



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
20 November 2016  
Sermon: "Good Neighbors"  
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Luke 23:33-43  
Jeremiah 23:1-6

Lucy and Ethel were good neighbors.

As many of you know, this sweet pair was featured on the "I Love Lucy" television show back in 1950's. It was ground-breaking for its time - the first to feature a marriage between a Caucasian-American and Cuban immigrant, and the first to ever to show a pregnant woman on screen.

Back when it first aired, Americans of all stripes, religions, and backgrounds would tune in each week. Its popularity was so vast in fact, that folks could simply ask, "Did you catch "the show" last night?" and everyone would know exactly what they were talking about.

One of the most compelling aspects of the show Lucy and Ethel's hilarious, close-knit relationship. Lucy always finds herself getting into trouble, and Ethel always finds herself caught up in her best friend's schemes.

On one episode, Lucy is afraid that she has dropped her wedding ring in a bucket of cement, which was used by their husbands to construct a new brick barbecue. So, in the middle of the night she begs Ethel to help her secretly take apart the finished barbecue, search for her ring within the thick cement, and quickly plop the barbecue back together again.

In the course of this tedious evening, Lucy turns to Ethel and says with sincere gratitude, "It's time like these you know what friends are for." Ethel looks up and responds, "If I would have known this is what friends are for, I would have signed up as an enemy." And then she of course, continues busily searching alongside her buddy, Lucy.

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It's never easy to be good neighbors.

On this Sunday morning, with thanksgiving right around the corner, I imagine that many of us here are preparing to share meals with a few relatives or friends with whom we might have a long-list of disagreements. We might be trying to figure out how we are going to gracefully tip-toe around certain conversations, or navigate how to boldly approach them head-on.

With an election season behind us that felt so polarizing and focused on “winning and losing”, this holiday, we might be wondering how to bridge the gaps between us, and enter into more honest conversations with our family, our church community, or our literal next-door neighbors. Everything still feels so raw and unclear. Surely we want to know how to prepare a way forward together – and what that will even look like.

Now, Jeremiah was no family counselor or life coach, but his words feel essential for us to hear today: *“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away.”*

The Book of Jeremiah was written in a time when the rivers of division were wide and well. After years of bloody battles, and power-hungry rulers, the Jewish people were scattered about. And so, the prophet Jeremiah is professing God’s desire to reunify the people of Israel (in the north) and their neighbors in Judah (in the south). He calls for both groups to repent, to come together, to let go of the past and start working hand-in-hand. God calls for kings and leaders to no longer abuse their authority, but use it for the purpose of healing and mending these broken relationships.

Jeremiah’s tone in today’s passage is harsh and candid, it is not God who has done the scattering, *“It is you”* he says on behalf of the Lord. *“It is you [the shepherds] who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them.”* His words paint a picture of a God who is deeply dissatisfied with those who have the power to affect positive change, a God who is invested in her precious people, who are now lost and troubled. Now, we know it is human nature (since way back in the Garden of Eden) to place blame on God, or on someone else; but Jeremiah reminds us, that we must look carefully at ourselves.

In this passage today, God isn’t speaking solely to kings, solely to those who bear the title of ruler, or governor, or president. God is speaking to us - calling us - reminding us that we are the shepherds who have scattered the flock, who have forgotten to go out and search for the ones who are alone and aching. We have become far too complacent, too preoccupied, too lost in ourselves. We have allowed these great divides between us to grow wider, separating our stories and our bodies from the rest of Christ’s holy and fraught community.

Now, I always shy away from a good-ole fire and brimstone sermon, but I think it’s important that we deal with this together. We must take to heart that although we might feel we are doing all we can do, God is assuring us that we are capable and called to so much more.

What would it look to construct new bridges between our neighbors, strangers, and enemies? What would it look like to really stand in solidarity with the powerless, to negotiate with the powerful, to listen with humility, to speak with new-found courage, to welcome in the lost, to pray constantly with ever-hopeful hearts?

Friends, Jeremiah’s words are a merciful reminder that we have been struggling, scattering, separating ourselves since the beginning of time. We need to hear his words again and again because we need to find a way to fully trust in what connects us all together. We must remember to whom we belong, to whom we answer to. Our faith teaches that we are called to follow the

One who shepherds us all. Or as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says: “Human sin is our failure to live what we are. Being the masters of the earth, we forget that we are servants of God.”

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Ten year ago, I took a job as a teacher’s aide just outside of New York. The fourth grader who I was assigned to had gone through six teaching aides before me, and he was privately known by the school administrators as “he who shall not be named.”

Well, his name was in fact Steven, and he was an only child from a wealthy-white family. His parents had been so involved and protective of him, that at this point he had it in writing that no teacher could tell him “no”, and he could walk around the classroom and chew gum as he pleased. Steven took all this to heart. He controlled every space he entered, he intimidated his teachers, and he had absolutely no friends.

From the moment I walked through the door, he made it clear that I didn’t belong in his life. Within the first few hours he told me that he would call his attorney if I kept following him around. But I stayed calm and continued to help him anyway. I was determined not to crack.

One afternoon, Steven was doing a math worksheet and was struggling with fractions. I offered to show him a trick that would be helpful. Steven snatched the paper away and barked, “Why don’t you go back to Mexico?”

What hurt most in that moment - more than his biting tone and choice of words was I knew that somewhere along the way - we had failed him. This eight-year-old boy had learned that in order to protect his power and his pride, he had to divide himself from his classmates, from his teachers, and from me. Being vulnerable with his neighbors was out of the question, and so he made a desperate, mean attempt to push me away. And my heart broke for him.

Where did he get that? Where did he learn that? Where did we as a society go wrong?

It’s never easy to be good neighbors.

Not today – and certainly not in Jeremiah’s lifetime. In the midst of his divided world, Jeremiah’s prophecy presents us with a new vision of shepherd, a new vision of neighbor, a new vision of leader and king – one that is equipped to seek out the lost and bring a polarized people into shared community. As Christians, we see that best in Jesus.

Today is “Christ the King Sunday”, a day when we celebrate that our Lord did not come to us as a shepherd with a golden staff ready to conquer, but instead as a sacrificial lamb. Christ devoted his life and ministry to seeking out the scattered: the tax collector high in a tree, the adulterous woman in the midst of angry crowd, the rich man and the fisherman, the widow and the soldier, the two criminals dying on either side of him, and sought to bring them all toward one another – toward him, toward God. And it is through Christ, through the Cross, that God demonstrates for us a new sort of authority and majesty – one that turns the world upside down, and asks us to be fiercely vulnerable.

If we are going to call ourselves Christians, then we must live into God's call for us to unify even when it seems impossible. It is not a unity brought about by dominance, oppression, what's mine or yours, whose in-whose out, whose right-whose wrong, no, this unity has a particular transcendent quality – it requires us to live into a spirit of shared power, of collective vulnerability, of a capacity to connect - no matter what.

Rev. Luke Powery, recently shared these words with his congregation:

“Christ claims us for his service - being a Christian is not the same as being an American. You hold citizenship in God's land, and it doesn't mean you can't lament and struggle with God or with others. There's room for this in the Christian life. But one thing is for sure: when you're a Christian, you know who is the Lord of the future and present, and who reigns ultimately.”<sup>i</sup>

Sisters and brothers, we are Christians above all. That means we follow Christ. And we are called to a path that is vastly bigger than candidates and tense thanksgiving meals. Our path after Christ is one that is vulnerable, and radical, and relational, and sacrificial, and focused on actively preparing the way for God's inclusive, all-loving kingdom here on earth. It is a treacherous, dangerous, and glorious task. And it invites us to be a new sort of shepherd – one willing to seek out all who are missing from the flock and welcome them into the fold.

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Mona and her husband Sebastian were an unlikely pair. Mona was a Muslim-American of Syrian decent and Sebastian a Caucasian-American. They both shared a passion for social justice work, and in time, Sebastian found a home in Islam, and the two found a true partner in one another.

Shortly after their marriage, Sebastian became more and more aware of the ways in which Muslims were being singled out. “I never really realized how people stared at you before,” he told his wife, who wore a *hijab* (a head scarf) each day. “Seeing the world through your eyes, is helping me re-examine the ways I am treated differently in society.”

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino and Paris, Mona and Sebastian began to feel fearful walking around their hometown of Cambridge each day. They thought they should stay in-doors, keep away from people who might try to harass them or hurt them.

But after a long talk, they decided to do something else. They set up a booth on a busy corner with a sign that read, “Ask a Muslim: Free Coffee, Donuts and Flowers.” As people passed by Mona said, “We'd love it if you would take a moment and break bread with us.”

Some people passed right by them, some people helped themselves to a coffee in silence, some posed an array of questions:

One woman asked Mona if her head scarf felt oppressive, “No” she said, “I find it liberating.”

A young man hesitantly asked about their daily lives, Sebastian said, “We are as American as Apple pie - changing diapers and cooking eggs.”

An older gentleman warmly said, “Thanks for doing this and I'm sorry and sad about what's happening in the world right now.”

A child stuffed two doughnuts in her mouth and begged the couple to return tomorrow with more.

At the end of the day, Mona reflected on what they had done together: “We stepped out of our comfort zone and it paid off,” she said, “We went and did something that took a lot of guts for us. We didn't feel safe and we did it anyway because we believe in love. We believe that the world is a generous and beautiful place. Period.”<sup>ii</sup>

It is never easy to be good neighbors;  
but God's call for us is never easy.  
It takes guts, and vulnerability, and courageous faith.

Since September, we have been thinking hard about the many ways God is calling Grace Covenant to live out our Christian faith together. And now, in this complex time, it feels more urgent than ever to internalize our calling in order to be:  
fiercely vulnerable and out-spoken in new ways,  
to listen more compassionately,  
to trust more deeply,  
to reach out more insistently,  
and to make ready the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

*“I will raise up shepherds who will shepherd them. They shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing says the Lord.”*

Friends, there is One who calls us into relationship  
There is One who shepherds us home.  
There is One who pushes us to something greater  
That One is the One we trust with our lives  
And that One is the One who assures us that  
we are equipped and ready to prepare a way forward together.

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<sup>i</sup> Power, Rev. Luke A. “There's work to do.” 15 November 2016.  
[https://www.faithandleadership.com/luke-powery-theres-work-do-or-open-letter-my-children?utm\\_source=FL\\_newsletter&utm\\_medium=content&utm\\_campaign=FL\\_feature](https://www.faithandleadership.com/luke-powery-theres-work-do-or-open-letter-my-children?utm_source=FL_newsletter&utm_medium=content&utm_campaign=FL_feature)

<sup>ii</sup> Basatneh, Alaa “He didn't understand until he married a Muslim woman.” 27 March 2016.  
<http://fusion.net/story/284721/ask-a-muslim/>