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Easter 5 – May 14, 2022

“Lighting up your neighborhood”

Read: Acts 13: 44 - 52/ Memorize: Acts 13: 46

Who is your neighbor? I read a story that might help answer that question. A long time ago, some people became concerned about shipwrecks off the coast of Maine. People were dying because there was no one to rescue them. Rather than just talking about it, they decided to create a rescue society. They purchased boats, trained in them and when a call went out for help, these folks would launch their boats and set out in the storms to help those in need. They saw their neighbor as anyone who needed help.

They received many commendations for their work. Over the years, more people wanted to join this rescue society because of all the good things they were doing. As time went on, they wanted to get to know each other better and decided to add a social component.

It took a while, but eventually more people showed up for the parties than the rescues. Eventually, those who were serious about the rescues, left the station and formed a new rescue society a little farther down the coast. Unfortunately, the same cycle of mission-oriented rescue to social club would repeat itself again. Why?

The natural orientation of groups, once formed, is to carry out the mission for a while and attract people who are like-minded. However, as time goes on, others join and the social side grows to be more important than the mission. This is true of any mission-oriented organization. This includes the church.

What we heard in Acts 13 this morning is a manifestation of that problem. Back in Isaiah 49, God had told the Israelites that they were to be “a light to the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.” That was their mission. Through the centuries Israel forgot the mission and became more focused on themselves.

They were more concerned about doing the right things in the right way so that they could please God, while forgetting what would please God the most: being a light to the world. It was actually worse than that. They disdained the Gentiles. They thought they were better than them and that God couldn’t really love them.

Our Go Campaign led us to make a commitment to Habitat. We are loving our neighbor, which is about more than just one family. What we are doing is setting an example of what the church of Jesus Christ does. It moves out beyond itself to overcome the natural inclination of a group of people to turn inward.

The way we'll benefit the most is if we each find our place to serve in mission. In Habitat, some will be builders, some will be prayers, and others will provide food or help in others ways. Sometimes it may be random, like the lady who stopped by to ask if it would be o.k. to just drop off cookies. At other times, it will be organized.

We're really making a commitment beyond just building 59 Buffalo St. We want to engage everyone in a ministry that cares for our neighbors. We hope that all would take some part in in Habitat as part of our commitment, but it can't stop there.

There is so much that we can do to benefit our neighbors, both individually and as part of Good Shepherd. It is our hope that even as we involve ourselves with Habitat, we will become more involved with other groups and partners in our community.

Here might be one of the impacts of that involvement. Someone came to church recently and said they had been out to dinner at a local restaurant, Casa De Pasta. Somehow the conversation turned to what we were doing as a church. The owner of the restaurant said, "I'd like to be involved. I understand you're going to provide lunch. We'd love to provide one of those lunches that you are doing."

So our movement out into the community has moved a member of the community to move out beyond himself. Just think how many different ways we can inspire one another to be better neighbors.

Our neighbors don't end at the city or county line. Remember the State Farm Insurance jingle: "Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there." I might be a little cynical about that. State Farm will be there if you pay your premiums and don't have too many accidents. They'll live up to their name, if you live up to your obligation.

On the other hand, it's not always that contractual. I recently heard from a representative from Lutheran World relief. They wanted to thank us for the help we've already extended this year to help our neighbors who are beyond us. People like those in the Ukraine and the countries surrounding it that are now in desperate need.

People in Africa who need wells. People who need clothing and shelter. Lutheran World Relief responds to each of those needs through partners with whom they have created relationships that enable them to deliver the help in the most effective way.

The reason the gentlemen called is because we have become one of the leading congregations in the United States in our support of Lutheran World Relief.

Consider this, we may never see these people, never meet them, and they likely won't join our church. That's not God's goal. We are being neighbors through the care and help we have extended through our partnership with Lutheran World Relief. We are sharing the Gospel and care for our more distant neighbors.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Antioch, they were invited by the leaders of the synagogue to bring a good word. They did. In fact, they did it so well, that people began meeting with them outside the synagogue. This made the synagogue rulers very uncomfortable and unhappy.

Because the Jewish leaders refused to listen to the Good News of Jesus Christ, Paul turned to the Gentiles, which made them very happy. What could have been a terrible thing, God turned into a blessing.

Way back in Isaiah 49 God had told the Israelites that they were to be a light to the Gentiles. They had snuffed out that light. When the Jews refused to listen to Paul, he brought the message to the Gentiles, who rejoiced in being included in God's family.

God refuses to let the Gospel become the possession of any particular race, religion or region. That was the mistake of the Israelites. Remember, any group naturally tends to turn inward, but God's plan is to look outward. He has given us the Gospel so that we can share it with others. We're not to decide who should get it and who should not.

Here's the even more amazing thing: God loves everybody, even those who don't believe in Jesus. They were all part of His creation. He loves them no matter their color or creed, age or stage of life. We don't want to wallow in the quagmire of hatred. Love has a better way. Paul talks about it in Philippians 2: 4, "Let each of you look out not only for your own interests, but also for the interests of others."

If you are looking for window coverings one of the things that you might consider are blinds. Did you know they have a more specific name? Anybody know what it is? That is correct. They are Venetian blinds. So named because in the late 1700's they were invented in Venice.

So did you hear the story about a woman who called a Venetian blind repairman to pick up a faulty blind? The repairman rang the doorbell on the following Saturday. The husband answered the door. "I'm here for the Venetian blind," explained the repairman. "Just a minute" said the husband, who went and fetched his wallet, pulled a few dollars from it and gave it to the repairman, closed the door and went back to his

breakfast. “Who was that at the door?” inquired his wife. “I don’t know” grunted the husband, “somebody collecting for the blind.”

Pastor Dan talked about what we see and who we see last week. Here’s what God would have us see: Loving calls for open eyes. Loving calls for listening ears. Loving calls for engaged minds. Loving calls for servant hearts.

When we open our eyes, listen carefully, engage our minds and seek to serve God, He will give us all sorts of opportunities that we will miss out on, if our focus is only on ourselves. Just as people were perishing on the coast of Maine, there are people just outside our door, who are perishing. They need Jesus.

The only way it will happen is if we love them just as we love God, with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, with all our strength. God has put us here to help them meet Jesus. Jesus set us the example. He calls us to follow it!

Here’s your question: How will you be a neighbor?