Matthew 5:13 *The Neighboring Life:* *Salty Neighboring*

***Advice Column***We’ve been talking about neighboring for the last month and a half, so when I saw a headline in the paper this week that said: “Neighbor Needs to Take Responsibility for being Un-neighborly” it got my attention. It comes from the advice columnist Carolyn Hax:

Question**:** I'm wondering how to make amends with a neighbor who's aloof and distant. She moved in four years ago. Soon afterward, there was a misunderstanding about my friend parking in front of her driveway and she was unnecessarily harsh about it, especially since I was seven months' pregnant at the time. It really upset me, and my husband went over to tell her off, but it didn't go well. He ended up reporting her big vicious dog to a friend in animal control. Animal control reported back that she and the dog were both ex-military and the dog was trained and under control so no lasting trouble came of it. After that, most of the neighbors took my side and avoided her.

Eventually, it all blew over since she is quiet, keeps her house in good shape, and even takes care of the elderly woman next door, mowing the lawn and shoveling snow for her. Also, the dog goes everywhere with her and does seem very well-behaved. But somehow we never really started speaking again.

I have invited her to the block parties and the neighborhood Christmas party that I organize, but she never shows up.

Last week, I was working in my garden and saw her come home from what was obviously a funeral and she looked so sad I wanted to offer my condolences but wasn't sure it would be welcome. I haven't seen her boyfriend since then and I'm worried he died and none of us neighbors even knew. We're a close-knit, supportive group on this street but she's missing out. I want to fix this but don't know how. What can I try that I haven't already done?

That’s quite a scenario. Usually, when people write to an advice columnist they are looking for help with a scenario that is caused by someone else. The advice columnist doesn’t usually call the letter writer out as the source of the problem. But not in this case. Here is Carolyn’s answer:

Answer**:** Oh you've done plenty.

You made her the bad guy when your friend blocked her driveway, yes? You sicced your temper-challenged spouse on her, who then reported her dog as "vicious" with zero facts and an abundance of spite; you turned the entire neighborhood against her; you made no attempts to apologize even as four years of accrued evidence of her fundamental decency towered over her original offense of being "unnecessarily harsh" about your friend's screw-up; you did not consider the possibility that her past service and relocation might equal a recent separation from the military and the stress that entails, which might explain a onetime "harsh" response to a careless neighbor; you had the high nerve to describe her as "aloof and distant" and "missing out" on your "close-knit, supportive" neighborhood when her being thus traces directly to the self-righteous shunning you subjected her to.

Invitations to the block party? As anyone's idea of a gosh-I've-tried-everything answer to four years of your neighborhood's idea of inclusion?

Nope.

The answer was to drop by four years ago, the moment tempers cooled, to apologize for losing your mind over a driveway spat and to invite her and her nice trained dog over for a pleased-to-meet-you do-over.

Now, the answer is genuine remorse. And pumpkin bread. Bake some and leave it for her with a note apologizing, in full, for the shocking chain of unneighborly events that you set in motion. Say you hope this is the year she joins you at the Christmas party.

Then don't hold your breath.

That is pretty much the exact opposite of what we have been talking about the last six weeks. That could go down as a text-book example of how not to do neighboring. And I appreciate the advice-columnist for not mincing words.

***Review***
Our series has been called “The Neighboring Life.” We started with the Greatest Commandment, **Matthew 22:37-40:**

**37**Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ **38**This is the first and greatest commandment. **39**And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ **40**All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Jesus said the most important thing is to love God and love your neighbor. And, in fact, it is pretty clear from these verses and elsewhere in the Bible (i.e. Matt. 25:45; 1 John 4:20-21) that one of the best ways to demonstrate our love for God is in how we treat our neighbor.

So then, the question we asked was a simple one: What if, when Jesus said “Love your neighbor” He meant your literal, next door neighbors?

One of the things we’ve done with this commandment is we’ve expanded it to include pretty much everyone. “Who is my neighbor?” a lawyer asked Jesus. And Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan, making it clear that we should be neighborly to anyone who has a need. The parable of the sheep and the goats says that we should love the “least of these.” The Sunday School answer is that we don’t get to pick and choose who to love.

But in blowing that commandment up to include everyone in the world, one of the things we’ve done is sort of give ourselves permission to ignore the people in our neighborhoods. We’ve bought into the American isolationism—the closed-garage-door-syndrome--that can make us virtual strangers to those who live closest to us.

So we’ve been talking about neighboring. We’ve talked about being intentional in getting to know our neighbors. We’ve used the rhyming words “Stay, Pray, Play, and Say” to talk about the practices of neighboring that can help us be the presence of Jesus in our neighborhoods. Looking at Acts 17:26, which says that God determines the times and places for where we live, we’ve said that it is no accident that we live where we live at this time.

So, to wrap this series up, today I want to talk about being Salty Neighbors. And no, I don’t mean that like in the story from the advice column. I don’t mean being salty like you would use that word to describe someone who is cranky or vulgar or pugnacious. I mean salty like Jesus describes it in Matthew 5:13.

***You Are the Salt of the Earth***I’ve made reference to this verse a couple of times in the series already, but we haven’t really looked at. It’s part of the Sermon on the Mount. **Here’s what Jesus says**:

**13**“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

What does Jesus mean when He calls us salt? Is that even a good thing?

Salt has been somewhat vilified in the modern era. Too much salt has been linked to high blood pressure and obesity. Our fast food industry is notorious for using an abundance of salt to keep us coming back for more. And, even in Jesus’ day, salt had its negative connotations. Conquering armies would sometimes “salt the earth” behind them, ensuring that the land would be unable to support crops for generations.

But I think it is safe to assume Jesus means this metaphor in a positive way. So let’s think about what salt is good for.

One thing that quickly comes to mind is that salt **makes us thirsty**. Eat some salty popcorn, you’re going to want something to drink. That’s why bars often make salty pretzels and peanuts available free of charge, to get people to drink more! Or so I’m told.

Another thing that salt does is **enhance flavor**. Salt draws the natural flavors out of food. Corn on the cob seems brighter with a sprinkling of salt. Fried eggs are just begging for salt and pepper. I know some people—my brother is one of them—who cannot sit down to a meal without immediately reaching for the salt shaker. (Here’s a pro tip: don’t do that. You should at least taste your food first to see if the cook has already seasoned it enough for your taste.)

And a third thing that salt does—and the function it primarily performed in Jesus’ day—is that it **preserves food**. Without refrigeration, the best way to store food for long periods of time was to dry it and salt it to prevent decay and spoilage.

Three things salt does well: it stimulates thirst, in pulls out flavor, and it holds back decay. So which of these three did Jesus have in mind when He called His followers “the salt of the earth.”? What’s the point of the metaphor?

And the simple answer is: we don’t know. Read enough commentators and preachers on this text, and it’s going to feel like a magician doing a card trick: “pick a card, any card.” It could be that Jesus meant any one of these three things, or that He meant all three.

If Jesus was referring to salt’s innate ability to make people thirsty, then what He is saying is that when Christians are following closely after Jesus with lives full of purpose, joy, and hope; then there will be a tendency to create a spiritual thirst in people around them.

There’s a saying that you may have heard Ernie Bruns use. It goes: “Live such salty lives around nonChristisnas that they can’t help but become thirsty.” This is what that means. Live your life so connected to Jesus that your neighbors will be curious about makes you different.

But Jesus could also be referring to salt’s tendency to make things taste better. In that case, He would mean that as Christians it is our job to bring out and highlight what is already good in our neighborhoods. There is a lot of talent and potential present in the homes that are nearest yours, and as a Christian maybe your role is to help highlight those resources and bring them into contact with one another.

This is the way Eugene Peterson understands the metaphor. In his translation of the Bible known as The Message, he writes this verse this way: “You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth.” How can you draw out what is already good in your neighborhood? How can you enhance the God-flavors that are already there?

And if Jesus was referring to salt’s preserving properties, then what He would be saying about Christians is that we have a role in holding back the decay of our society. We live in a fallen world. Sin, and evil, are real. Left unchecked, things are only going to get worse. In spite of improvements in technology and education and governing systems, the human condition tends to run towards decay. We don’t need to look any further than Sutherland Springs, Texas to see that.

But one of the ways the downward spiral can be held in check is by the presence of Christians in the world. One of the ways God restrains wickedness from being as bad as it can be is by putting Christians in the world—not to change everything, but—to change their neighborhoods, to influence their communities, to be pockets of salt in a world that is otherwise falling apart.

So: pick a card, any card. Or pick all three. When Jesus says: “you are the salt of the earth” He seems to be saying these three things: make people thirsty; draw out the God-flavors, and hold back the decay.

***Stay Potent, Stay Close***
But there are a couple of other things about the salt metaphor that we need to note.

For one thing, in order for salt to have the greatest possible impact, it has to **remain potent.** That is to say, it needs to maintain its saltiness. That’s what Jesus means in the second half of the verse. Un-salty salt is worthless.

Now, from a scientific perspective, salt never stops being salt. Sodium Chloride (table salt) is a stable compound that doesn’t break down easily. But in Jesus’ day, the primary way salt was obtained was by evaporating water out of the Dead Sea. When that water was evaporated, salt crystals were the first to form. If they were harvested at the right time, you would have relatively pure salt. But if too much time passed, other crystals from other compounds in the water would also form and the salt would become diluted, to the point where it would be useless. At that point, as Jesus said, it would be good for nothing but trampling into your foot path.

The point seems to be that in order to be effective in this world we need to keep our connection to Jesus. We need to maintain our potency. We need a strong enough concentration of Christ’s influence in our lives that His power and presence will be visible and understandable to our neighbors.

And the other thing is, for salt to do what salt does, it needs to **come into contact** with whatever it is supposed to affect. Salt doesn’t make a person thirsty unless they eat it. Salt doesn’t make your eggs taste better unless you shake it out of the salt shaker. Salt can’t hold back decay unless it is packed onto the meat.

For Christians, that means in order to live out Jesus’ description of us, we must come into contact with other people. We need to spend time with our neighbors. We need to get involved in their lives. We cannot salt their lives—in the good ways Jesus’ metaphor implies—if we are still stuck in the salt shaker. Bill Hybels writes:

[This], unfortunately, is a fairly good description of a lot of people who call themselves Christians. Oh, they’ve got a lot of potency in their own relationship with Christ. They walk a God-honoring path in their personal patterns of living. But they never get out where they can rub up next to people who need their influence. They’re good looking table ornaments, but they have low impact. (Becoming a Contagious Christian, p. 43. The entire discussion of salt is drawn from Hybels’ exposition on pages 41-43 of this book)

Jesus wants us to be salty neighbors. He wants us create thirst in our neighbors. He wants us to enhance the good things in our neighborhoods. He wants us to be a preserve of good in a world trending toward decay. And in order for us to do that we need to stay potent, and we need to stay close to the people around us.

***The Powerful Potential of Neighboring***
As we wrap up this series I just want to talk about potential blessings that can result when we all seek to be better neighbors. The companion book to our Bible study guide—*The Neighboring Church*—gives 5 benefits from living a neighboring life. They are:

**A Safer Way to Live.**

Robert Putnam is a sociologist who was one of the first to document America’s slide away from community based living to more independent individualism in a massive book titled *Bowling Alone.* In a follow up book entitled *Better Together: Restoring American Community* he writes:

The more neighbors who know one another by name, the fewer crimes a neighborhood as a whole will suffer. A child born in a state whose residents volunteer, vote, and spend time with friends is less likely to be born underweight, less likely to drop out of school, and less likely to kill or be killed than the same child—no richer or poorer—born in another state whose residents do not. Society as a whole benefits enormously from the social ties forged by those who choose connective strategies in pursuit of their particular goals. (quoted by Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis in *The Neighboring Church*, p. 36)

Communities are safer when neighbors look out for one another. Our children are safer.

I subscribe to the Des Moines Register, so I get to read about news from around the state. And one of the trends that has really gotten my attention recently are the number of children who have died from abuse. In particular, the stories of Natalie Finn and Sabrina Ray have had an impact. Both were teen-age girls who were starved to death by their foster parents in the Des Moines area.

More recently Sterling Koehn is a 6-month -old boy who was found dead on Aug. 30 in a powered jumping seat in his parents’ apartment in the tiny town of Alta Vista. It appeared that he had not been moved from the seat, or had his diaper changed, in over a week.

Each of these cases are dreadful, and the adults responsible need to experience justice. But it also leaves you wondering where the neighbors were? Didn’t anybody notice that these girls were starving to death? Wasn’t there anybody checking in on the young mother with the toddler?

Please understand, I don’t blame the neighbors for what happened in any of these cases. But I am saying that if we, as a society, did a better job of knowing and caring about our neighbors, these things would be much less likely to happen.

**A Healthier Way to Live.**

Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers* begins with the story of Roseto, Pennsylvania. Roseto is a little town of slate quarry workers named for the village in Italy where most of its residents immigrated from. In the 1950s it came to the attention of the medical community when a physician and researcher named Stewart Wolf discovered a medical mystery there.

It turned out that virtually no one under fifty-five in Roseto had a heart attack or showed signs of heart disease. For men over sixty-five, the death rate from heart disease in Roseto was roughly half that of the U.S. as a whole. In fact, the death rate from all causes was 30 to 35 percent lower in Roseto than expected.

What could cause such unusual statistics? Was it diet? No. Rosetans were cooking with lard rather than the olive oil of their heritage and received a whopping 41 percent of their calories from fat. “Nor was this a town where people got up at dawn to do yoga and run a brisk six miles. The Pennsylvanian Rosetans smoked heavily and many were struggling with obesity.” (*Outliers,* p. 8)

Nor could climate account for their astonishing good health. In the two towns closest to Roseto, Nazareth and Bangor—both about the same size and populated by the same kind of hard working European immigrants--the death rates from heart disease were three times that of Roseto.

Genetics wasn’t the answer either. Dr. Wolf and his colleagues tracked down relatives of Rosetans that had settled in different parts of the U.S., and found that their health statistics did not correlate with their cousins in Pennsylvania.

So what was it? Gladwell writes:

What Wolf began to realize was that the secret of Roseto wasn’t diet or exercise or genes or location. It had to be Roseto itself. As…Wolf [and his colleague] walked around the town, they figured out why. They looked at how the Rosetans visited one another, stopping to chat in Italian on the street, say, or cooking for one another in their backyards. They learned about the extended family clans that underlay the town’s social structure. They saw how many homes had three generations living under one roof, and how much respect grandparents commanded. They went to mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel and saw the unifying and calming effect of the church. They counted twenty-two separate civic organizations in a town of just under two thousand people. (*Outliers*, p. 9)

In a word, Dr. Wolf found that the Rosetans were healthier because they were good neighbors. Gladwell writes:

Living a long life, the conventional wisdom at the time said, depended to a great extent on who we were—that is, our genes. It depended on the decisions we made—on what we chose to eat, and how much we chose to exercise, and how effectively we were treated by the medical system. No one was used to thinking about health in terms of community. (*Outliers*, p. 10)

Good neighboring is good for our health.

**A More Hopeful Way to Live.**

In the opening of his book *Soul of a Citizen*, Paul Rogat Loeb told the story of two women living in the inner city. Both were pregnant and living alone. One day, in a chance meeting in the elevator of their apartment building, one said to the other, “I see you’re pregnant. I am too. What if we exchanged babysitting?” According to Loeb, that simple neighboring encounter, in time, turned into twenty families becoming a neighborhood co-op “permanently woven into the fabric of their neighborhood.” Rebecca, the young woman whose question started it all, recalled, “It just seems like a more hopeful way to live. Loeb commented:

In both intent and outcome, Rebecca’s effort was modest. It resolved an everyday personal dilemma, while helping nurture an old-fashioned sense of community in an urban setting. Yet it also had a powerful emotional and spiritual impact on her life. It helped replace isolation with connection. (The Neighboring Church, p. 38)

I saw an Iowa version of this just this past week with the Harvest Bee for Kent and Lannette Kilpatrick. Kent has been struggling with infection issues in his foot, so his doctors told him in no uncertain terms that he was not to be getting into a tractor. But Kent still had crops in the field. So, this last Wed. some farmers from church, along with Kent’s son-in-law Scott, organized a Harvest Bee. There were 7 combines, a bunch of grain carts, and innumerable trucks out there to get Kent’s corn in in a single day. And the neat thing was—while there were several men from church—most of the volunteers that day were Kent’s neighbors. The farmers who farm the land closest to him.

It’s a more hopeful way to live when we pull together to help our neighbors. And who knows, maybe next time it will be one of those neighbors who needs the help.

**A More Just, Merciful and Humble Way to Live**

Micah 6:8 is known as the Micah Mandate. It says: “Act justly and… love mercy and…walk humbly with your God.” When we get to know our neighbors we sometimes have the opportunity to live this mandate out.

Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis tell this story in *The Neighboring Church:*

One of the ways our friend Don Simmons came to know his neighbor Miguel was by helping him understand some of his documents and mail. “Because Miguel didn’t feel confident in his reading level and was embarrassed to ask his high school son for help, he would come to my yard, hand me a piece of mail, and say, ‘I got this. What does this mean?” I would read things and capsulize them for him,” Don said.

Sometimes the things Don read angered him, like the time Miguel’s daughter-in-law received something from Child Protective Services. “I read it and had to tell her, ‘This is about your kids.’ How horrible it must be to a mother to get something and not understand it. She could read it but didn’t understand what it was asking her to do.”

Don helping his neighbors gain understanding is an act of justice and mercy. As tempted as Don was to say to Miguel, “Let me fight this for you,” he also knew that walking humbly meant empowering this family to make their own calls in addressing their issues. Sometimes Don dialed the city number on his own phone and handed it to Miguel or his wife, Teresa. “Yes, there were times they would look at me to make sure they were saying things correctly. It wasn’t a great thing I did. It was so simple to help them because I could read and understand a document,” Don said. (p. 38-39)

I think of the story Krista Petty told when she was here of the neighbor who noticed DHS taking the neighbor’s kids away. Because the neighbor knew the mom, and knew she was a good mom, she was willing to ask some questions. As it turned out, the whole situation was the work of a vindictive ex-husband.

Sometimes, we see things happening at a neighbor’s house and we say: “Oh, I shouldn’t get involved. I don’t want to stick my nose in where it doesn’t belong.” And if they are strangers to you, you are right: you don’t belong, you shouldn’t get involved. But if your neighbors have become friends, then their crisis becomes your crisis. You have the opportunity to help in whatever way is needed.

**A More Christlike Way to Live**

Finally, being a good neighbor is a better way to live because it seems like the way Jesus would live. Rusaw and Davis again quote their friend Don Simmons:

If I am supposed to understand scripture and be like Jesus, then this is what Jesus would do. This is how Jesus lived. He was conscious of the people closest to him. He didn’t leave them out. He was never too busy. If Christ-likeness is the goal, I can’t obtain it without loving my neighbor. (The Neighboring Church, p. 40)

The first week of this series, as I introduced communion, I shared a verse with you from *The Message*. Now, as we wrap the series up, it seems like a fitting way to conclude. **John 1:14:**

The Word became flesh and blood,
    and moved into the neighborhood.

This is the Apostle John’s classic summary of the incarnation. This is what Jesus—the Word—did for us. More traditional translations say: “The word became flesh and lived among us” or “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” The original language could literally be translated as “pitched his tent.”

The point is: Jesus was the original good neighbor. When we were far from God, He did not leave us as strangers, but He came to live among us. He moved into the neighborhood. He came to love his neighbor as he loved himself.

And if we would be like Jesus, we should do the same. Be salty neighbors.