



Love your neighbor as yourself.

A Year-Long Study Easter 2017 –Easter 2018 Weeks 1-13

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Introduction

From time to time, the United Church Board has established a theme for its upcoming year of ministry and mission. In mid 2015, it began discussing how it might provide a positive Christian witness for a world being torn apart by fear and separation resulting in the development of an increasingly segregated society.

The Board spent time considering a number of proposals over these months, using criteria for their sort that include: speaking and acting from an authentic base of Christian faithfulness; offering an inclusive approach rather than focusing on one group or need; being positive and affirming, rather than shaping our message around negative or "anti-" sentiments; and providing adequate time for congregational education and opportunities to be heard and included. Further, while offering a positive Christian witness often includes forms of political activity –such as voting, letter-writing, and other actions, the Board seeks to be respectful of all people and points of view and does not presume to identify singular or only-appropriate faithful individual responses in any arena. Through its leadership, the Board strives to encourage us all to find ways to rise above the shifting sands of party politics, by reminding us of our common ground of Christian faith, compassion, service, tolerance and generosity which have long characterized UCF's ministry. It is from that solid ground that we move into the future together.

To those ends, the Board, on the recommendation of the Outreach Committee, identified the text "Love your neighbor as yourself" as the theme for a year in our life together. The Board invites every individual and each group within the church to explore the meaning of Christ's instruction and find a concrete way to express that through our lives and ministry programs. Groups are encouraged to be creative. Some seed ideas are to: do a Bible Study together on related texts; carry our music ministry into nursing homes or retirement communities; create a space of welcome; help feed or otherwise serve our community with intentionality and reflection.

This study is designed to provide a liturgical year's weekly reflection for individuals or groups as we consider who our neighbors are, how we do and might interact with and relate to them; and how the extensive Scripture comments might guide change or extend those relationships and activities. The questions and reflections offered are intended to ask us to be particularly attentive to specific aspects of our lives in a given week. While the guide can be picked up at any time, the offerings are designed to be considered in the order they appear. It is also hoped that this guide will lead to discussion around dinner tables and at church and other gatherings. We will all grow if we are as honest with ourselves as we can be.

How ever we use this resource, if we take it seriously (and that need not be burdensome), we have the potential to strengthen our capacity to "Love our neighbors as we love ourselves."

The Design

We will start our study by focusing first on our relationships with those with whom we have the most frequent contact; in the groups (usually nuclear and extended families) where our habits, comforts and discomforts for communal efforts, celebration, mourning, agreement, and disagreement are shaped.

We will then move in ever-widening circles, from more to less intimate relationships, considering how our personal patterns of behavior, relating and thinking remain the same or change as the relationships shift.

We will learn the origins of words like "family", "friend", and "neighbor"; then think about how we use those words, define those relationships, and how they shape our understandings of expectation, obligation and reciprocity with those groups of people..

After we have taken some time to thoughtfully reflect on how we experience our relationships with other human beings, we will begin our study of the Biblical origins of the words we translate as "neighbor" and study the Scriptural texts about "neighbors". (There are one hundred fifty four of them, so we won't get to them all!)

Toward the end of the year, we will try to bring it all together -- our habits, practices, comforts,, discomforts WITH God's call to disciples of Christ to identify ways that we, as individuals, and as a community of faith, the body of Christ now in the world, we might serve our neighbors, be respectful of difference and build community – our own and in the world around us.

The Method

Each week's information and questions comprise only a page. While they may be read quickly, they are not designed for immediate response. Rather, the hope is that, having read and considered the suggestions, we give special attention to those areas throughout the week. Sometimes we simply articulate what we have always known; sometimes we may have insights about things we hadn't quite realized before. We may choose to start conversations with family members or colleagues or have periodic discussions in church groups and committees. We hope to hear from individuals and groups about their experience throughout the year.

Week 1

Family

Pronunciation: [fām'ə-lē, fām'lē] from Latin *familia* referring to household servants or slaves. "A fundamental social group in society typically consisting of one or two parents and their children; the children of one of these groups; a group of persons related by descent or marriage."

(from the Free Dictionary)

Before we consider those to whom we are not "related", let us consider how we define those who are and how we related to them. As late as 15th century England, the word *famulus* referred to house servants or slaves. It is only in recent times that "family" has made the interesting transition to the warmer meaning it has acquired in our own time: a group of people related by marriage, blood or adoption.

Beginning with the home in which you live, how many people to whom you are related share your space, and in what manner are your related to them?

Are there others living with you, whom you consider to be family, even if they don't fit the traditional definition?

By what means, circumstances, events or relationships did you come to consider them family?

How many generations live in your home? If you are an adult, is this like or different than the household you grew up in?

Who are the other people who are part of your family who do not live with you?

How often do you see the people who are your family, but don't live with you? If you are an adult, is this like or different than the household you grew up in?

Has your understanding of what a family is changed over the years? Because of personal experience? Education? The experience of other friends or family members?

If there have been changes, what ones were the easiest? the most difficult? to navigate – for your whole household? For you?

What circumstances led to ease or difficulty in navigating the change?

Week 2

Family

Naming the ways our relatives are connected to us and numbering them is merely the beginning of understanding the power of those relationships in shaping our lives and opportunities.

In the household in which you now live (or in the one in which you grew up, or in which you raised children), how are the tasks of living and family shared:

- parenting?
- housekeeping?
- lawn care?
- home repair?
- car care?
- income earning?
- bill paying?
- transportation?
- recreation?
- planning for the future?
- major decision making? (vacation, job changes, major expenses, retirement)
- elder care
- education

If you are a single parent or live alone, what are the challenges of doing all these things?

If you do not live alone, spend some time this week reflecting on your activities and what your life might be like if you had to do it alone?

Do you/would you have assistance available from family members outside your own household?

From where do you seek assistance –and in what forms?

Is it emotionally/spiritually easy to seek assistance from family members?

What makes it easy?

What makes it challenging?

Week 3

Family

Many blessings flow to us from living in stable established households – more if we have links to other generations and an extended family. While it is not universal among us that we have grown up in such households, in large part, it is our common experience or one we have created for our own households. Often, we take those blessings for granted. Consider the household you now live in or the one you grew up in or in which you raised your children. This is the week to attend to our blessings.

Do you feel safe in your home?

Do you have enough food?

Do you have heat, light, and clothes?

Do you have doctors, dentists, and eye doctors when you need them?

Do you have savings or emergency funds available if "something comes up"?

Do you and your family members:

- laugh together?
- share or divide tasks?
- play together (games, movies, tv, walks, bike rides)?
- relax together?
- have holiday or other family traditions?
- have family jokes or inside understandings?

Do you and your family members:

- support and encourage one another?
- help one another with problems, questions or decisions?
- cry together?
- share disappointments?
- share stories of daily events?
- attend plays, games, concerts?
- talk over shared goals? hopes?
- plan vacations?

Give thanks!

Week 4

Family

Our families offer relational support and encouragement. We often do not realize that they also provide practical and financial resources and safety nets, and therefore we take those things for granted. This week will consider the ways we have benefited from those family arrangements.

Did family members provide financial assistance for your education?

Have you provided financial assistance for a family member's education?

Did family members provide financial assistance for the purchase of a home?

Have you provided financial assistance for a family member's purchase of a home?

Do you provide elder care or child care to other members of your family? Does this include physical presence or financial support or both?

Do you receive elder care or child care from other members of your family? Does this include physical presence or financial support or both?

If you lost your job or had a temporary financial setback could you reasonably expect assistance from a family member?

If you had medical expenses not covered by insurance, could you reasonably expect assistance from a family member?

Would you be willing/able to provide financial assistance to a family member during a job loss or medical emergency?

Would it be a loan or a gift?

Are there circumstances under which you would not be willing to provide financial assistance?

As you consider the ways you have received or given assistance to family members, what would you not have, have had a harder time or a longer wait in providing for yourself without that assistance?

If family assistance were not available, where would you turn?

Week 5

Family

No matter how well-established, loving and supportive family members are to one another, sooner or later, multiple goals, needs and gifts will result in disagreement or conflict. This week, we will consider how our families deal with such situations and how they might shape us for responding to conflict when it occurs outside the family.

Is there a difference in your mind between the ideas of "disagreement" and "conflict"? If so, is it a matter of content or intensity or something else?

When there is disagreement in your family:

is it talked about? yelled about? Is there/was there ever violence?

do people just wait for it to go away?

is it your experience that compromise is sought?

that there is a winner and a loser?

is there a "final authority" in your family about how conflicts will be resolved?

Has anyone ever been cut off from the family? Restored?

Do you feel as though you have power in deciding how conflicts are resolved? Do you generally take a particular role in resolving a conflict?

conversation initiator?

mediator?

final authority/decider?

peacemaker?

consoler?

If there is a disagreement/conflict between two or more other members of the family and it does not directly include you:

do you stay out of it because it isn't your business? your place? don't want to be involved?

do you take the same role you take in conflicts that do involve you? or some other role?

Do your responses above change if:

you judge the content or intensity to be of import to everyone?

you think the whole family will be disrupted until it is resolved?

you think the parties have disparate power (ex: child and adult; or someone with earned income and someone without)?

How does your family "do" repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation? Do they?

Can you discern patterns in how you respond to conflict, and if they are different if you are directly involved and if you are not? Do these patterns vary, and if so, according to what circumstances.

Week 6

Family

Looking back on the previous four weeks, we will reflect on how our own family experience shaped some of our attitudes, consciously or unconsciously, about what families do, how members benefit from family affiliation, what people can do "for themselves," and where and when assistance can or ought to be sought in times of need. All human beings both make judgements and are judgmental. Please be as honest as you can in your reflections.

Is it your experience that your family is/was largely self-reliant?

Have the wage earners in your household ever been involuntarily unemployed for any length of time?

In what ways did your family benefit from governmental or corporate safety nets?

Social Security?

disability payments?

pensions?

employer or government subsidized health insurance?

good public school system?

student loans, grants, etc.?

supplemental nutrition programs, WIC, unemployment, or other income subsidies?

Do your responses to the questions above add any perspective to how self-reliant your family is/was?

When you read or hear of a family in need, how does your own family experience affect your interpretation of another's situation? Are you more or less likely to have one or more of the following responses? In what circumstances?

Our family did it and so can others.

We did without in order to get the things we wanted.

They have/had the same opportunities everyone else does.

They made poor choices and these are the consequences.

There are government programs to help./There should be government programs to help.

That's what churches and other religious organizations are for.

Let's collect money to help them.

Providing financial support just creates dependency.

Big business took their home. There should be regulations.

This wouldn't have happened with better schools.

I don't want to /would be willing/able to pay more taxes to help other people's schools.

I can't do anything. I don't want to do anything.

I can do something. I want to do something.

Would any of your responses change if you knew people in need personally, or knew they had no family, were "blameless", didn't have good schools, lived in a crime ridden area, etc.... ?

Week 7

Friend

Pronunciation: [frend] from Old English freond, "to love, to favor," a person who has a strong liking for and trust in another. (from the Merriam Webster Student Dictionary)

After our families, most of us probably spend more of our time with our friends than with others, with the possible exception of our co-workers. Let's consider these people in our lives and how we relate to them and how those relationships are like or unlike the ones with our family members.

Do you have a few close friends or many less intimate people you consider to be friends (or both)?

Do your friendships tend to have been formed across your life span or do they date to your earliest days (or some other period of your life)?

How did they get to be friends?

We grew up together.

We went to school together.

They are from the old neighborhood.

They are from the new neighborhood.

Our kids go/went to school together.

We met at work.

We share common interests (sports, golf, clubs, bridge, genealogy, church etc.).

We are Facebook or other social media friends.

How often do you see each other? What do you do together? How do you keep in touch?

How are these relationships like/unlike those with family members? How are these relationships like/unlike with those you consider acquaintances?

What would you be willing to do for a friend in an emergency? In what circumstances? Have any of these things been requested of you or accepted from you by friends?

buy them food?

help with child care/elder care?

let them live with you?

loan or give them money?

Other? What?

Which of those things do you think they would do for you? Which have you/ would you accept or request? In what circumstances?

Week 8

Neighborhood

Pronunciation: [ney-ber-hoo d] from Old English *neahdæl*. "a district, especially one forming a community within a town or city" (from the Oxford Dictionary)

As we move to consider more widely our relationships with human beings beyond those whom we call family, we will start by considering where we live.

Do you live in a rural, suburban or urban area?

Do you live within 20 miles of your work place? Is the community where you work the same kind (rural, suburban or urban) as where you live?

How do you define your neighborhood? By:
whom you personally know?
the street on which you live?
a town or city name?
the name of the school district?
the development name?

Do you have reliable public services? (trash pick-up, street cleaning, road, side walk maintenance)?

Does your neighborhood have a low crime rate? Is there a "neighborhood watch"? What are they watching for?

Does your neighborhood have good public schools?

Is your neighborhood less or more economically well off than the one where you work; than adjacent areas; than the nearest city, region, state...?

Does your neighborhood have formal or informal expectations of its residents? (yard maintenance, home maintenance, vehicles on property, fencing or lack thereof, etc.)

How are expectations enforced?
informally, through neighborhood feedback? What kind of feedback?
formally, through a homeowners' or association or governmental; agency? What kind of enforcement?

Are expectations modified if residents are elderly, disabled, ill, or unemployed? How would you know if this were the case? Would you help people meet expectations in such circumstances?

Week 9

Neighbor

Pronunciation: ¹nā-bār from Old English *nēahgebūr* "neighbor," from *nēah* "near" + *gebūr* "dweller". "person who lives near another" (from the Merriam Webster Student Dictionary)

The most basic understanding of a "neighbor" is someone who lives near us. As we continue to move beyond our basic households,, this week, pay attention to how you interact with the people who live near you.

Do you know the people who live on either side of you? across from you? behind you? Does that mean that you:

recognize them on the street?
know their names?
know what they do for a living?
know their hobbies?
socialize with them?
formally, (organized neighborhood events)
less formally in more intimate gatherings in your homes?

Do you know them because:

they are your neighbors?
you have worked together for shared neighborhood concerns?
your children do or did go to school together?
you happen to work at the same place?

Do you:

help one another with projects, share child care, etc. ?
call one another in an emergency?
know one another's celebrations or challenges?

How often this week did you speak to a neighbor? (more than "Good Morning")

Do you prefer to live more privately? Think that there is no longer a social contract about expectations and hopes of living in a neighborhood? or that there shouldn't be one?

On reflection, is there anything you might like to change in how you interact with your neighbors? If so how might you do that?

Do your reflections this week identify any patterns or suggest implications for how you might interact with neighbors who are more broadly defined?

Week 10

Neighbor

As we move farther from the people on our street, we consider others who are also neighbors and with whom we are familiar -- co-workers/colleagues, classmates, fellow church members or other community organization team or interest group members.

How many of these folk:

look like you?

worship like you?

come from the same educational? cultural/social? economic background?

have the same native language?

are in the same life stage with regard to careers, parenting, retirement etc.

When you are in meetings, breakfast or lunch, do you work directly with, or share meals with a variety of people or those most like you?

Do you socialize with any of these people outside of formal settings? Are these people more or less like you and your household?

If you regularly meet, socialize, eat and work with people from different backgrounds, how do you find common ground? What is the common ground you find?

If you regularly meet, socialize, eat and work with people from different backgrounds, yet with whom you have regular contact (or its potential) why do you think that is?

Given your experience (or lack thereof) with people less rather than more like you, what are the challenges of understanding issues that face other people who may not share your values, experiences or opportunities. What value have you discovered in being able to do that.

Not long ago there was a news report about a two-year old named Sophia (whose name means "wisdom", by the way,

Sophia was promised a doll as a reward. She studied the doll selection for nearly half an hour and chose a "doctor doll" because she was always playing doctor. As it happens, Sophia is white and the doll was black. The store clerk asked her if she wouldn't rather have a doll that looked like her. Sophia said, "She does look like me. See. She's a doctor. I am a doctor. She's a pretty girl. I am a pretty girl. See her hair. See her stethoscope."

Using Sophia's model, as you consider the people encounter who are less like you, now who looks like you, worships like you, has the same needs, the same goals...

Week 11

Congregation

Pronunciation: kǎŋ-gri-'gā-shən from Latin *congregatus* "flocking together," past participle of *congregare* "to herd together, collect in a flock, swarm; assemble. 1 "a group of people assembled for religious worship;" 2."an organized body of believers in a particular locality"
(from Merriam Webster Dictionary)

When you think of our congregation, do you primarily think of it as being the first or the second definition above?

Do you primarily ACT as though the first or second definition applies --that is do you primarily participate through worship or are you involved in other ways?

In the definition, the word "body" is used to mean a group. In religious language, we understand ourselves to be the body of Christ? In what ways does our congregation act like a group of people in the same place? In what ways does our congregation act like a Body – a living thing with different parts?

If you were to identify a part or role you have in the workings of the body, what would it be? Do you mostly spend time with people who share the same role or parts or with those who have different ones?

St. Paul says that we value some parts of the body more than others: Do you think so? Which ones appear to me more or less valued?

Do you socialize with people outside of church that you know from church? If so, are they: people near you in the pews? In the same stage of life? Joined when you joined? people who share a role with you or people in other areas of ministry?

If you don't socialize with people from church outside of church, why not?

When you socialize with people from church, do you "mix them" with other friends, family or neighbors? Why or why not?

How many of the folk in church:

look like you?

worship like you?

come from the same educational? cultural/social? economic background?

have the same native language?

are in the same life stage with regard to careers, parenting, retirement etc.

Week 12

Congregation

A congregation is often likened to the human body. It is also often referred to as a family.

Do you think of the congregation as a family?

If so, what characteristics are present that lead you to that sense: caring? support? encouragement? acceptance? financial support? meals? elder care? child care? other?

If you don't think of the congregation as a family, what characteristics are different or not present that lead you to experience the congregation differently? Would you want it to be more family-like?

How do people become part of your family? How do they become part of a congregation?

If people want to "end" their membership in your family, how do they do it? In the congregation? How easy or difficult is it for them to do? Is one more or less permanent than another?

What are reasonable expectations for a congregation to meet in terms of being "family like?" What are things it would be unreasonable to expect a congregation to do?

Does your family have any responsibilities to those who are not part of it? If so what are they and how are they met?

Does a congregation have responsibilities to any who are not members? If so what are they, and how are they met?

A congregation is made of its people. Which parts of the responsibilities of the congregation do you accept as your own? Are some more responsible or accountable than others?

In what ways does a congregation respond when needs/obligations are not being met? How does a congregation hold its members accountable?

Look back at **Week 5**, when we considered how we handle disagreement and conflict in our families. Is the role you take in your family like or different than the one you might take in a congregational disagreement. Why do you think that is so?

How does the congregation do forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation? Is this like or different how your family handles these things.

At the end of your reflections, do you think of the congregation as more or less like a family than you did at the beginning?

Week 13

Looking Back

Before we turn our thoughts to scriptural teachings about neighbors, family, church and love, we'll pause here to recall any insights we might have gained about our own attitudes, practices or experiences of family.

Take some time to look back over earlier weeks' questions and ideas. Your answers are your own and for yourself. There is no judgement here – the reflections are designed to help us achieve greater self-awareness as we live and grow into our faithful obligations to love our neighbors.

What did you learn about yourself and how you or your household might be like or different than others with regard to:

how you define family

how independent or interdependent you are with one another (shared support etc.).

how you manage conflict, forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation

how you think about financial resources and sharing them with other family members in need

When you started to think about those outside the family or your household –geographic neighbors, classmates, colleagues and co-workers, fellow church members:

with whom do you have the most meaningful interaction?

to whom do you feel the closest?

for whom are you most likely to provide assistance –and what kind – time? care?, meals?
financial?

with whom are you mostly likely to try to resolve any conflict might arise?

How do the patterns of relationship and behavior change as your circle widens beyond your family?

What do you enjoy about connecting with people to whom you are not related?

What is more challenging or less comfortable?

When you consider broadening the definition of neighbors beyond the ones we have already explored, what do your reflections suggest about how you are likely to connect with, serve or work with people who may have less rather than more in common with you, and whom you do not personally know?