

Neighborliness

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published in *Lutheran Woman Today*, Spring 2004

It was a week before Christmas when they came to our home on the great marsh. Farmers and teachers, office workers and town officials, old and young—neighbors all! It was the annual gathering of folks from up and down our road and around the neighborhood of my wet and peaty 350-acre backyard. Twenty-five years before, I invited them for the first time, and they have come every year since. During the autumn days of the marvelous color change in this beautiful landscape, they had seen my students from their windows and from their fields, searching in the wetland peat for pollen and seeds from ages past, counting wetland plants in the plots they had laid out, observing blundings turtles in a peaty pond. The neighbors wondered about these young people moving with determination on such uncertain ground. They wondered about the discoveries they were making. And now, entering our home, stamping snow from their feet, they came into our living room, rearranged for the annual neighborhood celebration of what my students had found.

Back in 1972, when we moved to Wisconsin, I bought a map showing the wetlands of our county, and marked a spot at the highest concentration of marshes, swamps, and bogs. I drove to that spot, looked for a realtor in the nearby village, and told him that Ruth and I wanted to buy a house on a marsh. What we wanted, I explained, was a place where a wetland would be our neighbor. The realtor was surprised: We said nothing about the kind of house we sought, just that it had to be on a wetland. A few weeks later he showed us the place where we now live. We moved into our new house in springtime, amidst the wonder of the marsh coming alive with croaking and peeping sounds and the calls of geese and cranes. God's care and masterly work were everywhere apparent! Psalm 104 came alive for us as we beheld the Artist's canvas spread out across the landscape, kept wet and soggy by springs breaking forth in and around it.

Awe and wonder

Once settled in, I began teaching 15 students at our new home, inviting them to join me in developing appreciation, awe, and wonder for the wetland as we studied it. We met first in the sunroom for an hour over coffee and conversation and then went out to conduct our studies. And then, at semester's close, I sent an invitation to my neighbors to join us in celebration.

Ruth prepared Christmas goodies, and the young wetland researchers made inspired presentations. Our awe for this great system of living things—interwoven across the wetland surface and undergirded by thousands of layers of their ancestors that formed the peats below—grew and grew. As we discovered the great wetland that predated us by thousands of years, we moved from awareness to appreciation and even to love. We came to the conviction that we must save it. Not that it had not been saved before; it had been doing quite well without us. But now we humankind were present, and we knew that we eventually might see our marshy neighbor diminished, filled, drained, and destroyed. Without knowledge, some of our kind might see this wetland not as a neighbor but as something to conquer.

Our respect for this jewel in God’s creation—this wondrous place with all its vibrant life—brought all of us to make the important neighborly decision to care for it. We—each of us as owners of various portions of this land—began to make covenants, donate development rights, write deed restrictions, and do whatever we could to sustain this part of creation. We did not want its long history to come to an abrupt end. And now at this Christmastime, we were gathering again to celebrate our cherished 1,000 acres that we had protected.

Loving ourselves

We came to love this great marsh! We came to see it as our neighbor! And loving it, we also knew that somehow we also loved each other; we loved even ourselves. Though it is sometimes difficult to confess that we love ourselves, we do. Consider what we do to keep our bodies working well, our spirits nurtured, our lives fulfilled. Love for self, far from being bad, is vital for self-preservation. It is this impulse, of course, that makes “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” a meaningful commandment. This teaching of Leviticus 19:18 makes all the difference to us as we seek to live beyond self. In rabbinic thinking, this commandment—this *mitzvah*—is the *whole* of God’s Law, God’s Torah. The first-century Hebrew sage Hillel affirmed this *mitzvah* as God’s Torah, with all the rest being commentary. Clearly, the commandment to love our neighbor as we love ourselves is central.

“Who is our neighbor?” is the age-old question. A family member? The person next door? A New Testament story helps answer this question. Jesus is asked by someone who knows Leviticus 19:18, “What commandment is the first of all?” Jesus replies, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28b–31).

Is the marsh my neighbor?

You may have noticed that my first aim in settling down in Wisconsin was to make a marsh my immediate neighbor. I did this consciously, knowing what Jesus teaches about neighborliness. Jesus gives the right answer to his questioner. But he puts Leviticus 19:18 in the context of God’s love. As “loving your neighbor” is the whole Law, “loving God” is the garment in which it is clothed. Neighborliness is put by Jesus into the brilliant light of God’s love: God’s love for us and God’s love for the world. God’s love, so beautifully expressed in Psalm 104, helps us to image God’s love with our own love—for our neighbor and all of God’s world.

So I call this great marsh my neighbor because it is God’s; it is God’s creation. Because I love God, I love what God loves: my human neighbors and my marsh. In the book of Luke we find the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. Two religious people pass by a man who has been beaten and robbed. Then a third person, a Samaritan, stops and cares for the victim, binding his wounds and putting him up at an inn. “Which of these three proved to be a neighbor?” asks Jesus. We know the answer!

Loving Rembrandt

Some years ago I gave a talk at a seminary with the title, “Loving Rembrandt, but Despising His Paintings.” I pictured a person who insisted that you could love and respect Rembrandt as a great artist but have no concern for the preservation and care of his paintings. My point was not to express my fears for this master’s works of art; they are given the very best of care! Instead it was to

highlight loving care for God's works in creation. Is it conceivable that we—coming to know these marvelous works and feeling the welling up of awe and wonder in our hearts when we behold them—would want to or even be able to trample God's creatures and creation?

When my neighbors came to our home at Christmastime, they came so they would get to know their neighbor better. Entering our living room, stamping snow from their feet, they prepared themselves for celebration—for renewing and increasing their awe and wonder for this great system of vibrant life. Their seeing the marsh anew, their taking time to enjoy and reflect on its inhabitants and its long history, their envisioning it moving into a future of blessing and fruitfulness brought them to know not only their human neighbors but also their great marshy neighbor.

Loving God

So too can it be for all of us as we behold the vibrant and verdant living fabric that clothes God's earth. It is a fabric shot through with God's love. Opening our hearts and minds to its integrity and immense beauty; sharing in the sorrow of its being beaten, stripped, and left in places half-dead; working to bind up its wounds; allowing creation to heal and be restored; taking care of it and paying the costs of its keeping; we can be God's Good Samaritans in creation. Loving God, we will love God's masterpieces. Loving God, we will love our neighbor as we love ourselves.