

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Neighbor: The Offensive Mr. Rogers”

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Luke 10:33-37

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We’re about halfway through our series “Neighbor,” looking at how we live next door, so to speak, as people of faith, especially when every bit of interaction around us is charged and divisive. Another plug, if you haven’t already, to offer your thoughts for our “preaching poll” for next year—yes, that’s 2023. It was based on your responses last year that this series in particular came about. Links in the Sunday email that went out and a QR code in the bulletin.

As we’re about halfway, next Sunday we’ll be led in worship by our youth, with Youth Sunday serving as something of a centerpiece of this whole series. That’s a Sunday I’ve been looking forward to for a while.

Up to now, we’ve spent most of our time in the so-named “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” a story Jesus told about a man mugged and left for dead, and then those who helped him and those who didn’t, all in response to a simple question, “And who is my neighbor?” This is the third week we’ve looked at this parable, and now entering the scene is the one the parable is commonly known for, the Samaritan himself. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Luke 10:33-37

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Well, it was just a matter of time really. There’s some bylaw written somewhere that if you do a series called “Neighbor” in a Presbyterian church, at some point Fred Rogers has to come up.

Just in case not everyone is up to speed, Fred Rogers of course is the star of a show many of you already know, a show many may have even grown up watching: “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Yes the kids’ show one with the bad puppets and questionable production value, but all the while delving into some pretty deep stuff, becoming a cherished household name.

Mr. Rogers warrants mention in a series called “Neighbor” if for no other reason than Mr. Rogers was awesome, and opened his show with those earnest, singsong words, maybe not sung entirely too well, but then

that was the whole schtick of the show, wasn't it? Not trying to be slick, but sincere. "It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood; a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? ... Won't you be my neighbor?" It's worth bringing up just for that.

But it almost *has* to come up if you're talking about "neighbors" in a Presbyterian church because Fred Rogers was, as some of you may know, himself a Presbyterian, and not just a Presbyterian, an ordained Presbyterian minister. And as a minister, his ministry wasn't within a church per se, but it was instead in fact the show that he did for over thirty years.

So cherished in fact was this man and his legacy that there is no shortage of stories of how Mr. Rogers had impacted folks' childhoods and on into adulthood for that matter, inspiring children and grown-ups alike to be honest about their emotions and to treat other people with dignity and civility.

There's one story out there about how Mr. Rogers' car was stolen one day, and because it was Mr. Rogers' car, it made the evening news. Well, the people who had stolen the car saw the news and realized what they had done. The next day, Mr. Rogers' car was found returned to the same spot with a note saying, "Sorry, we didn't know it was yours." I suppose there's a bit to unpack there, because perhaps the car thieves might have been convinced that stealing *any* car is wrong, but if they draw the line at Mr. Rogers' car, well it's a start.

So many stories like that, and folks' lives being impacted by the work and ministry of this man, to the point that maybe one of the most devastating criticisms I have ever heard given involved Mr. Rogers as well. I forget the exact context of this, but two people are having a disagreement, and one says to the other, "You're not acting like the person Mr. Rogers knew you could be." And when I heard that, I thought, well I'm glad that wasn't directed at me. Could there be something more devastating than hearing that you would be letting Mr. Rogers down?

Because that was kind of his thing, that was the whole "Won't you be my neighbor?" thing. It was directed toward everyone and anyone. He looks straight into the camera at the beginning of each show for thirty years, inviting you, "Won't you be my neighbor?" How can you not love that? The sincerity, the invitation, the welcome, the love. It's powerful.

That's kind of how this parable is often thought of too for that matter. The Good Samaritan. How nice is that? A man beaten up on the side of the road, and this good Samaritan comes upon him, tends to him, takes him to an inn, and makes sure that he's taken care of. How can you not love that? The care, the tenderness. It's powerful.

It's so powerful that even the title of the parable (not an official title, by the way—neither Jesus nor Luke gives it a title) but even the title of the parable has now become synonymous with someone who helps another in need. Someone's hurt? Maybe a Good Samaritan will come along. Someone's cold or hungry? Maybe a Good Samaritan will come along. That sort of thing. We hear the phrase "Good Samaritan" these days, we immediately think, "Oh, that means someone helped another person who was in need. What a lovely thing to do!" It's like Mr. Rogers. How can you not love that?

But what if Mr. Rogers wasn't always so universally cherished. What if Mr. Rogers was downright offensive sometimes?

As it turns out, we don't have to go to the Neighborhood of Make Believe to see what that looks like, because Mr. Rogers, as nice and cuddly and inoffensive as many may remember him to be, didn't always steer clear of upsetting the apple cart.

For example, in the 80s, there was an entire week of episodes dedicated to all the complications caused when King Friday, the king of the Neighborhood of Make Believe, was worried that Corney the Beaver, who lived in the Neighborhood of Southwood, was stockpiling bombs—you know, like you do in a kids' show. As the week goes on, King Friday ends up stockpiling his own bombs, spending the money that could have otherwise been spent on music or education. All of this was in response to what Mr. Rogers saw as excessive military spending and paranoia at the height of the Cold War. Those episodes caused such a stir that they were subsequently pulled from television and wouldn't be rerun for over thirty more years.

Or about fifteen years earlier than that, in 1969 the neighborhood police officer, Officer Clemons, came on the show, and it being a hot summer day, Mr. Rogers invited him to cool off his feet with him. They had one of those plastic kiddie pools. And so Officer Clemons and Mr. Rogers cooled off their feet in the pool, calmly commenting how nice it felt, even sharing a towel to dry off their feet afterward. Sounds pretty innocuous, right? Wrong. Far from innocuous, because of the fact that Officer Clemons was black, and Mr. Rogers was white, and at the time, the notion of integrated swimming pools was a controversial thing, with many community pools still segregated. To every kid watching the show, there was really nothing all that remarkable about it. It was, as Officer Clemons and Mr. Rogers noted, very nice. But to some white adults, it was a shot across the bow and raised quite a stir.

Point is, Mr. Rogers, talking to children for over thirty years about love and kindness and acceptance, showed that inviting people to be his neighbor was sometimes an offensive thing to do. It wasn't just a cuddly kids' show about being nice to people.

Similarly, this parable of the Good Samaritan isn't quite so nice and cuddly either. We brought up a couple of weeks ago that it was no coincidence that this third person to come across the man beaten up on the side of the road wasn't just a regular Joe, not just anybody. It was a Samaritan. And a Samaritan, to the Jewish ears of those listening, wasn't synonymous with someone who helps another in need—like we might hear it today. It meant someone who was anathema, cut off, someone who shared a similar enough history and even religious faith, but the paths diverged pretty drastically and so there was a level of hatred between Jews and Samaritans that only familiarity can bring.

So when it wasn't the priest or the Levite who showed kindness to the man on the side of the road, you know the usual suspects, that was saying one thing. But when the one who did was someone that was commonly despised by those listening, it put this story into a whole new category. This isn't just a story about how nice it is to help people, just like Officer Clemons and Mr. Rogers sharing a wading pool wasn't just about how nice it is to cool your feet off. It was about redefining who is your neighbor and what it means to be a neighbor.

After all, this whole story didn't come about because the lawyer asked, "So how should we help other people?" It came about because the lawyer asked, "And who is my neighbor?" after affirming that loving your neighbor as yourself was a key to inheriting eternal life. And so Jesus doesn't end the story by saying, "This is what it means to help other people." He ends it by asking, provocatively, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

You see the notion of “neighbor,” even in how it’s treated in the very law that the lawyer cited, tended to refer to those who were in the same vicinity, which makes sense, but it also tended to refer to those of the same nationality, the same ethnicity, birds of a feather sort of thing. So in that reading, loving your neighbor as yourself could have been interpreted to mean, “Love those around you, who tend to be like you, well.” But Jesus is calling that into question.

I’ve seen in some dramatizations of this exchange, in which after being asked “Which of these three... was a neighbor...?”, the lawyer starts to say “the Samaritan,” but can’t bring himself to actually utter the word “Samaritan,” so instead says, “The one who showed him mercy.”

And to that, Jesus offers his powerful reply, “Go and do likewise.” When he says that, we can mistake that to mean, “Go, and help other people in a sacrificial way,” the way the Samaritan did, the way he bandaged the man, took him to an inn, made sure he was cared for while he recovered, went the extra mile. And that’d be all well and good; not the worst lesson in the world to learn that we should help others sacrificially.

But that’s not what Jesus meant by saying, “Go and do likewise.”

Jesus meant, “Go, and see the person or persons you most despise, you are most unsettled by, whose company you least enjoy as your neighbor, and therefore as the one or the ones whom you are called by God to love and care for as you love yourself.” And that message isn’t quite so cuddly as “It’s good to be nice to other people.”

We’ve been talking about this topic of “Neighbor” for four weeks now, how we live out faith in public, how we live out faith living “next door” to others, so to speak. And we’ll talk more in coming weeks about some of the more practical ways we can do that. It turns out the Scripture has no shortage of ways in guiding us into living out faith in that way.

But for a start, we’re not going to get very far in living faithfully, peacefully, fruitfully within the world unless and until we see others as our “neighbor” to begin with, that is, as those whom we are called by God to love as we love ourselves. And what Jesus is teaching us here is that those “others” are precisely the ones that we don’t want to see that way.

How do you live out faith in a divisive world? Start by seeing those from whom you are divided as your neighbor. How do you communicate when it seems all other communication is either clickbait or angered hyperbole? Start by seeing those with whom you’re sharing as your neighbor. How do you live in community with others whose worldviews, whose lifestyles, whose values differ so diametrically from your own? Start by seeing those with whom you differ as your neighbor.

Who are those to you? Who are the ones, could be individuals, could be entire groups of people, who are the ones whose very inclusion would make your skin crawl? Who are the ones you’d be hesitant to even name because it brings up so much intense disgust? Whoever that is, *that’s* your neighbor.

Daunting, I know. Maybe even frightening. But the good news is, the life following Jesus, the life following his words, “Go and do likewise,” starts to look more and more like the eternal life the lawyer was hoping to inherit, when we start inviting precisely that person or those persons, in the same way Mr. Rogers did, “Won’t you be my neighbor?”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.