

# THE NEIGHBORS

*a parable revisited.*



**The Neighbors**  
**a parable revisited**

*"Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?" Jesus answered, "What's written in God's Law? How do you interpret it?" The religious scholar replied, "That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence--and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself." "Good answer!" said Jesus. "Do it and you'll live."  
Looking for a loophole, he asked, "And just how would you define "neighbor"?"*

---

November is just plain cold. The sun rises late and disappears early. The wind howls as it cuts easily through the layers of clothing worn in defense against cold's grip. Tonight is no exception as the biting cold assailed everything in its path. To add greater insult to bitter cold air was the frigid state of the economic climate. Many had lost their jobs; food banks were taxed, and families were driven into the streets. Well, maybe not exactly the streets, but many a family made their residence in their car; snuggled in with blankets with the car heater blasting, it was at least bearable.

Al was a successful contractor before the economic "come to Jesus". His company built several upscale subdivisions in the Red Deer area. Labor was tight and materials evermore expensive, but credit was cheap, and his company went further in debt hoping sales would rebound. His mistake? At first glance, it was a bad idea to build all those homes on "spec". You know "spec", as in speculation, in anticipation that when the homes are complete people will buy them. The decision to build was not motivated purely by greed. Al had a family to support and, moreover, felt a certain responsibility to his employees. They had families to feed, and many of them had remained loyal to him through the labour shortage. The thought "Have to keep them working" often echoed in his mind. In addition, Al faced mounting pressure from City Hall to hurry up and develop the land he had purchased.

Like everyone else, Al and his wife of 25 years, Diane, were living well beyond their means. While cash flow was great, they were always only a month away from financial ruin. With their

careers well underway, they had finally decided to start a family and were very proud of their twin daughters now five years old.



How they found themselves packed into their Escalade with all their possessions and nowhere to live was really a sick blur of a nightmare. In just three months, they went from their upscale home in their upscale neighborhood to sleeping in their car in parking lots and side roads. Al and Diane tried to get work, but things were tight all over. Nothing this bad since the 30's they say. So in disgrace, deep grief and a heavy cloud of depression and anxiety, Al and his family settle in for another night in the harsh November wind.

“We’ll have to take it easy on the fuel tonight” Diane whispered, “Not much left.” Al checked the gauge, discovered it was well into empty and his chest tightened. He held back a great sob of anxiety as he gazed into the frosted windows. Diane clasped her husband's hand in a reassuring way, "It's not your fault. We're going to be okay!" Al forced a tight grin across his face but deep inside he was a sea in great tumult. He churned with so many emotions they were indiscernible in any rational sense. The theme was great fear - no! More like pure terror. The kind of fear that gestates violently, birthing its offspring of desperation.

A knock came at the window, and Al could see a figure through the frosted glass. He lowered the window and revealed a Police officer. “Everything alright folks?” he inquired.

“Yes, just fine.... I guess... considering” Al stammered. “Hey is there any room at ‘In from the Cold’ tonight, do you know?”

“I don’t expect so. They’ve been over capacity for several weeks now, and I heard the City was gonna shut ‘em down if they didn’t comply with occupancy. Asshole bureaucrats!” the cop said, wincing as he noticed the twins in the back. “There may be room at Dundas but that’s no place for your girls.”

“Yes, we’ve heard,” Diane said resigned to the bitter reality their Escalade would be their home for yet another night.

The policeman continued reluctantly, “I know it’s tough, but I’m gonna have to ask you guys to move on. The ‘powers that be’ want to discourage folks from living in their vehicles, so I have orders to tell ya to move on”. You could tell the veteran cop was just sick about forcing them to move on. How the bureaucrats expected folks to go to a shelter when there was simply no room didn’t make sense. What were they supposed to do?

Al’s head dropped as he knew moving the car would waste the precious fuel they were counting on for heat through the night. He agreed, rolled up the window and turned the ignition. They drove for ten minutes before coasting to a stop. The last of the gasoline was spent along with the last bit of Al’s hope. He could barely swallow the rage and fear that were near volcanic proportions deep within him. Diane, in the clutches of her own fear, once again reached across the car to console her husband. The silent tears flowing down her face symbolized the fear for her children and husband. Unable to contain his anguish any longer, Al’s tears glistened in the light of a nearby street lamp. His body began to tremble and then heave as great sobs of wretchedness and misery boiled over



from the poisonous caldron within. His girls, now awake, cried “Mommy why is Daddy sad? Why is Daddy sad?” as they leaned over the seat to console their Daddy. They all huddled together in the front seat of the car and cried and hugged, trying to reassure and hearten each other. Al’s mind was rapid firing with thoughts - “Do we try the shelter on Dundas? Is it better than freezing to death? Could he protect his wife and daughters in such a notorious place? What if something happened? Maybe freezing to death would be better than the fate awaiting them at Dundas”. After what seemed like hours but was perhaps really only twenty minutes, Al decided he was going to venture out and see if he could scrounge some money for food and gasoline. He bundled up, hugged his family and disappeared into the cold night.

John looked at the clock on his computer showing 6 p.m.. He was finishing up a few replies to emails and getting his buy orders ready for markets opening in the morning. It had been several weeks of pure carnage in the commodity markets, losing well over half its value. Many had been wiped out. The good thing about being a broker is regardless of whether your clients win or lose, you get your commission. His partners joke, “We get them coming and going” but all of them were well aware and empathetic to the substantial losses their clients had incurred.

As John was shutting things down for the day, the telephone rang. It was his wife Darlene. “Hey babe! How was your day?” he asked.

“Oh, it was busy. Lots happening down at the church. The choir has been practicing, and they have started the prep for the bake sale and Christmas pageant. By the way, remember we need you home by six thirty for dinner before the kids are off to pageant practice. Oh darn, I just remembered, I haven’t heard from the children’s pastor about the costumes yet to be made! She frustrates me so much! What would it take to get a little more organization and communication from her?!” With a sigh, she took a deep composing breath and continued, “Well, now that I have vented, please hurry home”.

“I am on my way, just shutting things down now. See ya soon, love ya” John said as he sighed, realizing the Christmas rat race was already in full stride. John and Darlene were members of a non-denominational Evangelical church. Darlene had led worship for a few years, and John was on the Elder’s board. It was a fairly middle class church with lots of programs and lots of folks. John was your typical straight down the pipe Evangelical: big on Israel and her

destiny, capitalism and Conservative politics. He laughed that if he was an American he would be a card carrying Republican and was most abhorred at the recent election which saw a “liberal, baby-killing-fag-loving Democrat” elected as President. The fact that the Democrat was black was a nonissue, after all, he wasn’t a bigot.

John walked over to the door where his coat hung and bundled up for the walk to his car in the parkade. He shut off the light and closed the door behind him. Walking towards the elevator, he exchanged pleasantries with the cleaning staff just as the doors of the elevator opened. As he entered he was greeted by Tom Phillips, his investment guy. After an exchange of pleasantries, the doors opened once again, and they walked towards the stairs to the parkade.

“Oh shit” Tom said, “I forgot my file for my meeting in my office. Have a good night eh?” John smiled and returned the nicety and descended the stairs to the parkade.

“The stairway is freezing, the car is gonna take forever to warm up tonight” John lamented under his breath.

In the same building was the office for the Anglican Diocese of Red Deer. Archdeacon Phil Manly was finishing a call with a financial supporter of the Bishop. Phil started a new email to his Bishop informing him of the generous gift for the Cathedral. His fingers danced with delight as he wrote the email. His thoughts hung on the enormity of the generosity in such bleak economic times, before turning to the meeting schedule of the Bishop and the preparation of the Diocesan Synod coming in March. There was a lot to prepare: clergy to co-ordinate, delegates to confirm, and billets to find. Synods were never a wonderful experience as many things were causing division among the Parishes. Many camps drew their lines around orthodoxy - conservative and liberal. It was a fairly toxic debate, and he was thankful that his Bishop was skillful politically; he could speak the language of either faction in a way that sounded appealing to either camp, while committing to nothing. The middle road was a delicate balancing act.

Phil was no slouch either and was really good at what he did. He was generally well thought of by the power brokers in the Diocese. He was being groomed, the golden boy if you will, for the role of Bishop in the not so distant future. Some said he had purple shirt fever, but the truth was Phil loved his church and what he did, and if that was mistaken for ass kissing by the cynics then so be it.

A reminder message popped up on his screen for a meeting at All Saints Church at 7 p.m. “Oops; I better get going” as his watch revealed it was 6:25. He was meeting with the Mercy and Outreach Committee to inspire them and see where the Diocese could help. Reflecting compassionately on the plight of the homeless and hungry, he was reminded of the great need in these harsh financial times. He had intended to encourage his audience with the text from Matthew 25 about the sheep and the goats, “Whatever you did for the least of these, you have done for me.”

“That’s a great passage to stir folks to action!” he gleamed. But he was running late, and he hastily shut down his computer, donned his coat and headed for the elevator. “Down to a cold parkade... I hate the cold” he muttered under his breath.

Two floors above was “Into the Nations for Harvest.” INH was a small, but highly respected Pentecostal sponsored college which equipped people for pastoral ministry. In the library was another bright star: Kirk Jacobsen. Kirk was born to be a Pastor; he was groomed his whole life for it. His father was the Senior Pastor of a mega-church in San Francisco, and Kirk dreamed of following in his father’s footsteps. Besides his father, his heroes were those of the likes of Bill Hybells and Joel Osteen. Great successful pastors with huge churches, lots of programs and lots of influence. Kirk studied hard and gleaned every principle for successful church planting and growth he could get his hands on. Kirk was sold out for Jesus. He was militant in his discipline: he regularly fasted, studied, prayed, tithed and gave offerings above. He was respected in his local church, and the Pastor had invited him to minister on a few occasions. Each instance resulted in a passionate and stirring message that filled the altar with hungry people longing for a touch from the “Lords anointed”. He was not unaware of the weighty expectations upon him, those placed there by himself and others. He had a sense of his potential greatness and what that meant for the Kingdom. He was deeply humbled that God had called him and given him such a great destiny, and he wasn't taking any chances with it. His entire life was controlled: no inappropriate or seemingly inappropriate relations with anyone, and certainly girls were a distraction to his mission. He was painfully aware of how scandal can end one’s rise to the pinnacle of Pentecostal fame.

Lowering the textbook he'd been plowing through, he rubbed his eyes with a sigh while wondering how history was going to be of any use to him in real ministry. "Couldn't these folks see how bound up in the religious spirit they were? We need the fresh manna from heaven," and he prayed that he would be that source for a world that so needed Jesus. He stretched again and looking at his watch he realized he had to get going. It was going to be a down night, no meetings. It was a paradox of emotions because he thrived on the meetings but was feeling just plain tired. He collected his things, returned the book he was reading to the re-shelving cart, grabbed his coat and made his way to the elevator. As he was waiting for the elevator to take him to the parkade, his mind drifted to his "happy spot": on the platform, speaking to thousands of eager disciples and many more by television and radio. The elevator arriving stirred him from his daydream, and he boarded the elevator car.

Several floors up, in fact, the top floor, was the suite belonging to a full-service law firm named Mayers, Conrad and Penny. They specialized in Tax/Corporate law and had found a very lucrative niche. Many of the nation's largest businesses retained the firm because they were the most proficient, in no small part due to the rising star of Mark Sinclair.

Sinclair, now in his mid-thirties, had graduated with honors from McGill. He had been practicing tax law for a decade now and served his clients and partners well. Mark led a fairly quiet life: just his work, his cat and Cameron. Cameron worked in Corporate Strategies for a large oil company. Sinclair had lost touch with his family over a decade ago. They just couldn't come to grips with his relationship with Cameron. He tried for a while through emails, phone calls and dinner invitations, but was always met with polite excuses and eventually no response at all. Mark wished he could just resign himself to the fact that his family were homophobic and just write them out of his life, but even after ten years of apparent rejection he still had a dated picture of his folks and siblings on his desk. Cam couldn't understand how Mark could still be pining away for the ones who were such a source of pain to him. In fits of frustration, Cam would say "Enough already! To hell with them!" Cam didn't really mean it; he just hated to see Mark in so much heartache.

It was a rare night for Mark. No meeting with clients and nothing on the social calendar. As he checked the weather and saw the bitter forecast, he was looking forward to a night in front on

the TV watching the Flames play. He was reaching for his coat when the phone rang. “Hey, you on your way?” Cam asked.

“Yep, I am. Just putting on my coat,” Mark replied.

“Can you grab a case of beer on your way? Only two left in the fridge, and that will only get us through the first period,” Cam asked with a chuckle.

“Sure thing, I’m on my way.” Mark hung up the phone, and with coat and gloves on headed for the elevator.

Al had been wandering the streets now for twenty minutes. It felt much longer as the cold air assailed his face. The streets were deserted, seems the sane folks were tucked away in their homes or restaurants, and all he could think about was his family getting colder in the Escalade. His mind was ravaged with brief moments of panic and unbearable anxiety; his soul was continually whipped by shame and despair. The cruelty of hindsight cut through the sinew of hope and the wounds seemed immediately infected with bitterness. Anguish and desperation well up



in his stomach. What felt like it would be a savage cry of dark emotion manifested only as sour, burning bile from his stomach. Why was he so arrogant? Why did they spend everything they made? Where were his so called friends? The ones he didn’t lay off because of some twisted sense of duty!! Where the hell were they?! The desperation, anger, shame and self-hatred pumped through his body like a toxic embalming fluid. His face and hands were now in agonizing burning

pain from the frigid conditions. He saw a parkade and headed for the open door to warm up a bit, but his soul was a torrent of fire. As he went through the door of the parkade, his anger erupted with all the fury of a hurricane. The screams of anguish and anger reverberated as his feet pounded the concrete steps connecting the levels of the structure. On the third level, he

crashed through the door in a full on lather and collapsed in tears and great sobs. His body convulsed as his tortured soul spilled forth its venom.

“What am I going to do? God help me?” he moaned as thoughts of his wife and twins in the Escalade lay before him, all too vivid in his mind’s eye.

Meanwhile, John emerged from the elevator and descended another set of concrete steps to the level where his car was parked. The breath from his mouth was freezing on his mustache, and he couldn’t get to his car fast enough. John reached for the door handle and moved quickly through it making a beeline to the refuge of his car. He didn’t notice Al on his knees only steps past the threshold of the door and fell right over the top of him. Without thought, Al instinctively erupted with the fury of a desperate animal and jumped on John, wildly and viscously punching him over and over again. He didn’t even think



about it. As he flailed and thrashed John, it was like he was outside of himself as if watching a movie. He was curiously detached from the vicious assault. John didn’t even have a chance to respond, to protect himself or inquire. The savage beating left him bloody, swollen and unconscious. His rage now spent; Al stopped his physical rampage. Fear of what had just happened gripped his already raw heart. Al rifled through Johns pockets taking his money clip, and he fled. Like a scared rabbit he darted down the frozen stairwell and into the frigid, black November night air.

John's ravaged body lay upon the frigid concrete floor breathing convulsively; his labor for life's breath was forged against an anvil of agonizing pain from internal injuries and broken bones. Against this vibrant backdrop of searing pain and frenetic fear, John's thoughts were tortured with anxiety for his wife and kids. Finally, John slipped into the darkness of his injuries by way of the chariot of unconsciousness.

As the elevator doors opened Phil Manly buttoned the top button of his wool overcoat, picked up his briefcase and made his way down the stairs to the parkade. A glance at his watch quickened his step as his mind returned to rehearsing for his meeting at All Saints in less than a half hour. He opened the door from the stairwell and was immediately met with the bitter night air. He shuddered as his face was slapped by the elements. Within a few steps, he was right on top of John in a lump on the cold floor. "Ohhh," Phil thought as he gazed sympathetically upon the poor wretch passed out on the floor. "The economy has really taken its toll. This poor drunk soul has passed out in the parkade. This is exactly why I need to really inspire the group at All Saints tonight. This will be a good example for them," he thought as he said a quick prayer for God's protection of this poor victim of hard times. Phil reached his car, started it and backed out and down the ramp to his meeting, disappearing into the frigid, black November night air.

Kirk was tired, and his eyes burned from the reading he had been so engrossed in. He missed home, his folks and the warmer climate of the Bay area. He longed for when his degree was finally complete, and he could get on with his mission. He was well aware of the weight of his calling, wishing at times he could lighten up, take a breather, do a road trip or even go on a date. As nagging as these feelings were they were beaten back into their cage by his sense of destiny and the responsibility of what God needed him to do. At the risk of being grandiose, one of the visiting ministers back at his Dad's church had prophesied that the fulfillment of his destiny with unswerving determination would be a final step leading to the return of Christ. A lot of pressure for sure but God's grace is sufficient. Kirk took a deep breath as the elevator doors opened, and headed for the flight of stairs leading to the parkade. At the head of the stairs, his finger pressed the button for the command start, and he looked forward to climbing into a warm car.

Kirk opened the door to the parkade and was greeted with the frosty embrace. It was so abrupt it seemed to take his breath away. "Oh, I hate this cold," he muttered under his breath followed by a self-chastisement prayer to count it all joy. Kirk's pace quickened but within a couple of steps he was arrested by the sight of John's huddled, broken body on the parkade floor. Kirk could see that John was bleeding. In fact, there was a lot of blood. Kirk was gripped with fear. "What should I do?" screamed in his head as panic gripped his mind. Almost intuitively he made a motion to help this poor fellow and almost as intuitively his actions were arrested by fear of not

knowing what to do. The potential for controversy and the sheer panic he was experiencing caused him to bolt for the refuge of his running car, and flee the garage as fast as his pounding heart was beating. The shame of fear and the resulting inaction assailed him, and he tried desperately to rationalize it. "There was blood and what if he had AIDS? Lots of street people have AIDS, and if I were to get it, my life would be over! People would think I am homosexual; I could never marry and I would forfeit my call! God is depending on me. He knows what that man needs and He will take care of it. I just need to trust him to God. Sometimes the Kingdom has casualties but it's for the greater good," he reasoned as he sped off into the frigid, black November night air.

As Mark reached his office door, he remembered his USB drive which had a file for the merger he was preparing for a client. He knew it was to be a night off, but "just in case" he returned to his desk. He grabbed the drive, put it in his pocket and turned to leave, but his gaze was caught by the fa-



miliar picture of his family. As it happened from time to time, he was stopped in the moment of the gaze and his mind filled with a menagerie of thoughts and memories with emotions of sadness at the estrangement. The fracture with his family was not his doing. He didn't want it that way, but his lifestyle was just something his family could not accept. They had always suspected that Mark was "that way" but could never deal with the shame of it actually being the case. "Where had they gone wrong?" they demanded of Heaven in their prayers. His siblings were just angry, not much more one could say about it. So years of no contact, no returned calls, letters or emails. He had often taken some solace in the martyrdom of the movement, but more so from the love and support of Cameron. But Mark still mourned the loss of family relationship and the empty, disconnected sense he had in general concerning life. His life was full, really.

Lots of friends and Cameron's folks were very supportive and embracing but somehow.... well... as good as it was he wanted something more.

Once more Mark headed for the door and made his way to the elevator. The doors opened, and he took the short ride to the parkade stairway. He made his way down the stairs, and the leather soles of his shoes seemed to make a louder than usual snap as they echoed in the deep freeze of the stairwell. As he entered the stairway John's motionless, bleeding figure on the frozen parkade floor arrested him in mid stride. He rushed to his side, falling onto his knees beside John. "Hey! Hello! Can you hear me? My name is Mark, and I'm going to get you help." John saw this figure through the haze of partial consciousness and blood, and heard the keys of a cell phone chirp 9-1-1. As Mark stayed on the phone with the 911 operator, he took off his coat and covered John's broken body with it. He removed his toque and gloves and put them on John to help him maintain what little body heat he had remaining. All the while he talked to John and encouraged him. "Stay with me k?" he said in a kind, affirming and warm tone which contrasted so dramatically with the reality of the situation they were in. "Come on now! Hang in there, help is coming," he repeated at random intervals as he applied pressure with his hand to a deep gash on John's head which was bleeding, still quite profusely.

The sound of the ambulance quickly approaching and turning into the parkade was a welcome sound for Mark. As the ambulance came to a stop, the crew were out fast with a stretcher and equipment. Mark got out of the way and let the paramedics do their jobs.

"Do you know him?" they asked Mark.

"No, I just came down and found him here."

"He's in rough shape," one paramedic said to the other. "No I.D. - we gotta get him to General stat." Quickly they loaded John into the ambulance and suggested that Mark follow to make a statement and get some treatment for the frostbite to his fingers and face.

Mark made his way to his car, started it and put his seat belt on. It was at that moment that the enormity of what had just transpired finally overtook him and his body began to tremble and then convulse with great sobs. With a shaking hand, he finally reached for the heater fan switch to get the heat flowing through the car. He was so cold, and his blood stained fingers burned from the effects of frostbite. He took a deep breath to fortify his newly regained composure and

gingerly dialed his cell to let Cameron know what was going on. With the sound of Cam's voice on the phone, the delicate composure gave way. Through returning tears, Mark recounted the ordeal to Cameron and let him know he was headed to the hospital and Cameron said he would meet him there.

Mark put his car in gear and slowly drove out of the parkade towards the hospital, driving off into the frigid, black November night air.

-----

So, Jesus asked. What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man attacked by robbers?" "The one who treated him kindly," the religion scholar responded. Jesus said, "Go and do the same."

*Royalty Free Photo credits:*

© Pakhnyushchyy - Fotolia.com

© nsphotography - Fotolia.com

