

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

Lanecia A. Rouse

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for January 12–18, 2015.

MAKING THE CONNECTION



“The other day I was sitting in a local coffee shop writing a devotion. Needing a break, I looked up from my computer and out a big window in front of me to view the city scene. I noticed outside a woman wearing house shoes, and she seemed to be holding all of her possessions in her hands. She was walking across the street, talking passionately to the air under the bridge. Another woman sitting next to me in the coffee shop must have noticed me looking out because once she caught my eye, she offered a pejorative statement about the woman. The experience highlighted for me a need for us to reflect more about what it means to be morally committed to the welfare of others, especially those less fortunate than we are.

“After the woman narrated her perceptions about our sister outside, we sat silently sipping our lattes, observing the woman as she faded from view. Though I did not respond, I wondered how her thoughts about the woman outside might be altered if I paraphrased a biblical question: Are we our sister’s keeper?

“How could such a question lead to a teaching moment for those of us sitting inside and comfortable? How might our careful answers to such a query birth new possibilities for the woman outside, for our communities, and for our own transformation?

“In the midst of a world where dehumanization, bullying, and discrimination still persist, we must face head on, as disciples of the Christian way, what the implications of the question may

suggest. God is still asking, ‘Where is your brother (sister)?’ And more often than not, the response of Cain seems to echo from our lips: ‘Am I my brother’s (or sister’s) keeper?’ With the constant social unrest in Ferguson, what better time than now for our youth to continue pondering these questions and live into the answers that may come?’ —Lanecia

MEET THE WRITER

Lanecia A. Rouse is my name. I am a freelance artist, photographer, and creativity cultivator who is daily learning how to play and to live in freedom. For the past three-and-a-half years, I served as the Project Manager of The Art Project, Houston, a therapeutic art and self-empowerment project of the Bread of Life, Inc., for my neighbors living on the streets of Houston, Texas. Prior to the move to Houston in March 2011, I served in youth ministry for thirteen years, most received with the brilliant, bursting beautiful youth of Belmont United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. Look for Lanecia online at www.larouse.wordpress.com.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- a candle and a lighter or matches
- a Bible
- butcher paper
- markers
- mixed media paper 14x11 or 17x14
- pencils or pens
- up-to-date newspapers and magazines
- white printer paper
- glue sticks
- music and player with speakers

PLUGGED IN

Below are a few book and media resources you may find helpful as you shape, guide, and inspire conversations that help your community think through questions such as these:

Am I my brother’s or sister’s keeper?

Who is my neighbor?

What is being my brother’s or sister’s keeper like today?

The same resources could be used in “Taking It Further” as book studies or movie night chats.

Books

- + *Love. Period.: When All Else Fails*, by Rudy Rasmus
(<http://www.amazon.com/Love-Period-When-Else-Falls/dp/161795215X>)
- + *Love Does: Discover a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World*, by Bob Goff
(<http://www.amazon.com/Love-Does-Discover-Secretly-Incredible/dp/1400203759>)
- + *Kisses from Katie: A Story of Relentless Love and Redemption*, by Kate J. Davis
(<http://www.amazon.com/Kisses-Katie-Story-Relentless-Redemption/dp/1451612095>)

- + *Touch: Pressing Against the Wounds of a Broken World*, by Rudy Rasmus (<http://www.amazon.com/TOUCH-Pressing-Against-Wounds-Broken/dp/0849919851>)
- + *Like Breath and Water: Praying With Africa*, by Ciona Rouse (<http://www.amazon.com/Like-Breath-Water-Praying-Africa/dp/0835810127>)
- + *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*, by Shane Claiborne (<http://www.amazon.com/The-Irresistible-Revolution-Ordinary-Radical/dp/0310266300>)

Fictional Movie

- + *To Save a Life* (<http://tosavealifemovie.com>)
The story of two friends pulled apart by school politics, leaving one alone and forgotten and in an emotional and mental state that leads to a tragic decision.

Movies and Television Shows

Below is a list of movies and a TV show that tell true stories of individuals and groups that chose to live in ways that reflected a love for neighbors and a dedication to using their gifts to bring about justice and life for their brothers and sisters. These are stories of ordinary people who lived extraordinary lives to be keepers of their brothers and sisters.

- + *Lean on Me* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097722/>)
- + *Freedom Writers* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0463998/>)
- + *The Good Lie* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2652092/>)
- + *The Blind Side* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0878804/>)
- + *The Red Band Society* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3576794/>) — a dramedy focused on a group of teen patients living together in a hospital

CHECKING IN

As group members arrive, welcome everyone, extending a special welcome to those joining you for the first time.

Invite everyone to take a seat. Light a candle, and greet group members. Then offer this prayer:

*“Creating and Re-Creating God,
Thank you for creating this day and giving it to us as a gift.
Thank you for creating this moment
and bringing these people together to explore and to grow in love
and in the knowledge of you and of who they are called to be in the world.
Bless our time together. May it further the in-breaking of your kingdom
in our lives, neighborhood, city, and world. Amen.”*

Invite group members to say their names and to answer this question:

What is a glaring social concern that saddens you right now?

After everyone has had a chance to speak, say: *“Today, we are going to explore the light that Matthew’s gospel sheds on the question, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’”*

EXPLORING THE WORD

Scripture: Genesis 4:1–10, Matthew 25:34–40

Read aloud Genesis 4:1–10. Then say: *“When God asked Cain, ‘Where is your brother?’ Cain answered, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’”*

Invite the group to discuss:

What was happening for Cain? for God?

What does the text say about the relationship God desires to have with us?

What does the text say about the relationship God wants us to have with our neighbor?

(You may want to point out that the Hebrew word translated “brother” points to a connection between human beings that goes beyond being a sibling. It means an interconnectedness that is rooted in the image of God and is within every person regardless of his or her particularities, choices, and circumstances.)

After some time of reflection, read the following or say it in your own words:

“Cain’s attempt to change the subject, release himself of guilt, and avoid the shame of his failure to love his brother was not even validated with a direct answer. Instead, God got down to what was true by naming the harm that had been done between the brothers, the death that had occurred as a result of Cain’s failure to love and care for his brother, and what the consequences of his actions would be.

“Our neighbors are essential to our faith. Genesis reveals that being in relationship with God means not only loving and offering our lives to God but also loving and caring for our neighbors. The same teaching is emphasized in the life and ministry of Jesus. Throughout the gospels, Jesus teaches that caring for our neighbors is an integral part of what it means to be in loving relationship with God. Regardless of the neighbors’ particularities, the commandment is to do the work necessary to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

“When asked which command in God’s Law is the most important, Jesus said: “Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.” This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: “Love others as well as you love yourself.” These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from” (Matthew 22:36–40, The Message).

“Life with God is life with one another. The commandments teach us that our brothers and sisters are imperative to our walk with God. Jesus wants people to understand that we need one another and that we are responsible for one another. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keeper.

“God loved the world so much that God commanded love and showed, through Jesus’ life and teaching, what genuine love looks like—to love one another as if our lives depended upon it.”

Read aloud Matthew 25:34–40. Then ask the following questions, and write the answers on the large sheets of paper:

How does Matthew 25:34–40 answer the question “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

To whom in our world does Jesus refer? Who are the hungry? the thirsty? the stranger? the naked? those who are sick and in prison?

Then say: *“It is important not to miss that Jesus is speaking about tangible needs the people in his community were facing. He makes the connection that life with God means life in community with one another, at times meaning we will need to use our various resources to care for and empower our neighbor.”*

What are some ways that we as individuals or a community can we love those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and in prison?

What are some of the challenges?

What are some of the possibilities?

When have you have seen or experienced people loving as Jesus says we are to love?

Invite group members to create a visual reminder of Matthew 25:34–40. Distribute sheets of mixed media paper. Have each person draw a heart symbol or an anatomical heart that covers most of the paper.

Invite group members to find images, articles, or words from the newspapers and magazines to create a visual paraphrase of Matthew 25:34–40. Explain that they will use the images, articles, or words to create a collage inside the hearts they have drawn. Encourage them to be prayerful and thoughtful as they create. Play music that helps them focus on loving and caring for others.

SHARING IN PRAYER

After all the group members have completed their heart collages, invite each person to think of a word or words that will remind and encourage them to love others well. Some examples are:

- love
- trust
- be brave
- love God, love my neighbor, and love myself
- just

Then distribute markers, and ask people to write their word or words on top of the collage.

Invite group members to pray with you, explaining that when you pray, *“Help us to . . .”* you will create a space of silence for them to speak their words in prayer to God. When everyone understands the instructions, pray:

“Loving God,

Thank you for the privilege of participating in the story of love you have been writing in the world since the beginning of time. Mold and shape our hearts to love as you would have us love, and continue to reveal to us what it means to be a good neighbor who loves others as we love ourselves.

Help us to . . .

(allow time for group members to speak their words, then close with the following)

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.”

TAKING IT FURTHER

- Host a movie night featuring a movie that helps the youth continue thinking about what it means to be our “brother’s or sister’s keeper.”
- Host a book club featuring narratives that inspire, equip, and help participants to think theologically about what it means to be a good neighbor locally and globally.
- Guide the youth in discerning how they are called to use their unique resources and gifts to be good neighbors in the community. Receive weeks studying scripture together, praying together, researching the needs of the community, interviewing community leaders, and listening to where the youth as a group are being led to love their neighbors who are sick, hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked and/or in prison.

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President Obama launched My Brother's Keeper in February 2014 to address persistent opportunity gaps facing boys and young men of color and to ensure all youth can reach their full potential. In 2015 the My Brother's Keeper Alliance (MBK Alliance) was launched, inspired by My Brother's Keeper, to scale and sustain this mission. In late 2017, MBK Alliance became an initiative of the Obama Foundation. My Brother's Keeper. Sail with Jaina to meet Baine off the coast of Theramore. Talk to Mathias Shaw to set sail for Theramore. He returned her brother? That took guts on his part. I wonder at the repercussions for both him and for us here.