

## **Our Neighbors**

**Isaiah 49:5-6, Matthew 25:31-40**

**First Presbyterian Church**

**August 18, 2019**

**90 Days of Listening Report # 2**

### **Isaiah 49:5-6**

<sup>5</sup>And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength— <sup>6</sup>he says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

### **Matthew 25:31-40**

<sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

## **Sermon**

This past spring almost 30 FPC members gathered in two groups for what we called “90 Days of Listening.” Because they were such “overachievers,” it only took about 60 days, but that’s not important. It was a simple and informal exercise designed to give our staff and session the opportunity to listen to a cross-section of church members. One thing I’ve learned about church folk is that unless you have a really serious issue or complaint, you are not likely to share what you are thinking and feeling unless asked. So that’s what we did – we asked. And the responses we got have already been very helpful.

We asked three key questions: First, “Who are we?” That’s the question of identity. Second, we asked, “Who on our community and world does God love yet we are not reaching at this time? That’s the question of outreach and mission. And third, we asked, “What might you recommend that the staff, the session, and all the other leaders of our church devote energy and resources to in the near future?” The question of priorities.

Well, several weeks ago in my sermon I tried to summarize the answers to the “Who are we?” question... the identity question... you may remember we did that using an exercise called “Animal Farm.”<sup>1</sup> We explored the things about this church that make us proud as a PEACOCK... what our SQUIRRELS are – the things distract us from our primary mission... we looked at the ELEPHANTS in our room – the issues we just don’t want to talk about... and what our ROAD KILL or epic failures have been. This morning I want to offer the same kind of summary of the responses to the second question – the question of mission and outreach.

The church is intended to be a missional community... “I will give you as a light to the nations, Isaiah says, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,” Jesus said, “you did it to me.”

It is in our DNA to reach out to others in the love of Christ... to love our neighbor as we love ourselves... which means that we are always answering the question Jesus answered that day when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan – the question is, “Who is our neighbor?” Heather preached a wonderful sermon a few weeks back in which she answered this very question from a biblical point of view. This morning I want to come at the “neighbor question” from a slightly different angle.

One of the things the 90 Days of Listening groups did each time they met is explore some very basic demographic data. This is, of course, only one way to answer the “neighbor question,” but it does offer some important insights. So, quickly... I want you to imagine drawing a circle with a five-mile radius around our church.<sup>2</sup> Going north that takes in all of the homes on this side of the lake... it includes Long View to the West... most of Mountain View to the south... and St. Stephens to the east. That’s about 70,000 people. Of this group 74% are white... 10 % are African American... 10% are Hispanic/Latino... and 6 % are Asian, Pacific Islands, or American Indian. As a percentage of the population the Hispanic/Latino community is showing the most growth... all other groups are staying about the same.

Now, looking at age, the average age of our neighbors living in this area has been rising for years... and it is projected to continue rising over the next several years. This is because those of us who live here are getting older (well, maybe you are getting older) and Hickory is becoming a place where older adults are choosing to retire. And at the same time that our aging population is increasing, the number of children 17 and under is declining (something our schools are having to plan for). There are still children here (as you could see at Sims Bar-b-que Friday night or here in our Fellowship Hall on any given Wednesday evening) but as these children grow up they are not being replaced at the younger levels. Add all this together - Hickory is a community that is slowly getting older.

---

<sup>1</sup> Click here to read that sermon.

<sup>2</sup> The Executive InSite Report prepared for the Presbyterian Church, USA from sources: US Census Bureau, Synergos Technologies Inc., Experian, Decision Insite/Mission Insite

Now, before I go on, I just want to acknowledge that many of you may already know all this – you read the paper, you sit on community boards, you heard a presentation at Rotary or Kiwanis, you surely deal with demographic data in your business planning. Yet, this morning I want you to ALSO consider how this demographic data impacts our church... our staffing... our resource allocation... the programs we have now... and the programs we may plan for the future.

Let me offer a for instance – when the same number of churches are all providing programs to a shrinking number of children, the number of kids in each church’s program will naturally decline, right? You can have great staff and volunteers who are leading wonderful programs... and still have less kids. Yet, we can also assume that the increase in the 55 and older cohort will mean new opportunities for ministry with them, right? So, I want you to ask THOSE questions as you hear these numbers.

One of the numbers our 90 Days of Listening group picked up on has to do with the various ways that households are configured in our community. Here we learn that the number of married couple households with children is decreasing while the number of single parent households with children is increasing. Some of us know from experience... and the rest of us can imagine just how difficult it is to be a single parent. Our “90 Days” groups want our staff and session to ask if there is anything we might do as a church to reach out to and support single parents raising children.

Now, let’s move from purely demographic data to look at our neighbors from a religious angle – from a faith perspective.<sup>3</sup> What do our neighbors believe? Do they practice a faith? Are they participating in a religious community? Well, the first takeaway I think is that the majority of our neighbors believe in God... they believe that God is love... and they believe that God invites the world into a loving relationship. Many fewer, though – about half of those who believe in God – say they have a “personal relationship” with God. In other words, they believe in God, but God is just not that important to them.

Turning to beliefs about Jesus, I think our neighbors reflect the fact that we live in what once was called the “Bible Belt.” There is belief that Jesus was both human and divine... that he actually rose from the dead as the Bible teaches... that Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah... and that he now rules as Lord of heaven and earth. Yet, these beliefs are clearly weakening as fewer and fewer of our neighbors are involved in a church where they can hear and learn about Jesus. The fact that these beliefs continue to be held at all reflects that some “Christian memory” still exists in our culture... but that memory is fading.

---

<sup>3</sup> quad-ren-ni-um project - Religious InSite Priorities Report 2017: US Census Bureau, Synergos Technologies Inc., Experian, Decision Insite/Mission Insite

The biggest story, perhaps, is the increasing number of folks that have no affiliation with either a faith tradition or a faith community. This growing group of Americans (who some estimate to be approaching 50%) is called the “Nones.” These religiously “unaffiliated” folk are now the second largest religious group in America; over-taking Catholics, mainline Protestants, and the total of all other non-Christian religions. Now, this doesn’t mean the “Nones” have no faith (or faith practice). Remember, the vast majority of Americans believe in God... but more and more these days folks are combining the beliefs and practices of a number of faith traditions or secular sources... piecing together a collection of beliefs and practices that work for them. But the fact is more and more folks do not identify themselves with one particular faith tradition or affiliate with a particular faith community. There are many reasons for this... and in the study, those folks who are “outside” of a religious community give four main reasons for NOT PARTICIPATING:

- Religion is too focused on money
- Religious people are too judgmental –
- harboring strict and inflexible beliefs
- I don’t trust organized religion / religious leaders

Though these reasons may not reflect who we are here at First Pres., we have to accept that this perception is reality for a lot of folks. After all, we love the church. It has been an anchor and rock for many of us. And we love THIS church... we love the people... the history we have with one another... the priorities we share with each other.

But the truth is we have an image problem with folks out there... with those who only see televangelists... and hear about clergy sex and financial scandals. We have an image problem with those who associate the church with extreme right-wing politics. We have an image problem with those who IF they happen to darken our doors for worship one Sunday or a Wednesday Night Supper, find us to be cliquish and insular. We have an image problem... and the truth is it’s not only with folks outside of the church, but with folks who are inside and may be considering leaving. It turns out some of you ALSO believe:

- that religious people are too judgmental...
- that religion is too focused on money...
- that conflicts in the religious community turn you off...
- that you don’t trust religious leaders.

And, if you take all that... throw in all the sincere questions most of us have about the existence of God, well, before long you have a pretty persuasive argument to just do without it... to do without the church.

There are other insights that demographic data offer us. For instance, we are a church with relatively wealthy members when the majority of our neighbors are not. We are a church who values education and whose members tend to be well-educated when almost 60 % of our neighbors within a five-mile radius have a high school degree.

We are a church made up of families in the traditional sense of that word which makes it a challenge for our LGBTQ neighbors or someone who is single, with or without children. Now, I am NOT SAYING that we should try to be something we are not... or that we should try to be all things to all people. In the miracle of God's providence, God has raised up churches that are able to reach and nurture Christians of all socio-economic, racial, ethnic, family configurations and educational levels. But what I AM SAYING is that it is important to at least know who our neighbors are... what their lives are like – what their challenges are – how they see God and Jesus and church - what gifts and strengths they bring to our Hickory community.

Well, when it comes to answering the question, "Who is our neighbor?" our "go-to" story is the story of the Good Samaritan.<sup>4</sup> It is there that Jesus shows us what it looks like to love our neighbor as ourselves. First, Jesus points out that the Samaritan *saw* the man who had fallen among thieves... he actually SAW him - (he didn't turn his head and look the other way). Then, Jesus says, the Samaritan *felt* something for him - he had compassion for him... (which is what can happen if you actually take time to see another person). And finally, the Samaritan *did* something for him (which is what can happen if you actually feel with someone in their suffering; their pain becomes your pain and you want it to stop). Knowing and loving our neighbor, Jesus says, is all about seeing the suffering of others... it's about feeling it in your own bones... and finally, it's about doing something in response.

I read this week of a preacher who went to lunch with his family one Sunday after preaching on the Good Samaritan.<sup>5</sup> During a lull in the conversation, he asked his wife and kids; "How do you think people learn compassion?" That's the kind of question that preacher's families must endure at the lunch table. And he said he thinks it was his daughter Ellie who said, "You've got to get inside the other person's skin." He didn't like that answer at first... he kept picturing someone unzipping their own skin and stepping out of it so that she could step in someone else's. But then he realized that she was exactly right – because that's what God did for us. The Doctrine of the Incarnation means - almost literally – that in the person of Jesus Christ God "got inside our skin." He learned what it was like to be us. And because he did... because he had this experience of human being... God was able to have compassion on us at a whole new level. That's precisely what the Samaritan did. He came to that bend in that road from Jerusalem to Jericho... he saw that man lying there – beaten and robbed and half dead. He took the time to put himself in the man's place... to imagine himself inside that bruised, and broken, and bleeding skin. And when he did, he realized that if it were him, he would want someone to do something for him... and since he was the only one standing there... he realized it would be up to him.

Who is our neighbor? This morning we've come at that question from a number of angles. Yet, at the end of the day, our neighbor could be anyone... everyone... and sometimes that person is literally our neighbor.

---

<sup>4</sup> Who Is My Neighbor? A sermon by Rev. Jim Somerville, June 14, 2019, First Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.

<sup>5</sup> Somerville again.

Many of you know Sadie Stamper. Sadie is a rising sophomore at Hickory High – her parents are Dennis and Shawn – her sister is Claire and her brother is Caleb. Well, Sadie is on a swim team... and swim teams sometimes have fundraisers to help support their efforts... and one evening recently, Sadie was going door-to-door in her neighborhood selling coupon books to raise money for her swim team.

After knocking on lots of doors, she came to a house where a man sitting on his front porch. Sadie knew she had seen him walking around the neighborhood but had never actually met him. As she came up the walk, she noticed he was wiping his eyes. He was trying to play sudoku but had obviously been crying. He looked up and greeted her... his eyes wet and red. She told him what she was doing and asked if he would like to buy a coupon book... he told her that he didn't think so and that his wife had just died a few days ago. She told him that she was very sorry about his wife and asked him how he was doing. He talked to her for a good while about his wife and how much he missed her and how sad he was. She didn't know what to say... so she just listened to him and told him she was very sorry for his loss.

Who is our neighbor? As a church, we will be asking this question in the days to come. But this much we know now! Sometimes our neighbors come to us as “categories” of people that are described in local demographic data. And sometimes they come to us sitting on the front porch of a house just down the street. However, they come to us, sisters and brothers – may Christ help US to love THEM at least as much as we love ourselves.