Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, July 21, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Acts 2:43-47
Luke 10: 25-37

Sermon: Our Spiritual Geography - Neighbourhood

When Paul and I lived in Fort Qu'Appelle, one of the blessings of the small town experience was the local Farmers' Market which ran from June to October each year. It was held on a piece of property close to the centre of town, for some reason undeveloped, but just the right size for many in the community to gather. People from the area who grew large vegetable and flower gardens or specialty items would set up tables to sell their wares. In the spring there were strawberries and asparagus, then the peas and beans would appear. And there was nothing sweeter than tomatoes off the vine or corn when someone else has done all the gardening!

But the Farmers' Marker was never just about fruit and vegetables. Bakers and chefs came out of the woodwork with all kinds of treats, homemade breads and cookies, jams and jellies. Handicrafters and creative souls brought their woodwork and artwork, jewellery and knitting, handstitched and bright-beaded moccasins from the reserves nearby. Usually the butcher and the grocer in town brought out a barbecue and sausages, hamburgers and hotdogs, so that shoppers could have lunch and make the trip worthwhile. Groups fundraising for their softball team or pow wows would sell cold drinks and icecream, and it was a great way to raise the profile of upcoming events.

We started out going to the farmers market before we knew very many people in town. We were quickly introduced by church people to our real neighbours: people from other parishes, people from the next town, or neighbouring reserve, and of course, the people with the best baking.

We loved the Farmers' Market when we lived in Fort Qu'Appelle and were always sad when it closed down in the fall. It was our grapevine, our social outlet, our community service, our network. It was multicultural, multigenerational and it drew on people from every income level. It was there where we really got to meet our neighbourhood.

There are neighbourhoods in Ottawa that have block parties and Christmas light festivals, corporate garage sales, neighbourhood watch, and just plain neighbours who look out for each other. We were lucky to move into one of those neighbourhoods – and when the tornado struck our street last fall, we checked on each other.

In the era of remote control garage doors, and families leaving their homes and coming home after dark, however, you have to wonder where all your neighbours have come from… and where they've all gone.

The etymology of the word neighbor is up for debate, but the one thing linguists usually agree on is that "Neigh" comes from a word meaning close or beside or near. The second half may be old English for farmer or tenant or Germanic for dwelling place.

The concept of neighbor plays a particular role in our scripture story. One of the main purposes of Hebrew scripture was to tell the story of Israel's people – to set them apart and give them a strong, faithful identity within the cultural melting pot of ancient Palestine and the Middle East. At times that clear separation might seem contradictory to our understanding of neighbourliness. This week in our Bible video series we watched the story of Joshua and Judges unfold – with all kinds of violence and vainglory about THEIR God being on THEIR side – it's not hard to see why Israel's neighbours might not appreciate them!

But throughout the holy scripture, there is another story that is told over and over again – stories and commandments about loving your neighbor, respecting your neighbor, caring for your neighbor, loving the alien in your midst, learning from the outsider, welcoming the strange guest, treating travelers and strangers with respect and hospitality.

In our responsive reading today we red the 10 Commandments. The Hebrew Torah is full of laws and regulations, dietary rules, worship stipulations and social codes. But these ten commandments stood out – perhaps because they work so well for life together.

The 10 commandments were given to Israel's people when they fled slavery and found themselves encamped in the wilderness for forty years. Having had no freedom in slavery, no real community, perhaps they didn't really know how to treat one another, and needed some simple guidelines on how to respect God and your neighbour.

You might say the 10 commandments are just common sense – but it seems to be a fact of human nature that we do require a little guidance on treating one another with respect.

The Jewish community of Jesus' day studied all the laws in the Torah but were always left with more questions, like the one the lawyer posed to Jesus in our scripture reading today: "But who IS my neighbor?"

It's such a deceptively simple question. In answer, Jesus gave us the beloved story of the good Samaritan, one of the most profound examples of how we should live our faith in the real world, if we follow him. The Lawyer's question seemed sincere: Were his neighbors those who lived close by? Were they the ones with whom he shared a social connection? Were they residents of the same community, or were they strangers, should they count as neighbours even the vagrants on their way through town?

Could anyone be sure that they were caring for their neighbors the way God wanted them to care? The lawyer wanted to know how far God's love was supposed to extend. Beyond the usual customs of hospitality? Beyond the boundaries or limits of our own allowances and expenses? Beyond the obvious divisions of social class or ethnicity or religion or gender?

In our own context, we have many proscriptions about not talking to strangers, and about minding your own business – we are probably more like the two who passed the beaten man on the other side of the road. The contrast between the two good Jews and

the good Samaritan demonstrate a truth that is important for us to remember: God's call to care for their neighbour surpasses everyday convention and excuses.

Internationally and locally, we have so many examples of leaders and nations closing their hearts and their borders to people seeking sanctuary and refuge. The tide of hatred and bigotry seems to be rising, even as we teach and demonstrate respect in our schools.

But it is too easy for us to point our fingers and complain about their intolerance ad insensitivity. Jesus parable was not just about being generous with people like you, it was about reaching out into communities of people who are very different, even rejected.

The call of the gospel is really about US recognizing who our neighbours are and what it means to be a good neighbour. Jesus' audience would have been shocked at how the parable ended. The lawyer could have complained "Jesus' neighbourhood is too big!" But still he was invited to "go and do likewise" - to live like his enemy, if his enemy was the only one who knew the real meaning of being a neighbour.

It was a lesson in empathy - to make the victim and the passersby someone that Jesus' audience could identify with, and to make the good neighbour someone they would normally reject. Not only was the man beaten by his own people, he had to receive care from someone he normally would never touch. The neighbour is not only the one who is much like us, but the one who can teach us that we are all the same in God's eyes.

One of the primary spiritual needs of our world is to "convert" people not to our faith tradition, but to convert ourselves and others to God's understanding that hostility should become hospitality, and the enemy must sometimes be our guest. For, with empathy, we can learn to deal with the sheer size and open boundaries of Jesus' neighbourhood. When we respect God AND our neighbours, then we will find the greatest commandment fulfilled. Thanks be to God.