

GOOD NEIGHBOURS MAKE GODLY NEIGHBOURS

Nantucket has a remarkably cohesive architectural harmony thanks to its zoning laws which are among the most restrictive anywhere. One time when I was holidaying there, I was invited to a party at house of almost aggressively modern design. It was not in keeping with the island's vernacular style. At some point, I ended up talking to the owner of the house and I asked him how he got permission to build it. "It's private property," he said. "So they can't stop you from doing what you want. You just need to outlast them." Good for him, I thought. But I also remember asking myself, "Why would you want to start out by being adversarial and annoying the people who are going to be your neighbours?"

We're familiar with such attitudes, but this is neither the time nor the place to debate the schemes of ambitious developers or the misgivings of anxious neighbours. Yet it's worth keeping all of those ambitions and anxieties in mind, especially in light of this morning's gospel in which a lawyer asks Jesus a simple question: "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" To which Jesus responds with a seemingly simple answer, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Even though it was a seemingly simple answer, loving God and loving neighbour aren't simple things to do—a truth underscored by the story of the 85-year-old Israeli woman who'd been kidnapped by Hamas but was released last week. Astonishingly, she held out her hand to one of her abductors and said "Shalom" to him. After all she'd been through, she offered a sign of peace. Who of us would have done the same?

A few weeks ago, I suggested that one of the difficulties with loving our neighbour as ourselves might be that we don't love ourselves. There's no doubt that self-hatred which is projected outward is the source of much of the misery of contemporary society—as the all-too-familiar recent terror in Lewiston, Maine shows.

Thankfully most of us aren't consumed with that kind of self-hatred. Most of us probably do love ourselves, despite there being many things we wish we could change or control. So if loving our neighbours as ourselves involves nothing more than the tolerance of a few annoying quirks, that doesn't actually seem too difficult. Living with, and clashing over, picayune things is part of life in community. Except it's always the annoying quirks and picayune things that set us off and which become the source of larger conflict. A pink front door. A strange piece of modern sculpture. A Christmas display that's too bright. You all know what I mean. None of us is safe from the "not in

my back yard” mentality. And none of us hasn’t fallen prey to escalating minor disagreements to unreasonable heights. It’s so easy to forget that if we want good neighbours, we have to *be* good neighbours.

But my interest this morning is in the Church as neighbour. One of the things we forget when we read the gospels is that they weren’t written to a global audience. They were written to—and for—particular spiritual communities who were trying to figure out who Jesus was for them. Matthew’s gospel was most likely written for a community which had moved north into Gentile territory after the destruction of Jerusalem. All of a sudden, these Jewish followers of Jesus were among folk who weren’t like them. Yet the way they lived and what they believed was clearly compelling and some Gentiles wanted to be part of it. So Matthew’s gospel reflects how they were all trying to figure out how to be neighbours, how to make a community that was not only functional, but loving.

In other words, they were grappling with the age-old question who’s in and who’s out? They were working out the ways in which they were called to be a good neighbour, a true neighbour.

It seems that the Matthean community realized it was about inclusion. That’s something we can understand, especially since these days people are desperate to be find and belong to inclusive communities. Alas, they’re too often seduced by the demagogues and faux-populists out there who seem to offer a sense of community and a sense of togetherness—but all by excluding people.

Yet, while the story of the early Church is one of inclusion and even radical welcome, the later history of the Church, including our own recent history, has been anything but. It’s been one of sanctimonious sectarianism and unbending legalism. For a long time, we weren’t great neighbours insofar as we really weren’t open to anyone and everyone. Some were in. Most were out. And look where that got us.

None of us now wants to be a Church like that, but when we try to attract our neighbours, we find old assumptions die hard. They’re afraid of coming and saying or doing something wrong. They’re leery of grasping a hand extended in friendship because they think there’s a secret handshake they don’t know. All of which is tragic, especially since we’ve learned *not* to reach out—not because we don’t want to, but because we fear there isn’t a willing hand to grasp. Or that we’ll have our hand slapped away. Or even have a nail driven through it. And yet what other hope does any of us have but to reach out in peace?

But in order to reach out, we must first reach within to touch our nearest neighbour—the Christ who sleeps within our deepest selves and who yearns to come awake within us, and waken within us the deep truth of his answer to the lawyer’s question. Conventional wisdom suggests he was trying to trip Jesus up. But it’s just as likely that he was looking for some teaching that would allow him to sidestep the annoying work of being a loving neighbour. But that’s not the way of the kingdom, which asks us to

love the people and things we find annoying —difficult though that is. But difficult or not, it's that kind love that enables us to be neighbours and build communities where everyone's in and no one's out. It's that kind of love which can defeat the diabolical forces bent on dividing human beings into camps and silos and factions. It's that kind of love which can give the hope of peace wings to soar. And all because it's the kind of love like the love which long ago spilled out from the bleeding, open hands of Love himself.

These line from a well-known hymn say it all:

*Love that gives, gives ever more, gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours, ventures all its all expends.*