

“Neighborly Hospitality”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
August 30, 2015

I am struck by the ways in which television has shaped my life, and perhaps for many of you, television also has shaped your life.

During the 1970s, one of my all-time favorite sitcoms was having its heyday. This sitcom, more of a family drama really, lasted for five seasons and 117 episodes from 1969 to 1974. Does anyone want to take a guess which sitcom I'm talking about? This show, of course, was *The Brady Bunch*—Marsha, Marsha, Marsha! You see, television has affected everyone. *The Brady Bunch* was, indeed, a beloved show by children and even parents, and *The Brady Bunch* always had some kind of moral to the story, but it was a show best known, not for its morals but for the changing family structure that our society was beginning to experience. For a variety of reasons—reasons never fully revealed by *The Brady Bunch* show, the intact nuclear family was becoming less and less the norm. *The Brady Bunch*, in a fun and endearing way, brought that reality home to the TV watching American public with what was the first blended family.

Now, skip ahead 20 years, and sitcom television was still revealing trends of American society. In the 1990s, I was often caught watching *Home Improvement*, a sitcom running from 1991 to 1999, which was about “Tim the Tool Man Taylor” played by Tim Allen, and it was about this fictional TV show of tools and home fix-it projects and, of course it was about his wife and his family also. *Home Improvement* was funny and clever and, like *The Brady Bunch*, typically it included some lesson or moral to each episode, but perhaps one of the most revealing aspects of the show was what it illustrated about the changing face of our neighborhoods. Central to this show was “Wilson”, a character who played the next door neighbor. “Wilson” showed up in nearly every episode. He was wise, educated and well-traveled, and he offered wisdom to Tim and to Tim in regards to the struggles in his family but, strangely enough, we never, ever did get a glimpse of “Wilson’s” face. If you remember, “Wilson” was always seen from behind the privacy fence in the backyard. You could see his eyes but never his whole face. We never did meet the whole “Wilson”.

Through the character of “Wilson” we saw reflected back to us our increasingly private, individualized, autonomous lives. The public square, social clubs and, indeed, our social institutions were, by the mid-1990s, long on the decline. In fact, a socialist, Dr. Robert Putnam, documented this trend in his seminal essay called “*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*”. Putnam writes “The institutions of American social capital are on the decline. Attendance at public forums, religious groups and civic organizations have been steadily declining since the heyday of the 1950’s suburban community. The social fabric of America is coming apart on the neighborhood level” wrote Putnam “and it’s only going to get worse,” as, indeed, it has.

So, it’s into this social reality of privatization, social isolation and general mistrust of our neighbors that we are supposed to practice Christian hospitality. To do so, we must first explore the biblical concepts of neighbor and hospitality.

Jesus, of course, is well known for His teachings about love of neighbor, a teaching that He pulls directly from Leviticus 19:18 in the Hebrew Bible. We have thought of neighborliness as perhaps some kind of social etiquette like the basket of goodies that a new neighbor receives when he/she moves into a neighborhood, but biblically the love of neighbor does not refer to either an act of kindness or an emotional attachment, but love of neighbor in the Bible refers, first and foremost, to a social obligation. It is what we call in our world today “the common good”. How do we build up “the common good”? This love of neighbor as a social obligation in the Bible takes social, political and economic forms, so as the Old Testament theologian, Mary Douglas, has pointed out, in Leviticus 19 that Ray read for us, it addresses neighborliness towards members of the community who are not social

equals. These people are probably folks who would not generally live next door to us--thus the references to the deaf, the blind, the poor--it requires that the strong and well-situated members of the community take the needs of their weak neighbors seriously. Speaking biblically, then, love of neighbor is about social obligation to those with no social power. We call this "the common good".

In Christian tradition, love of neighbor takes the practical form of hospitality. Hospitality is gospel love in action. It is doing good to others, showing love towards others, out of gratitude first and foremost for what God has done for us or God's love of us. When we remember how loved we are and have experienced that love, it is something we are called to share.

In the scripture from 1 Peter this morning, the hospitality referred to is hospitality that takes place in the worshipping community. If you noticed, in that scripture it says "the end of things is near". In that first century, there were many who thought God's final judgment and of history was perhaps near and that Jesus was perhaps coming back any day now, so there was, in the worshipping community, a sense that things were maybe coming to an end, but this hospitality was about how, in the worshipping community, we take care of one another, so this worshipping community lived in tension with the gospel call and being accepted by the wider community, so what we learned was that following Christ was as difficult then as it is today and even more so, so the gospel in this early community was about hospitality within that church gathering.

Christian hospitality is, of course, about generosity, it's about abundance, it's about welcoming of the stranger, and it is about reaching out over the fence or walls that keep our faces hidden from one another.

As Putnam, a sociologist, has documented, we are increasingly a nation of isolated, lonely and now increasingly angry, people. Think in the last 20 or even 30 years of the common terms we have in our culture like "road rage", like "going postal", all of these phrases about how angry our culture has become partially because we have become so isolated from one another, but engaging in Christian hospitality is not just about sharing, but it is about bringing together the community in a sense of abundance, that there is not to be resentment because everyone will have enough to share.

Engaging in Christian hospitality in such a society as ours is not only difficult to do but is increasingly frightening, but we must remember what it was that Jesus taught us to do what he was bringing to this world, so the way of Christian hospitality was not built on self-interest or fear of the neighbor, but was based on self-sacrificial love and compassion for others. So, as we engage in Christian hospitality, it increasingly becomes an act of cultural nonconformity. To share in our culture is to do something that is countercultural because when we reach out in the name of gospel ethics, we are taking fear and confronting it with love, greed confronting it with generosity, resentment confronting it with gratitude, and confronting hatred with forgiveness.

So, let us figure out again how to be people of hospitality in the Christian sense. Of course, I was thinking about TV and how we are shaped by different messages we get from TV, and two special songs came up in my mind this morning. They are songs about neighbors. The first one I am just going to remind you of, and the second one we are going to sing together. This first one, as soon as you know where this comes from, yell it out. "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood". Mr. Rogers! "A beautiful day in the neighborhood. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?" Some of you may know that Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, and his show that went on TV for so long was all about the neighborhood and reaching out to the neighbor and the joy of being in relationship with the neighbor. I was watching on YouTube earlier this morning and I was thinking that Mr. Rogers was so soothing, such a gentle soul and just beautiful to watch. It is just sad that that show no longer goes on. I think reviews and repeats are on.

Here is the second song, and I was stunned about songs about the neighborhood that we just don't hear anymore. Now, if you know this song, I'm going to sing it through once then join in if you know this song. "Who are the people in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood? Who

are the people in your neighborhood, the people that you meet each day?" Where is that from? Sesame Street! All right! Are you guys ready? "Who are the people in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood, in your neighborhood? Who are the people in your neighborhood, the people that you meet each day?"—Amen.