

Smoky Mountain Reflections #163

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” This is how Jesus summarizes the second table of the law; (commandments 4-10) Honor, protect, and be proactively concerned with the authority in our lives, our family, friends and neighbors, and the property, reputation, and relationships of everyone in our lives. Those simple 7 rules tell us who our neighbor is and how we are to love them.

The problem with putting that into practice is that we have to push the old Adam out of the way. When we try to do this together as a congregation what does it look like? If we try to love our neighbor by employing man centered marketing strategies designed to appeal to the old Adam, then most millennials will ‘smell’ that you are trying to sell them something and discount you as just another hawker of goods to be peddled. So maybe instead of trying to find newer better ways to love our neighbor, we should just let our relationships with them dictate how we love them. Looking over the list of ministries we support here, you find good examples of how we can love our neighbor both here in our community and, through larger organizations, we share God’s love on a regional or even international scale.

We here at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Sevierville rarely have a worship service that does not have at least one new face. Only about 20% of those guests are people who live in our community and are looking for a church home, the rest are out of town Lutherans or other vacationing Christians who appreciate traditional, liturgical worship. Either way, they are all guests, so how should we treat them? Only a few decades ago it was a common practice to have guests stand and introduce themselves, and maybe present them with a small gift, until many churches discovered that lots of people would avoid visiting a church for fear of just such an awkward moment. Then there is the opposite end of the spectrum, to just ignore people so as not to call attention to their presence so they do not feel uncomfortable. This is common in larger congregations, but creates a problem. Many people attend the same church but do not know each other, so anonymity becomes the norm, and even members can feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. So what is a person to do? The next thing you know, that crazy pastor with the French name will start encouraging people to greet each other with a holy kiss!! No, nothing as drastic as that... how about a simple sharing of the peace; greeting one another in the Lord, then, when the closing hymn is over, the awkward shaking the hand of a stranger part will be over so you can introduce yourself and get to know each other through a bit of small talk as you leave the sanctuary together.

While that might take care of some of the awkwardness of being a loving neighbor in a church sanctuary, our world is loaded with social land mines which give different responses to the same action. For example, I have been thanked and praised most of my life by people of all ages and genders for a simple act of kindness, holding a door (incidentally, my last name translates to door man). However, I have also been scolded by the occasional toddler or feminist who assured me they could take care of that door themselves. If your motives for loving your neighbor are desires for praise or adulation, you will eventually be disappointed or even have your feelings hurt. On the other hand, if your actions are based on a biblical strategy... “Love your neighbor as yourself”, then regardless of how your neighbor responds, you remain faithful, and by loving your neighbor in accord with God’s will, you are showing your Love for God.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier