

And who is my neighbor?

By [David Williams](#)

February 25, 2015

I don't know exactly why I stepped outside. It was just to see what the temperature was like, I think, and then to look up at the brightness of the night sky on an unusually warm February evening.

The moment I stepped outside, though, I knew something was off. There was the smell of fire, not of wood, but that acrid sharpness of synthetics and plastics burning. I stepped from our carport, and the street was filled with smoke, hanging heavy around the streetlights.

I called out my younger son, who agreed that there was something amiss. We prowled down the street, checking, smelling, observing.

Three houses down and across the way, the smoke seemed heaviest around a darkened home, and when I went to bang on the door, the muffled tone of a smoke detector's klaxon could be heard from within.

Other neighbors came out, and I called 911. It took just minutes for the fire department to arrive in force. They broke in, and thick smoke poured out from both front and rear of the house. They found the fire, and extinguished it.

The word went around that there'd been a couple of small dogs removed from the house, although I didn't see them myself.

But what we didn't know, what no one I talked to seemed to know, was who actually lived there. Not their next-door neighbors. Not the folks in the house across the street.

It was a rental, and some folks knew the owner.

Not a soul who gathered in the red, brilliant, stuttering light of those fire-engines knew the occupants. There was no number to call, no urgent text or e-mail to send, no way to say, hey, hey, your house is on fire, get back now. I may have seen them, I think, now and then. Getting into and out of their vehicles, a shadowy flutter

between home and car, witnessed in passing.

Here, there were human beings who live close enough to my house that I could hit their home with a well placed frisbee throw. I may have called in the volunteer heroes who saved their house and—God willing—their pets, but I do not know who they are. I couldn't pick them out of a lineup.

And I remembered, later in my reflections, that time a man asked Jesus, "[So Jesus, who is my neighbor?](#)"

Back then, that meant one thing. It assumed we would know, that the physical, material reality of the human beings who share our place was known to us. It assumed we would be biased in favor of those souls, and against the stranger. My Teacher challenged his listeners to expand their thinking about who is and is not a neighbor, about who deserves our compassion and care.

*Originally posted at [Beloved Spear](#)*