

**Good Neighbours (Rom 13.8-10)**  
**Sermon for North Star MC, Drake SK ~ Sept 26, 2021**  
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I want to speak about being neighbours this morning. My own experience of neighborliness is more urban... It's been 19 years now since we moved into our neighbourhood in the north end of Saskatoon. Darlene & I, and our four kids. Looking back, I wonder if we were one of those families that the neighbours worried about:

- Loud. with rambunctious little boys, whose parents didn't stop them from climbing too high in the trees. Or jumping on the trampoline, way past others' bedtimes.
- Friendly teenaged girls who would wave from our kitchen table over the back fence and into the living room of our privacy-loving neighbours, who promptly closed the curtains.
- A family who regularly fired up the backyard fire pit for a wiener roast, with only a fence (no back alley) separating us from the other yards around us.

We got a range of receptions from our next-door neighbours. On one side, there was an immediate welcome, when Darlene went over to borrow a hammer on moving-in day. "What kind?" he asked. On the other sides the initial reception was a little rockier. Our smoke and noise wasn't welcome.

But things change as you live side by side. We got to know the people. We met on the sidewalks. We had those long post-hibernation catch-up conversations that only a prairie winter can produce. We learned names. We learned more about their families, their jobs. The kinds of things that make neighbours: births and deaths, heartaches and hopes. We grew into our place in the neighbourhood—we *became* neighbours.

19 years later, we are still becoming neighbours. Still hearing new stories that mark the tragedies and the beauties of life on our little corner of Saskatoon.

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My reflections this morning come from Romans 13.9: ***Love your neighbour as yourself.*** Pretty much the most basic commandment of all Scripture. It's the OT command that is quoted more than any other in the NT. Jesus himself quotes this one more than any other. We hear it in the Gospels, in Paul's writings (both Romans and Galatians). In James. That by itself speaks of its centrality to the life of faith—and maybe also, the difficulty we have in living out this command, deeply and authentically.

Today I want to shine the light of this biblical command on our lives with the Indigenous neighbours around us, something both practical and urgent for our current lives in Sask.

This week the nation is observing, for the first time, a **National Day for Truth & Reconciliation**. This is a new day on our calendar. I won't call it a "holiday" – because that often means things like a day off of work (if you're not a farmer, I suppose), and happy celebrations. This is a *solemn* day, a day of remembrance and honouring.

Some people might wonder why it's necessary. I hope, by the end of this sermon, you might see that it's one part of being good neighbours. At the very least, I want to encourage us to go back to basics, and think about what it means to be **neighbours**. So, let's take a closer look at this all-encompassing command. In three basic steps.

### **Step One: “You Shall Love”**

Now, it seems a bit weird that God would command love. Right? Doesn't that kind of rule out its authenticity? That's a dilemma that arises if we think of love primarily as a feeling. Which is pretty common in our world... but not a particularly biblical perspective.

Biblical love is more than a feeling, more than the emotions of attraction or adoration. The love that God commands, *agapé* love, is the beautiful convergence of *many* dimensions of what makes us human:

- love involves our *will*, as we commit to the other person's well-being. Love is a choice.
- love involves our *body*, offering *visible* acts of compassion and care. Love is specific deeds.
- finally (and this is part of the mystery of God), love often grows *into* emotion, *feelings*, and deep relationship.

What is the starting point for this kind of holistic neighbour love? I'm suggesting to you today that it starts with **listening**. It's very hard to love, to show love, without listening. When you listen, you find out what's important to your neighbour. You find out what makes them tick. What their hopes and dreams are. What turns them off. What makes them angry.

For example, in our first weeks in Saskatoon, we learned how much our backyard wiener roast smoke bothered our neighbour. And more importantly, after months of listening to a different neighbour, we discovered how an initial rocky reception was due to some major crises going on in their own home. A similar dynamic holds, I believe, in trying to listen across the cultural and community divides that fragment our communities and province. Nothing lays a groundwork for neighbourliness, like listening.

I've had the privilege of visiting the Beardy's & Okemasis community, north of Rosthern, off and on for the last 10+ years, going back to my years at Bethany College. I've had the enormous privilege of being in many circles where Elders and others have shared about their lives, their struggles, their hopes for their grandchildren, their dreams for their community.

It's been a profound blessing to me, and it's a community I've come to love in many ways. Nobody says it's perfect. But it's a beautiful place, rich in relationships and driven to give their youth a safe and successful path forward, in a world full of challenges and snares.

At the same time, as I've listened, I hear several themes repeated, time and time again. Painful themes that are woven deeply into the fabric of the community. Traumas that have wounded, abuses that have caused inestimable damage. These are things that we must listen to—we cannot love, if we don't listen to these stories and the hurts that they hold:

- **Indian Residential Schools** – throughout Sask and across the entire country. There is so much pain centred on the multi-generational impact of IRSs. If you’ve ever had doubts about the impact of the residential school experience, I invite you to ponder this one question: *would you send your kids to a school that had a cemetery?*
- the many restrictions and indignities of the **Indian Act** – a few samples
  - until 1951 – it criminalized their ceremonies
  - until 1951 – it forbade hiring lawyers to deal with land claim issues
  - until 1960 – it withheld the right to vote in federal elections
  - until 2008 – the Canadian Human Rights Act could not be applied to the Indian Act.
- the **pass system** – the indignity of having their travel and commerce controlled by a government agent, as if they were young and untrustworthy teenagers – never actually passed as law in parliament, but still imposed and practiced by gov’t agents, well into the 1950s.

These are part of what we listen to. Because listening is an act of love. Deep, open-handed listening brings healing to victims and survivors. It validates them, gives dignity and hope. I’ve heard it said by Indigenous ppl on many different occasions: *we tell our stories until we are healed.*

At this point in our community lives, the best way we can become a better neighbour is to practice listening. There are different ways to do this, and I’m committed to helping churches find ways that work for them.

A good starting point is with the many books, documentaries, things to read or watch, that are currently available. I’ll leave you with list of suggested reading, listening, and viewing options. Getting to know real live neighbours is of course the best and deepest way of living this out; that takes time and effort.

But the basic thing is: to love, we need to learn to *listen*.

## **Step Two: You Shall Love Your Neighbour**

You’ll remember the time that Jesus was asked by a Jewish man of power and privilege, “What do I need to inherit eternal life? What do I need to do, to make it in God’s eyes?” He knew the right answer, and Jesus agreed with him: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and Love your neighbour as yourself.”

But this man wanted to “justify himself,” says Luke. He pushes Jesus for a clear legal definition: “And who is my neighbour?” This was indeed an urgent question in Jesus’ time, with differing legal opinions. In OT Law, all those commands God gave Moses, “neighbour” meant a “fellow-citizen,” part of the covenant community of Israel. In other words, “neighbour” is defined by covenant. Covenant is what makes a person your “neighbour. That was the OT definition.

And that is totally relevant to us. Because, as we also talked about in the adult SS session, covenant is another word for “treaty.” And treaty is one of the things you will also hear when you start listening to the Indig neighbours around us. Covenant matters. Treaty

matters. “Treaty” is what permits us to live where we live, allows the nation of Canada and the province of Saskatchewan to have jurisdiction over our lives.

As Canada was being built, the federal gov’t was obligated, by royal decree, to make Treaty with those who were already here. Nation to nation. The First Nations of the region now called southern Sask—the Saulteaux, Cree, and Assiniboine—were demanding a treaty, and this was negotiated in Sept 1874 at Fort Qu’Appelle, when they signed Treaty #4. For them, it was a covenant of relationship with the Crown.

But problems arose almost immediately, for a few different reasons: At its most basic level, the First Nations saw Treaty as something like a wedding: a ceremony that marks a new and bonding relationship—the two parties are now related, in the presence of the Creator.

But the European gov’t side saw it more like a certificate of divorce—this is how we can get what we want and need out of the household, without maintaining the relationship. For the Cdn gov’t side, it was first and foremost about acquisition of property —namely, the land. One side sees it like a marriage. The other sees it like a divorce. Isn’t that a recipe for disaster?

Well-known Sask Cree author and lawyer Harold Johnson has expressed it more pointedly. He tells us that from a Cree perspective, the Treaty made us, and still makes us, cousins. Treaty was a form of adoption ceremony. We are adopted. We’ve been given the rights and responsibilities of family. But as a society we never embraced it, never lived up to it. What a disappointment that would be to the welcoming host family! This rejection is a huge taproot of pain and discontent.

It comes down to this: just as “neighbour” was a covenant term in Jesus’ day, so “neighbour” is a very real covenant or treaty term today. If we want to love our Indig neighbours, we will learn about, and learn to acknowledge, Treaty.

That might be with a reminder that “we are all Treaty people.” Or it might be with a treaty land acknowledgement—at our workplaces, in our homes, maybe even at our places of worship. Paying our respects to the spirit and intent of the treaty, which is about relationship.

You might wonder why land acknowledgements have become so prominent in the last few years. I’m beginning to think of them as something like a wedding ring—a reminder of the covenant that was made. You who are married—how would you feel if your spouse never wore that ring, never mentioned it, never even said why they weren’t wearing it.... A treaty acknowledgment carries similar weight in our lives as western Cdn citizens. It’s a way of honouring and making visible the relationship that was intended by the First Nations who chose to welcome us as neighbours and even adopt us as cousins.

### **The Third and Final Step: Love Your Neighbour As Yourself.**

What does this mean? to love our neighbours as ourselves? I think a big part of it is self-awareness, self-knowledge. And then applying that awareness to others. What Jesus is encouraging, I believe, is godly empathy.

What makes you tick? what do you love... automatically, deeply, dearly? – your *family*, the *place* you grew up? various civic or religious freedoms? certain cultural or religious activities? are there *songs* you couldn't live without? What *else* makes you tick? what life experiences? what griefs and losses? what things have left wounds or scars, those deeper inner bruises, and the fears that make us want to protect our selves and our loved ones? All of these things are part of who we are, and shape our thoughts, feelings, actions, responses, values.

As I said earlier... I've been in Saskatchewan for 19 years now. This means that I've now lived here longer than anywhere else in my life, including the 18 years I spent growing in BC's Fraser Valley. And, as much as I love Saskatoon (and I do love it), nothing can replace for me the sense of home, the depth of total rootedness, the potent allure of the landscape, that I experience when I return to BC.

A mere 18 years produced that deep connection for me. I cannot conceive what 1800 years would do, in terms of a connection with that landscape. And then multiply that by 4 or 5 times, and you have the time frame for how long First Nations have been in S. Sask.

The tipi rings or rock carvings that some of you might have seen on pasturelands could have been there since the time of biblical Abraham and Sarah. Can we ever understand what such a long habitation, and connection to the land, means for these people? Are we ready to understand that those deep connections, those profoundly deep losses, are at the root of so much of today's painful, agitated, or downright hostile headlines?

To love our neighbours as ourselves is to confess a common humanity. To acknowledge that our neighbours love the same things we do. To *see* the best, to *assume* the best; and to realize that, if we meet some who might appear broken, they have been damaged by histories, events, traumas, that would break us too.

## Conclusion

Let me wrap this up. I'm so thankful for how our family's life has turned out on our little street in Saskatoon's north end: hearing the stories, sharing the joys and pains of life; hearing the sounds of kids playing on the street, watching my grandkids play together with my neighbour's grandkids.

Those blessings are a vision of what life in Saskatchewan, life in Canada, can move towards, with God's help: *watching our grandkids playing together*. Without bias, without hostility, without fear. We can do it when we learn to love more fully—love by listening, learning, respecting. We can do it when we learn to love our neighbours in the full biblical sense – remembering that we are *relations*...

- brought together in the sight of God, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, as long as we both shall inhabit this land,
- as long as the sun shines, the grass grows, and the river flows.

It's a beautiful calling to be a good neighbour. Today, God is inviting us all to take a step forward— to walk in love, because *He* first loved us. God is inviting us to grow in neighbourliness, for the sake of *Christ*, for the sake of the church's *integrity*, for the well-being of our *province* and our nation, for the health of our own *souls*. This week and every week, may we all find courage in Christ to take a next step.