

Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Luke 10:25 – 29, 30 – 37
Sunday, July 29, 2018

The other year, a new family moved into our neighborhood. We were really excited because they had a child around the same age as *our* kids. They moved in right as school started, so one morning, I was at the bus stop with the kids when this new neighbor walked up with his child. So I introduced myself and my kids, shook his hand, but all I got from him was his first name. I started talking to his kid and introduced him to my kids, thinking that might help break the ice. I tried making small talk. Nothing. This man just *would not talk*.

The next morning, when we went out to wait for the bus, this dad and his child came up, but they stood about ten feet away. I tried talking to him again. Nothing. It went on like that for the rest of the year. They would stand about ten feet away, and as soon as he put his kid on the bus, he walked back to his house. I kept trying to start a conversation, but nothing worked. So I think, “Maybe he’s just shy, has social anxiety or something. He obviously doesn’t want to talk, so I’ll just let him be.”

Then one morning his *wife* brings their child to the bus stop. And I think, “Great! I’ll try to get to know *her!*” Not a talker. So then I’m thinking, “Is it *me?* I *feel* like I’m being friendly enough. I always smile and say good morning and make some effort at conversation, but I’m just not getting *anything.*” Eventually, they just stopped coming out to the bus stop. I don’t know if they started *driving* their kid to school; I would *imagine* so, but we never see them *leave*. The only time we see them is when a car comes home from work at the end of the day. That’s it. We are resigned to the fact that we do not know our neighbors.

Now, we just had *new* neighbors move in right across the street. And *they* have two children around the same age as our kids. But they moved in while we were away on vacation. And by the time we got back, we were so busy with camps and other things for our kids that we haven't had a chance to go over and introduce ourselves to them yet. We *want* to know them. We'd *like* to know them. But we do not know our neighbors.

I want to ask for a show of hands. How many of you know the people who live right next door to you? How many of you know the people who live right across the street from you? Raise your hand if you know your neighbors well enough that you would invite them over for dinner. Raise your hand if you know the people who live right across the street from the *church*. Next door to the church?

For the doctoral classes that I took in June, one of the assignments for the class was to go on a series of five or six walks around the neighborhood with people in the congregation; people who could help you see and understand the neighborhood in a different way. One of the things that I found was that, on *most* of the walks I went on, we didn't know anyone who lived in the neighborhood. We could say, "This church member lives *here*," or, "A church member *used* to live *there*," but for the most part, we did not know anyone else.

I was on one walk with John McClintick. And as we were walking, we saw this elderly woman with a walker, out walking with a nursing aid or at-home helper. So we started talking to her. She had gotten really sick back in the winter, so she was doing therapy and trying to get her strength and health back. We asked her how long she had lived in the neighborhood, and she said *all her life*. Her parents had lived there, and she lives in the house that she grew up in. So she has lived here for 80-something years. But, she said, all of her friends who lived around her

have either gone on to nursing homes or died. New people, young families, have moved in around her, but she doesn't know any of them, because they all go to work, come home, and stay in their houses. This woman who really *needs* her neighbors doesn't even *know* them.

We live in a society where that is increasingly the case. People are so busy that when they come home from work at the end of the day, they want to spend time with their families, or they have so much to do there, that they don't interact with their neighbors. Or they have friends who live *outside* the neighborhood, people they know through school or work or church with whom they share common interests, and they spend time with *them*. More and more, we do not know our neighbors.

That's why I wanted to stop our scripture reading where we did. A man asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus says to him, "What is written in the law?" The man says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says, "Good! That's right! Do this and you will live." But then the man says, "Who is my neighbor?" Usually we go right on to read the rest of the story (which we will in a minute), but I wanted to let that question sit with us. *Who is my neighbor?* Do we even know? That's a question we need to ask, because you can't *love* your neighbor if you do not *know* your neighbor.

Jesus answers that question by telling a parable. And so I want to invite you to hear the *rest* of this scripture reading:

Jesus said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was

going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 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?” [The man who asked Jesus the question] said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

This story was intended by Jesus to be *shocking*. But so many of us have heard it so many times that it has lost its power to *surprise* us. We hear it as a moral lesson about helping someone in need. When people talk about a “good Samaritan” today, when you hear it on the news, it’s about someone who goes out of their way to stop and help someone in need. But what’s at the *heart* of this story is a reversal of expectations.

This man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jerusalem is where the temple was, and so what’s assumed is that this man is returning from worshipping at the temple; that he is a good, faithful Jewish person. He is attacked and beaten and robbed and left for dead. A priest comes by; a good, faithful Jewish person like him. You *expect* the priest to help him. But for whatever reason, he doesn’t. He goes over to the other side of the road to avoid him. Then a Levite comes by. The Levite was like the *assistant* priest; a good, faithful Jewish person, just like this man who has been attacked. You *expect* the Levite to help him. But for whatever reason, he doesn’t. Just like the priest, he goes over to the other side of the road to avoid him.

So you expect the third time to be the charm. The *next* person who comes is going to be the hero and help this man. So who's it going to be? An ordinary Jewish person (not a priest or religious leader, but just an average, everyday Jew)? A lawyer, like the man Jesus is telling this story to? But Jesus says a *Samaritan* came near and took care of him. Samaritans were the *opposite* of a good, faithful Jewish person. Good, faithful Jewish people *hated* Samaritans. Samaritans thought the wrong things about God. They worshipped in the wrong ways. They had perverted the Jewish faith and sold out their own people when the Assyrians invaded Israel hundreds of years before. There was *nothing* good and faithful about Samaritans. No one expected a Samaritan to be the hero of this story; to be the *neighbor*.

And so one of the questions that this forces *us* to consider is, "Who is *my* neighbor? The person who is *like me*, who *looks* like me and *believes* like me and *acts* like me and shares common interests and activities? Or could my neighbor *also* be the person who is *not* like me? The person who is *different* than me and *other* than me. The person I don't have anything in common with. The person who, maybe I wouldn't expect anything good from them, or who society tells me nothing good can come from them. Who will we open ourselves up to and let into our lives and *allow* to be our neighbor?

There was an article in the Washington Post last week, in which a reporter was talking with evangelical Christians in Alabama about what it means to be *moral* and *Christian* today. There was a quote by a woman named Sheila, who said, "*Love thy neighbor* means love thy *American* neighbor. *Welcome the stranger* means welcome the *legal* immigrant stranger. The Bible says, 'If you do this to the least of these, you do it to me. But the least of these are *Americans*, not the

ones crossing the border.”¹ In other words, my neighbor is the person who is *like me*. But that is not at all what Jesus says here. The *neighbor* in this story is a *foreigner*, a person who is *nothing like* the man he helps, a person who is viewed as worthless and *other*. So who would the Samaritan be for Sheila? An undocumented immigrant from El Salvador? A Muslim refugee from Syria? Who would it be for *you*?

There’s a movie out now, a documentary about Mr. Rogers called *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* It’s all about how his television show came about and how he used it to teach children about being good and kind and patient and loving. And a lot of times he was directly responding to things that were happening in the news. He talked to children about assassination after Robert Kennedy was killed. He talked about the Vietnam War and the Challenger space shuttle explosion. It was really *gutsy* to do on a *children’s* show.

At one point there had been a story in the news where black children were swimming with white children in a recently desegregated public pool. Some of you who lived through that era know what a big deal that was at the time. And the *owner* of the pool was *not happy* about those black children swimming in that pool. So he walked up to the pool and started dumping a box of chemicals into it that would burn the kids. Mr. Rogers saw this and was *horrified* by it. And so what he did was, on his show he had a black police officer named Officer Clemmons. And he would welcome Officer Clemmons into his home and shake his hand and make a point of showing the kids watching that this was his friend.

There was one scene where Mr. Rogers was out in his yard soaking his feet in a little pool on a hot day. Officer Clemmons walks up and says hello, and they talk about how hot it is. Mr.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/national/wp/2018/07/21/feature/god-trump-and-the-meaning-of-morality/?utm_term=.41e870e59da8

Rogers says to him, “Would you like to soak your feet in my pool?” Officer Clemmons says, “Yes, I would, but I don’t have a towel.” And Mr. Rogers says, “Well, you can use *mine*.” So Officer Clemmons sits down and takes off his shoes and socks and puts his feet in the pool right there next to Mr. Rogers’ feet. And the camera comes in close to show black feet and white feet in a pool together, and it held that shot for quite a few seconds. When they were done, they started drying their feet off with the towel, and Mr. Rogers says, “Here, let me help you.” And he starts drying Officer Clemmons’ feet with his towel. It turns into a *sacramental moment* between these two men, where he is *washing his feet*. In the face of a society that was saying, “You cannot be my neighbor because you are not like me,” Mr. Rogers was showing children that this man who is different from me is my neighbor, and I love him because I have taken the time to *know* him.

Who is my neighbor? Who will you open your heart and your life to and *allow* to be your neighbor? Is it just the person who *looks* like you and *believes* like you and *acts* like you and shares common interests and activities with you; the person who is *like you*? Or is it also the person who is *different* from you, the person who is *other* than you, the person who the rest of the world tells you *shouldn’t* be your neighbor because they are nothing like you? Do you even *know* who your neighbor is? Have you taken the time to get to know them? Because we can’t *love* our neighbors until we *know* our neighbors.

Jesus didn’t say, “Love your *white* neighbor or your *American* neighbor or your *Christians* neighbor or your *conservative* or *liberal* neighbor.” He said love your *neighbor*, *whoever* you find yourself living life with. Show mercy and compassion and kindness and love to *all* people, no matter what the rest of the world tells you about them. We *love* our neighbors by *being* neighbors. So go and do likewise.