

Neighbors in Ordinary Time

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Recently, my neighbor died.

When I was at the funeral home and when I arrived at work late after his funeral, I was asked how I knew the gentleman who passed away. It was almost sheepishly, or with a note of apology that I said he was “a neighbor.” It was almost as though I thought that to mourn for one who was “just” a neighbor was somehow unjust to his nearest and dearest.

On reflection, though, my instincts were wrong. To downplay the importance of our neighbors is to deny the often underappreciated presence they are in our lives.

Unlike our families, our neighbors are not bound to us by blood, marriage or adoption.

Unlike our friends, our neighbors are not freely chosen.

Rather, it is happenstance, the chance moves we make and simple physical proximity that brings our neighbors into our lives.

Yet, these are the people who can shape our lives in ways we may take for granted – until they move away or pass from this life.

My neighbor was a lifelong neighbor of my parents. For all I know, he may have been outside in his driveway the day my parents first brought me home as an infant and knew me from my very earliest days.

He remembered my grandparents and told me stories only old neighbors would have known.

He entertained my grandfather in his last days with talk of cars and cameras.

If I wasn't home, he shoveled my parents' walkway as they grew older. He let me shovel his as he himself grew older.

He worried if my parents' lights didn't go on at night. As he grew older, I was pleased to see his lights go on in the evening twilight.

He held my mail when I was traveling, and accepted figs from my tree in return.

He helped my parents get into their house when they locked themselves out, and dropped by with concern whenever he saw the truck of a plumber, electrician or tree trimmer parked in front of our house.

He was simply part of the landscape of my life – until, now, he isn't anymore.

There are many blessed with neighbors such as this.

Sadly, there are also reports that, with ever increasing frequency, so many in our modern world do not know their neighbors.

In busy cities, we do not “waste” time on our front porches and stoops when we could be productive in other ways. We need not talk over a backyard fence for company because the phones we hold in our palms let us text acquaintances in far flung places, and social media friends and followers are easily collected. In polarized time, we can decide with whom we will talk – avoiding the random, risky serendipity of the neighborhood. We may fear letting others into our lives, so it can be tempting to avoid anything more than a perfunctory wave toward those who share the streets where we live.

And yet ...our lives are poorer without our neighbors. Indeed, the Gospels twice tell us that the great commands are love of God and love of “neighbor.” This is not merely a command to love those we willingly embrace in friendship, those who are in the heart of our families, and those with whom we choose to share our lives.

Rather, it is a call to walk with those placed in our lives simply because our homes and our families are in each other’s paths. It is a call to consider whether we are ourselves good neighbors, and whether we are grateful for good neighbors when we are blessed to have them.

Sometimes, too, it is a call to pray for those neighbors when they have passed from this life, with the hope that one day we may again find ourselves as neighbors in the dwelling place that is our true and lasting home.

And, to my neighbors past, present and future, thanks for sharing my ordinary time.

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