

Learning From Our Neighbors

When my wife and I got married and moved into an apartment complex in Sacramento, CA, my neighbors began to give me an education. Several years after this education began, I was reading the Bible and read the story Jesus told in Matthew 25 about the king and the servants who were given talents. It struck me how much I am like these servants and how I also have decisions to make regarding my talents.

Growing up, I never worried about my father coming home from work. Now I work with boys whose parents never came back to pick them up from daycare. I took for granted that family gatherings are a fun time with my cousins until I talked with my neighbor and discovered that she won't go to a family gathering for fear her uncle would try to harm her. I didn't know I had a safety net around me until my neighbor was evicted because her child was taken away by Child Protective Services, and she no longer had child support to pay for her apartment. Right now, I have dozens of people I could call, and they would send me \$1,000 with almost no questions asked, if I had a legitimate need.

I grew up enjoying acapella 4-part harmony singing. I come from a musically inclined family and singing came almost naturally for me. Now I go visit elderly friends with a group to sing and they can't believe how we "sing like angels". When my neighbor's car wouldn't start, I pulled jumper cables out of my trunk and helped them out. How did I learn that? I'm not really sure. I think I was born knowing how to do that. My neighbor asked me, "Why do you work so hard? You don't have to. That's what the government is for." But I know a secret. Work not only provides income, it also changes how I feel emotionally, physically, and in some ways spiritually. But I only know that because I was taught to work hard.

One of the first questions many Anabaptist people ask me is, "Is it safe to live where you live?" I have learned that safety is of the Lord. But it surely helps that I don't do drugs or sleep around or drink or wander aimlessly at 3:00 AM. Those are personal decisions I make, but they are greatly influenced by my Anabaptist heritage. When my wife and I were going out on our first date, no one had to take my wife aside and make sure she had pepper spray in case she needed it. It had never occurred to either of us that assaults are not unusual on first dates. Sometimes when I travel to speak or go to a conference, I stay at a complete stranger's house. I might even arrive after they are in bed. But they trust me because of my family or someone I

know or their pastor. That is not normal!

My neighbors would line up down the sidewalk for my wife's homemade cookies. One of our neighbors said, "When you start a bakery, I will come every day for a cinnamon roll!" Why does Rosanna know how to bake like that? She was taught by her mother. Recently there was a knock on our door. When I opened it, there was a neighbor with a jacket. She wondered if Miss Rosanna would be able to sew extra patches on it since Rosanna sews her own clothes.

One of my Muslim neighbors is afraid something bad happened to her son because he went under a tree after dark. All the Muslims in my neighborhood know that demons are in the trees after dark. And so, she lives in fear. I am so thankful I don't have to fear superstitions! Several years ago, my phone rang. It was Life Matters, a ministry that works with people in apartments. We work with them in doing our kid's club. The person on the other end asked if I knew how to garden. Well, I don't really have a green thumb, but I know what a garden looks like and my parents had a garden. That is enough. The person says, "You and Rosanna seem like that kind of people." So, now we are in charge of a community garden for anyone in Logan Park Apartments where we live.

The thing that I realize with many of these blessings is that my wife and I were not given the choice to be born where we were born. We did not choose to learn many of the skills we know. We have been handed a tremendous gift. It is a terrible shame when we throw these good things out just because we don't understand the value of our heritage.

I want to be fair. My children are growing up in a very different environment than I did. They will have a very different view of the world than I did. They are learning very different things than I learned. We don't talk about cows very much around our dinner table. We discuss people and cars and who was at the park and what tricks you can try on a skateboard. And yet, I want to give my children the same values I have been given. The surroundings will look different, but the values can still be there.

Those of us who grew up in Anabaptist homes have been given such a head start in life. A good work ethic, good singing, and safety are not what makes us Christians. But these things give us huge advantages in life. But we are given a choice like the servant with the talents in Matthew 25. We can either bury our talent and pour all of our energy into protecting what we have, or we can invest in the lives of others and give the talents to the "exchangers" so God can receive His own with interest when He returns.

