

Reconnecting with Our Neighbors

May 23, 2018

The contractor arrived on time and introduced himself to my husband at the front door. Then he asked a question that stunned my husband, “Is that woman in the bushes your wife?”

“What woman in the bushes?” my baffled husband inquired. “Out front,” the contractor explained, “there’s a woman rooting around in your bushes.”

Confident I had left for work already, my husband excused himself and went out to investigate. Sure enough, he found a woman in the middle of our yard, where a creek crosses. She was moving brush and yanking up undergrowth. “Hello! Can I help you?” my husband called.

“Oh! You scared me,” the mystery woman exclaimed, as she continued her work. This itinerant landscaper explained that she was a neighbor from three houses away. She noticed that the creek, which also crosses her yard, was running low, so she had come upstream to clear any blockage. “Did you want this?” she asked as she yanked on a flowering honeysuckle. Assuring her that we’d take care of it, the woman moved off through the bushes.

So, I’m getting to know my neighbors, but the first encounter was a little weird. I don’t yet know her name, but I suspect she’ll stay “the woman in the bushes” in my mind.

There is an art to neighboring, and it doesn’t always come naturally. If we think of the best neighbor we’ve ever had, you might remember a person who always had your back and was ready to lend a helping hand. Years ago, a neighbor called when we were out of town. He’d noticed our side door had blown open. Fearing a pigeon invasion, he used the house key we’d given him and came in to lock the place up tight.

During the education hour of our last Presbytery Gathering, several of us explored how we reconnect with neighbors. In Holy Cow! assessments, the desire to reconnect and address needs in our neighborhoods surfaces as a top priority, but we struggle with reconnecting.

Like the woman in the bushes, we sometimes push ourselves onto our neighbors, convinced that we’re solving a problem they didn’t even know existed. Or, we use neighborhood “outreach” as a form of “in-grabbing,” a wily membership drive. Our neighbors see right through our hidden agendas, and they can find encounters with us weird or annoying.

True neighboring requires listening. We listen to the leaders in our communities, whether they have official titles or “street cred.” We listen to stories pointing out where God has gone before us to do amazing things. We learn names of neighbors and their hopes for the community. We listen with humility if they tell us they don’t have any interest in attending our church, and we stay in relationship anyway. We listen for promptings of the Spirit that encourage us to join in what is already happening in our neighborhoods and to take a chance on something new. The call to be in community is unshakeable, but it requires practice. Start with listening and prayer. You’ll be surprised at what God can do with that.