

TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS

*Radical Practices in Solidarity,
Sufficiency, and Sustainability*

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Introduction

Revisiting Neighbor Love

Marcel lived on the streets of Toronto. When I met him in 1996, he'd been homeless for just a few months, and I was in the city on a mission trip with my church. After talking for a few minutes, I looked at my watch. It was time for my group to leave. As I walked away, I promised I'd pray for him, and I did.

For the next few years, I kept a memento of the trip at my bedside that reminded me to pray for him each night. For most of my life, the teaching I received from the church led me to believe that the command in scripture to love your neighbor was about how I should treat the Marceles of the world. I long believed that Jesus taught us to extend service, love, and compassion to individual people. He wanted us to be like good Samaritans who help individuals who have been hurt, to visit the sick and prisoners, to care for widows and orphans, and—at the most extreme—sell our things and give our money to the poor.

This interpretation of Jesus' ministry, this way of answering the question "What Would Jesus Do?" dominated my life because it was in the water everywhere I went. Most of the churches, civic groups, and volunteers I have worked with have this understanding of the Christian life. It's about being good, and kind, and giving to the people in need whom we encounter along life's journey. Dennis Jacobsen, a pastor and community organizer, recorded what one

bishop told him: “The role of the church in society is not to engage systemic injustice but to fill in the gaps.”

And this is how most churches operate. They are “devoted to food pantries, homeless shelters, or walk-a-thons to generate money for this or that cause.”¹ Or consider the experience of faith-based community activist Robert Lupton when he met with a church about their food pantry. He pressed the congregation for the reason they kept running a food pantry when they knew food pantries could foster dependency. One woman replied: “It costs much less in time and money to run a food pantry, and that’s what the churches want!”²

This is the kind of charity Christians want. In fact, two-thirds of worshipers in the US attend congregations that are involved in direct-service ministries like food pantries, hot meals programs, or the like.³ Their response to a neighbor in need? Reach out individually.

But there’s another way. And it involves carrying out Jesus’ command to love our neighbors by recognizing that our standard responses to neighbors in need are (1) not “normal” and (2) not enough. When I say they are not “normal,” I mean, this isn’t the way showing love to our neighbors has always looked. Yes, it may be the primary way younger generations have experienced neighbor love, but Boomers and the Silent Generation will recall the churches’ involvement in strong unions, Vietnam War protests, civil rights marches, broad-based community organizing, neighborhood meetings, and more. Now, just because neighbors were working together to achieve mutual goals does not mean these were always worthy ones. There were—and continue to be—Christian groups that fight for white supremacy, deporting immigrants, restricting women’s rights, and more. There are many movements for social solidarity today, but few of them originate within, or find strong support from, the white, mainline Protestant church.⁴ The highly individualized way we in those churches think about our neighbors

is the unique result of the rise of neoliberal thinking in the 1970s and 1980s, which baptized and normalized a radical form of individualism.

Answering the call to love our neighbors based solely on individual instances of need is not enough. There is no way we can convince enough people and churches to donate and volunteer to eradicate poverty, ensure everyone has health care, generate jobs for everyone who needs them, and so on. As Christian ethicist Rebecca Todd Peters says, “Homeless shelters and feeding programs certainly offer essential relief and assistance to local communities in need, but these experiences go a long way toward helping first-world Christians ‘feel good’ without managing to change any of the underlying structures of society that contribute to the problems.”²⁵

We engage in services that benefit us, and make us feel good, but fail to change the forces that put people in the position of having to ask for help. Lupton suggests that “churches want their members to feel good about serving the poor, but no one really wants to become involved in messy relationships.”²⁶

Instead of seeking to end homelessness, churches want to help the homeless. Instead of ending hunger, we want to help the hungry. Instead of addressing the root causes of mental illness, we want to aid the mentally ill.

Although we may have had good intentions all along, the way mainline Protestant churches and Christians have loved our neighbors over the last several decades has resulted in perpetuating unjust systems.

To use the familiar story of the Good Samaritan, we have (with pure intentions) sought to help people who are battered and bruised, lying on the roadside. But we have done nothing to stop the bandits who are robbing people along the way.

Instead, our actions have emboldened the robbers because we have curbed the most harmful effects of their thievery. Had throngs

of people been dying on the roadside, maybe there would have been an uprising, forcing the governing powers to deal with the conditions producing people desperate enough to turn to being bandits. Just imagine if all Christians stopped doing charity work tomorrow. Imagine the pain, death, homelessness, hunger, and more that would soon be all over the headlines and twenty-four-hour news cycles. How long would people allow it to happen before we demanded a widespread social and governmental response?

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, described the power of what he called “false generosity” to perpetuate the very systems that require generosity to exist. While acknowledging that the world is more complicated than his simple binary of oppressor and oppressed, his words sound a stark warning:

Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity,” the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this “generosity,” which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. This is why dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the “rejects of life,” to extend their trembling hands.⁷

Simply put: it is the way churches and Christians respond to our neighbors in need that has perpetuated their need to ask for our assistance. Take, for instance, the church mission budget. For many mainline churches, the mission budget is a list of nonprofits that get a varying amount of annual support. Most nonprofits need annual funding to help alleviate the worst symptoms of poverty

and discrimination of individuals. But few, if any, are advocating and organizing to change the root causes of need. We may have good intentions, but they aren't solving the root problem. For our good intentions to result in good impacts, we have some work to do, including understanding how our actions affect others.

When most churches and Christians seek to follow the commandment to love our neighbors, we act with good (but unexamined) intentions that lead us to do the kind of service that ultimately harms others. What we don't do is examine our intentions, question our assumptions, evaluate the actual impacts of our actions, and truly love others the way we would want to be loved if we were in their position. Most obviously, we rarely ask the people to whom we are extending "love" what they want love to look like. We assume we know what we would want in their situation, but we rarely stop to ask the experts themselves—the people we claim to want to help.

Part of the reason why we don't ask, or don't even think to ask, is because many of us have the privilege to avoid encountering people in need. Study after study has shown the increasing economic segregation of American neighborhoods and cities. The sociologist Robert Putnam, in his book *Our Kids*, powerfully traces the trends in his own hometown of Port Clinton, Ohio. Putnam shows how manufacturing jobs dropped from 55 percent of the jobs in 1965 to only 25 percent of the jobs in 1995.⁸ And childhood poverty rose from below 5 percent in 1990 to over 35 percent by 2012 in most of the city.⁹ As these demographic changes occurred, the landscape of the city also changed, marking more dramatic lines between rich neighborhoods and poor ones. Putnam talks about how when he was a kid he played football with kids from across the economic spectrum, and people didn't think a whole lot about it. All the kids were "our kids." But today, school sports often come with fees, with transportation requirements, private coaches, and a host of other expenses locking out poorer kids. The kids are no

longer all “our kids.” Some may be “our kids,” but most are “their kids” or “those kids.”

In my adopted hometown of High Point, North Carolina, the loss of manufacturing jobs in the 1990s led to massive swaths of poverty throughout the core and southern part of the city. Although these were never the rich parts of town, they were inhabited by factory workers whose kids went to the same high schools as the other kids. Today, however, we have sections of the city where the childhood poverty rate is 99.6 percent and parts of the city where the childhood poverty rate is 14 percent. In its starkest terms, the life expectancy in my town differs by over fifteen years, depending on where you live.¹⁰ Small changes in geography correlate to massive differences in life outcomes. And our kids largely do not go to the same schools. In fact, 17 percent of kids in High Point attend private schools, which is far above the state average of 8 percent.¹¹ Our city has one of the highest rates of private schooling in the state. The kids aren’t “our kids.” They are “those kids.” Those struggling in urban communities are more commonly called “thugs,” “criminals,” “lost causes,” “troublemakers,” or any number of slurs that signal the fear that poor, often Black and brown, children evoke among white, middle-to upper-income Americans.

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve started to see that love of neighbor can’t just be confined to helping the individual Marcells I encounter. True love of neighbor isn’t just about how we treat the individual person we encounter in need of help. It is also about how we structure the society in which we live to promote justice, create opportunity, and cultivate genuine community.

My friends at the Racial Equity Institute often say that if you walk by a lake and see a dead fish, you think, “There’s a problem with that fish.” But if you walk by a lake and see hundreds of dead fish, you think, “There’s a problem with the water.”¹²

When I was younger, I met Marcel, and I thought, “He’s had struggles in his life and I should pray for him.” Now that I’m older,

I've met a lot of Marcells, and I'm realizing it's less a problem with Marcel and more a problem with the water in which we all swim. The lake is poisoned, and if we want to truly love our neighbors, we must stop just reviving individual fish and throwing them back into a toxic lake. It's time to start working to clean up the lake, so we can all live. If I were a fish in a toxic lake, I know that's how I'd want my neighbor to love me.