many of you received it and responded, even when you were not in the area. You wanted to help, but three were immediately available: I, Bill Ashforth and Perry Jaimison.

Now we suspected this trailer was done for when we got there, but there was still a tremendous amount of cleanup and recovery work to be considered. And here was the over sixty gang going to work at a construction site. The family had no tools, no idea what to do and no way to communicate and determine next steps. Now the over sixty crowd was not going to rebuild the trailer or drastically alter the reality of the day, but we stayed and we listened, we cleaned and we offered whatever solace we could. And we brought tools, although my *palanca* has since gone missing.

It was not until later that I understood that the companionship of strangers was the critical element. Where two or three of us were gathered, hope materialized, but not because we had all or even any of the answers. It was the hope that was backstopped throughout the week from SPC and others. I received emails from many at SPC, some vacationing as far away as South Carolina and even Norway. The frustration became how to channel and direct such hope and generosity. We were not experts in social services and Catholic Charities was overwhelmed.

While we did not have the wherewithal for a proper needs assessment, what I came to learn was what Wayne Muller in his tremendous book, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, so aptly writes about his volunteer community, *Bread for the Journey*. In times of tragedy,

“we do not begin with a traditional needs assessment...If people are alive, they will have unmet needs. Instead we begin with strength assessment. Where in the community is the hidden wholeness, who are the people with courage and vision, those whose faith still burns bright and hot?”

This approach begins with listening at a time when the call to action can lead to hurried responses that despite the best intentions, risk “doing good badly.” A bias for action is critical sometimes, but a “headless heart” can be as detrimental as a “heartless head.

I certainly had no expertise to offer, but this effort began with companions who not only were organized thinkers, but had the wisdom and compassion of age to listen and proceed gently, particularly with the difficult mission of conveying an absolute truth: This trailer was not going to be rebuilt on the good intentions of the local community that had the labor and skills to believe *perhaps* they could pull it off. We could continue with demolition, but just because we were working hard did not mean we were making anything happen.

And so it became clear, we were not in the center of a construction project. We were in the midst of suffering, as the whole family gazed with us at the burnt remains of home, furniture, appliances, electronics, toys and even clothes. Convincing someone facing

tragedy to move on is not easy. But, with the firm and compassionate guidance of another, one Jim Schmitt, who left his business worksite with a moments notice to help us, we had the gravitas of a seasoned professional contractor and firefighter to convey convincingly the reality of a total loss. That was the hard part, helping the family face the truth. It was not only necessary to move on, but to begin the healing process.

But not all, in the fullest sense, was indeed lost, because where two or three were gathered, even more showed up. At SPC, Chris Madeo put the Refugee and Immigration Committee to work. Session was informed and agreed to provide funds for back to school clothes and backpacks (thanks to Mary Ellen Lloyd's generous connections), Chris Madeo and I delivered these items and food from Catholic Charities and helped with the clothes shopping. Others at SPC continue to inquire about next steps and we are exploring developing a more structured relationship with Catholic Charities for future endeavors, which we expect will grow given current attitudes and policies toward immigrants.

Two Sundays ago, at the invitation of the family, the Madeos and I went to the middle child's baptism at the LDS Church. We met the clergy, were warmly welcomed and we participated in a bilingual, Mexican-Mormon, full emersion baptism. And we wrote notes of *palanca* to the daughter, as did everyone else. At the conclusion, the family fed us homemade tostadas and tamales. That Sunday was an intimate Sabbath moment, a time to reflect and be together. So one blessing was returned with another, and to quote Muller again, "Our wealth arises from our capacity to bless and be blessed."

Out of this shared blessing, concrete solutions materialized. While there are more issues to resolve, the father is back to work at his old job, and the family has a roof over its head, food to eat, some new clothes and hope. Hope for resolution of remaining issues, cautious hope for the future.

Patience and love poured out to change a tragic situation. It poured out at SPC, but also at Catholic Charities and at the LDS Church. In this case, where two or three churches were gathered in Jesus' name, churches with very different faith traditions in some ways, common ground was found without hesitation and all worked together, much like we are witnessing in Southeast Texas, Louisiana, Florida and the rest of our country.

This is just another small but essential reminder to me that this congregation, as I have said before, is a beacon on the hill, but more importantly, a beacon that does not shine alone. With God's grace may it continue to be so.

Oh, and by the way, thanks to Bill Ashforth, I got a new *palanca*.