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“Keeping Relationships”

Sermon Series: “ Keeping Your Edge”

Sunday, October 21, 2007©

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Scripture Lesson: *Leviticus 19:13-18*

God is working in this world and He will work through you—if you leave room for your neighbor. Let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit and teach us this morning. Fill us with Your word so that we might be made new for the glory of the Father. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

One of the great unseen problems with harvesting our field out the edge—of ignoring our partnership with God and trusting ourselves to bless us more than we trust God—is how it affects our relationships with other people.

I was having a problem with my cell phone two weeks ago. This isn't the first time this has happened and my patience is admittedly a little thin with my provider. In between appointments, I went in to the service store on a tight time frame and stood in line. I approached one employee who told me that he was just a trainee and could not help me. After several minutes I finally got up to the front, where the one employee working in the store told me that my problem was not covered by my contract and I would have to pay to have the problem fixed. This revelation kicked off a vigorous dialogue between myself and the 19-year-old behind the counter. Finally, after a spirited exchange of ideas he said, “Let me look in your file.” To this I responded, “Great. That should tell you what you need to know.” And I stood there tapping my toe impatiently. After about

a minute or so of examining my file he said, “Do you still work for the Presbyterian Church?” I was busted. I wanted to answer “No, I got fired and turned Buddhist.”

We live in a time when we have less and less room for other people in our lives. From 1958 to 1995, the number of people who said that others can generally be trusted declined by almost 50%. In the last 25 years, the number of people attending civic club meetings has declined by 58%, family dinners by 43%, having friends over by 35%.¹ But this isn't working very well for us. The average person has only two friends in which they confide, down from three in 1985.² One quarter of all people say they have no one they can talk to. More than one out of every three people consider themselves lonely.³ One man, someone not at this Church, said to me recently, “My life consists of a 45-minute commute in the morning, 10 hours of work, a 45-minute commute home, frozen pizzas, the internet, and movies from NetFlix. I am terrified at the prospect of having anything more than a two-minute conversation with anyone. Yet it's exactly what I want—to connect with someone, somewhere, sometime.”

This is not the life God desires for His people. But when we harvest our field all the way to the edge, we reap a life which is lonely and lacking. One of the reasons that God wants us to leave room in our life is so that there can be room for people. We see that in the Scripture lesson which we are

looking at this morning. If there is a theme of this passage, it is the very last verse, which Jesus quoted as the second greatest commandment which God has given to us. *Leviticus 19:18*, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” We have heard this phrase so often it has lost almost all of its meaning for us. I have been subjected to so many unrealistic sermons on the Golden Rule, and been entreated so often with shallow platitudes by the self-righteous to love my neighbor that it makes me want to TP my neighbor’s house. You all are saying now, “Note to self: do not move in next door to the Laverentz’s or be slow repairing Eric’s cell phone.”

What frustrates me is that no one ever asks the question, “Why is it so hard to love our neighbor? Once again, this passage in *Leviticus* gives us a clue. Listen to what *Leviticus* commands here: *Don’t oppress or rob your neighbor, pay your workers right away, don’t slander, don’t curse or cause to stumble, show no prejudice against the poor, don’t defer to the rich.* What do all of these commands have in common? First, these are all things which we know we shouldn’t do. But we do them anyway. We’re sinful. Secondly, we do them because we believe if we don’t, we won’t have enough. We’re afraid that if we love our neighbor too much—if we leave too much room for them in our lives, in our hearts and with our harvest—that we won’t have enough room for ourselves and our needs.

This is simply not what Scripture teaches or what God promises. Scripture does not teach the law of subtraction. Scripture teaches, when we make room to love our neighbor, the law of God’s action. *Luke 6:37-38* “*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.*”

Let me put this into tangible terms this morning. If I have two oranges and I give you one orange—does it mean I have one orange? Yes. That’s what the law of subtraction teaches. But the Scriptural law of God in action teaches that He will also give me a banana, and an apple, and a papaya, a kiwi, a mango, some grapes, a pineapple, a kumquat, a cantaloupe, and a watermelon. If it’s the fall, God may even throw in a pumpkin.

It’s simple. When we partner with God to love our neighbor, by leaving room for them in our lives, our heart and our harvest—God blesses us far more than we could ever bless ourselves.

A lot of you may read Peggy Noonan’s columns in the *Wall Street Journal*. Noonan is a devoted Catholic and a huge fan of John Paul II. She tells a story about the first time she saw the Pope. She invited a friend of hers who was not a Catholic, a professional fund-raiser for the Democratic Party, to go with her. But her friend was an hour late and Noonan had to wait outside until the entire event was full and the doors were closed. They found themselves waiting outside with a crowd of others who also couldn’t get in.

There was a woman crying. She was standing to my right and crying out loud with a hankie in her hand. She had a teenage daughter with her, and we spoke. She was crying because they had tickets but had arrived late. They had come all the way from Chile to see the Holy Father. They had flown on a plane from Chile!

We joined together and commiserated, shared our stories. Then two college girls joined us. They were sad too, not that they had tickets but that they’d come to New York and hoped for a glimpse and hadn’t gotten one...Then to my left I saw a New York social figure, a philanthropist, a lovely woman standing by herself behind a barricade, looking lost. She had a ticket too. She’d gone to the wrong door, been redirected to the wrong place, and now couldn’t get in...She was white haired and trembling, and I put my arm around her, and

we, too, commiserated and stood waiting, listening for the pope's voice.

Now and then some official-looking person would come by and we'd ask for help, but we got nowhere.

And then suddenly: A handsome young man in a gray suit, tall, with dark hair, walked across the street from the cathedral and stood before me at the barricade. "Are you Peggy Noonan?" he said. Yes, I said. He moved the barricade forward. "Come." He said. Whoever he was, he was in charge and he could help us. But I didn't understand, so I just looked at him.

"I read your stuff sometimes," he said. "Come." He moved his head at the cathedral as if to say, "I'll get you in."

I hesitated. To go in I would have to leave my friends—the Democrat, the sobbing Chilean and her daughter, the college girls, the philanthropist. And we all wanted so much to see our pope, and no one of us deserved it more than any other.

"Go!" said the Democrat, so happy for me. But love came into me, which brought faith, which brought strength. I put my arms around my friends. "We are all here together," I said to the man. "We must stay together, please." And he thought for a second. And said nothing. And then he opened the barricade wider. And we ran, all of us.⁴

When we leave room for others in our lives, hearts and our harvest—God opens doors and tears down barriers which we could never imagine for ourselves and others.

So how do we do that? Let me share two ways, building upon some of the themes of this sermon series. First, if God is the owner of all and Lord of all, then we should ask, "What is God doing in His world?" God is not absentee or lost. If we truly believe that God is the Lord and Owner of all, then we can know that He is always at work

in His world and He is at work in every circumstance and in everyone whom we meet.

During the Apostle Paul's life he was imprisoned in Rome twice—both times on trumped up charges for preaching the Gospel. The first time he was imprisoned for two years without trial. During the prime of his life, at the height of his powers as a minister of the Gospel and a witness for Jesus Christ, Paul was placed under house arrest, guarded 24 hours a day by a Roman soldier. You have to believe that Paul would have asked more than once, "Lord, what are you doing?" But a little thing like being under house arrest every minute of the day at the tip of a spear did not stop the Apostle Paul. Now I don't know about you, but if I ever find myself in prison, my whole goal will be to find a way out—either by judicial appeal or by nail file. Instead, Paul saw God's plan and made it his goal to love his neighbor, even if that neighbor was a Roman soldier standing guard. Listen to Paul describe his situation in *Philippians 1:12-13*, "*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.*" Paul trusted in God's lordship and ownership of this world so much that He trusted Him to be at work even through his imprisonment. Through what imprisoning circumstance could God be working in your life—maybe it's your job you hate going to every day. Maybe it's an illness. Maybe it's a broken marriage or relationship? Maybe it's debt or an addiction? Maybe it's that difficult neighbor who you just know TP'd your house? What is God doing in your world? I promise you, He is doing something.

The second question we should ask is, "If God is at work in this world and He is my partner, how is my partner working through me?" While he was in prison, Paul also wrote to the Church at Philippi, *Philippians 1:3-6* "*I thank my God...in every prayer of mine...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until*

now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” God is working in you. And God is working through you. The law of God in action teaches us that if we love our neighbor, there is no limit to what God will do.

If I asked you to name the most influential Christian of the 20th Century, who would you name? A lot of people would say Billy Graham. Some people might say Bill Bright who founded Campus Crusade for Christ, and through whose work the Gospel has been shared with as many as 3.4 billion people. What about Henrietta Mears? Who is Henrietta Mears? Both Billy Graham and Bill Bright credit her with changing their lives. She was the head of the Sunday School department at First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, California. Many of the great Christian leaders of the 20th Century were disciples by this single, matronly, high school chemistry teacher from Minnesota. More than 400 men were led into the ministry by Ms. Mears. How did she do it? As a young teacher, Henrietta Mears wrote down her life goals. Among them were: 1) To share Jesus Christ with everyone she met. 2) To help each person recognize his or her talents and then use those talents for God’s glory. 3) To make herself accessible to anyone who wanted to talk about deep matters.⁵ These are goals each of us could have.

I have a friend in town who is a Presbyterian pastor named Lyn Olson. Lyn serves a church at 78th and Holmes. Lyn, when she goes out to eat, frequently asks the server, “We’ll be praying for our meal. Is there any way we can pray for you?” She has never had any server turn her down. The first time she did it was at a cafe in Brookside. The waitress was a woman with tattoos up and down her arms and neck, with multiple piercing all over her body. Not exactly knowing how it

would turn out, Lyn asked her, “We’ll be praying for our meal. Is there any way we can pray for you?” The woman just looked at her and Lyn thought, “This isn’t going to turn out well.” But then she said, “Yes, my partner’s Father is having cancer surgery in Omaha right now. Would you pray for him?” And so they did. About 30 minutes later the woman came back, sat down at their table and said, “That was intense. I just talked to my partner sitting in the waiting room and before I could even say anything, she said that she just had “This incredible feeling of peace just come over her.”

God is working in this world and He will work through you—if you leave room for your neighbor.

Would you pray with me please?

¹ From Bowlingalone.com

² “Social Isolation in America: Change in Core discussion Networks Over Two Decades,” American Sociological Review,” June 2006, Vol. 71: p.353.

³ From Webmd.com, “Loneliness Study Shows Nearly a Third of All Adults Are Lonely,” by Miranda Hitti.

⁴ “John Paul The Great,” by Peggy Noonan, 2005, p. 77-79.

⁵ Marcus Brotherton, “Teacher:” The Henrietta Mears Story: Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2006, p. 143-144.