

## Jesus Christ is Risen, He is Risen Indeed,

I chose to start my message this morning with the Easter theme for a very specific reason. I have not chosen before to do the message on one of the other readings, and while I have woven them into the message, I have stuck to the Gospel as the main topic. However it is the excerpt from Paul's letter to the Romans that struck me from today's readings, and so it is with a reminder that we are a people reborn that I begin.

What is it you think of when you hear the word neighbor. I am reminded of a commercial from a few years ago where the doorbell rings and the door is opened by a younger woman, and there on the stoop is an older lady, carrying a pie, welcoming her to the neighborhood. The hook of this commercial was that the people were saying what they really thought, not what was expected of them to say, so the speech begins from the older lady, "I saw you moved in and I wanted to make sure you weren't weird, so I baked you this pie." The younger lady responds with, "I expected as much, I assume you want to come in and snoop around," to which the woman responds, "That's why I'm here," in a cheerful tone as she steps through the door.

The part of this tableau which has stuck with has been the phrase, "I just wanted to make sure you weren't weird." It is this, more than anything, that modern society has focused on. The fear of the other. Which is ironic, given that in Paul's day, to the Jewish people, the Roman's were very much the other, the invader, the bringer of foreign thought, ideals and culture. Very much the conqueror, enforcing those ideals on the cultures and persons that they took over, by belittling those others, and by making sure that everybody knew that to be Roman was to be superior. Paul himself, was such as an early persecutor of the Christian religion. How then, did Christianity survive, grow, and thrive. What was it that made the early church so appealing to the people, and what is it that we can learn from it today?

I think part of the answer is contained in the missive that Paul sent to the Roman's today, quoting our Lord and Savior, "Love your neighbor as yourself." You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal and you shall not covet, and any other commandment are summed up in this word" "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." How different an attitude to teach towards the other, towards your neighbor. In a society where wealth and power meant the ability to pretty much do as you please, to think of the other with love. This is not the filial love one feels towards a family member, or the eros that one feels towards a spouse, this is the agape love that meant so much to the foundation of the Christian church. Pastor has preached many times on the difference of agape love, so I will not belabor the point, but how wonderful it must have been to be the other in that situation, and to be the recipient of that agape love.

It was about five years ago that I got to see another type of neighborly experience, when I went with my wife to a Berryhill Court reunion. It was not held in Plainfield, for all of the families had moved away, but after 50 years these families that my wife had grown up with still got together, shared memories, laughter and love with one another, and were very much not viewing each other as “weird”. It was amazing to see, multiple generations from the families, some of whom had never lived on the court, experiencing the love shared by the people who had grown close. I know that we can still see this type of community, and that a church can still be very much a part of that community.

It was 10 years ago when my wife and I came to this church, very much nervous about being viewed as the other, about being seen as weird. I had ceased the practice of weekly worship, and drifted into the malaise of attending once in a while, and when I first came to Faith, I stood well away from my wife, who was convinced she would be struck by lightning it had been so long since she had been to church. And so it was during the first sharing of the peace, that we were approached by Doug and Evvy Stratton, who greeted us with welcoming arms, and above all else a desire to grow and share in the agape love that made the early church grow. It was in reflection with the Synod Council this week that we all agreed that the thing we miss the most as we are gathering again after the pandemic, is the hugs and the handshakes and the smiles that cannot be seen under a mask, it is the sharing of the peace.

I look for stories to emphasize the point of the message, and today I found a short story by Frank Federicks. As a Christian, I reflected over the years as what it means to “love your neighbor.” When I lived in rural America, outside of Portland, Oregon, this seemed like a much easier feat. Our nearest neighbor lived a few hundred yards away. I'd have to walk a mile in any direction to find someone we didn't know. Now living in New York City, and my “neighbor” is someone I don't know. My city, neighborhood and block are filled with people who don't know me, don't care to know me, don't look like me, talk like me, think like me and have no desire to change that fact. This is true to the extent that I haven't yet caught the names of the couple who are subletting the apartment next to ours. In short, I literally don't even know my literal neighbors. I find that it's pretty hard to love people you don't even know, And sometimes, we all, myself included, use that as an excuse to not even try.

One day, Brendan, a young but rising DJ in New York, was coming home to his Brooklyn apartment when a homeless woman asked him for money. He said, honestly, that he had no money. By the end of the week, she asked two more times, and each time he answered, “No.” Finally she frankly replied, “you better not, because every day you say no.” Inserting some rational thinking into an otherwise awkward conversation, he proposed, “I am on my way to a job interview. If I get the job, I will take you out for Chinese food.” This promise yielded a friendship that neither we prepared for, that changed the trajectory of their lives. Brendan got the job. But their friendship didn't just

end with Chinese food. They build a friendship of mutual support, spending their birthdays, holidays and tough times together over a period of eight years. When Brendan's heater broke, she made him a blanket. Two days later when he told her that he had lost his job, she disappeared, returning minutes later, bringing him groceries, which she continued to do throughout the winter. Even with so little, she never hesitated to give back.

Over these eight years, Jackie moved from the streets and subway stations, into a halfway house, to the YMCA, and is now moving into an apartment. To celebrate this occasion Brendan wanted to do something special for Jackie. He went with her to Target, and helped her to pick out everything she'd need for an apartment, starting a registry. Then, he set up a campaign to raise the money to pay for the registry. While their original goal was to raise \$500, they raised more than \$6,000 and are now looking to use the extra funding to support other women in need.

Brendan isn't a Christian, and this isn't about out-Jesusing each other. It's not even a challenge to only Christians, but everyone who struggles with the desire to be a stakeholder in their community, yet are overwhelmed by the reality of living out that desire. Brendan reminds me that having a day job with a mission doesn't relieve us of the challenge of being loving neighbors, for the few within miles, or the thousands within blocks. Similarly, loving our neighbors, whether next door or at our door step, doesn't require a change in profession, just a willingness to speak, to listen and to give.

The fact is my friends, that we already know what it is to be on the receiving end of agape love. We already know what it is like to have the Lord listen to our prayers, and we know what it is like to have Jesus give his very life for the forgiveness of our sins. We know what it is like to receive grace, and a reward that cannot be earned by any action of our own. May we as people use the example of Jesus, examples from the world around us, like Brendan and Jackie, examples from our church that model the behavior of loving your neighbor, such as First Things First and Interfaith Rise, to lose the fear of the stranger, the fear of those that don't look like us, talk like us or think like us, and learn instead to speak, to listen and to give. It is this message of love that changed the world, and we all have the examples if we have but eyes to see them, and the tools to do this if we but use them.

Amen