

Column

An old custom in rural communities is to lift a finger from the steering wheel when meeting another motorist. Typically, this is done on unpaved roads where cars and trucks are scarce. This gesture serves as a sign of goodwill and acknowledgement of another human being.

In the subdivision where I live, though not rural, this quaint custom continues. Because roads are narrow, it is often necessary to pull to the side in order to let an oncoming car pass. When this happens, in addition to the finger salute, there is almost always a nod of the head. And, if you know the person, windows may well go down followed by a brief conversation. News concerning family and friends is shared.

What I have been describing might be termed neighborliness. More of it is needed. Humans, after all, were made for interaction with others. When this is lacking – as was the case with many during the Covid crisis, there are negative consequences. According to a study conducted in 2020 by J.P. Rogers and others, these consequences include: anxiety and panic, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, insomnia, digestive problems, as well as depression and post-traumatic stress.

Covid may be past, but the need for face-to-face interaction remains. Social media is fine and has its place, but virtual is not the same as physical presence. Recently a member of our church made this observation on her first Sunday back after several years of being away. Health concerns had forced her to stay at home, and she had faithfully attended online church, but there was something missing. Being among people, getting and receiving hugs and interacting over coffee and cake caused her to break down and cry as she stood up and thanked people for their concern and care.

Social interaction is vital for our physical and emotional wellbeing, but neighborliness, as I have called it, needs to be taken a step further. Often hands-on action is required.

For example, I know one man who has a big garden and laying hens who shares his goods with neighbors who live on meager incomes. I know others who, following a storm, are out the door with chainsaw in hand. Not only do they clear their own driveway, they take care of the widow woman down the way and anyone else who needs help.

People working together like this make the world a better place, but who can doubt it also brings joy to the heart of God. Hebrews 13:16 tells us as much: “But to do good and to communicate [share] forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”

If that is not enough, Jesus has left us with a picture of a true neighbor. It is found in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The hero in this story fulfills the role of a neighbor by giving aid to a man who had been robbed and left for dead on the roadside.

Neighborliness, then has a number of facets. It involves acknowledgement of the other (even if it is through the windshield of a motor vehicle), social interaction and hands-on help. Opportunities for all three are all around us if we have eyes to see them.

Not everyone can be rich. Not everyone can be famous. Not everyone can look like a Hollywood celebrity. But everyone can be a good neighbor.

O GOD, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity; Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running the way of thy commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 11th Sunday after Trinity from the Book of Common Prayer)

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