

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 10:25-37

Won't You Be My Neighbor?*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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I thought I'd start this sermon with some music that I suspect that many of you know: *Would you be mine, could you be mine, won't you be my neighbor?* Come on everyone, let's sing it together!

Like many of you, I grew up watching Mr. Rogers on TV. I loved everything about the show – the songs, his entrance and exit rituals (like putting on and taking off his sweater), and the puppets in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, like King Friday the XIII, Daniel the Striped Tiger, and Lady Elaine Fairchilde.

I recently watched the documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Have any of you seen it? It was a wonderful film about Fred Rogers' life, and it brought back a lot of great memories from my own childhood. What I hadn't realized, however, was how much Mr. Rogers' faith shaped his life's work.

Some of you might know that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. Early on in life, he discerned a calling for using television as a ministry and for making a positive change in the world. He was tired of children's TV shows that were violent or little more than slapstick comedy. Even though he rarely – if at all – mentioned God or religion on his show, his show was deeply theological.

In particular, the concept of “neighbor” was at the heart of Mr. Rogers' theology. It's no accident that the show was called *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. And it's no accident that his opening song was “It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood.”

Today's gospel reading is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable, of course, is one of the best-known passages in the New Testament. Most of you, I'm sure, are familiar with the story. In fact, when you heard the gospel reading today, you probably said to yourself: “I know how this ends.” A traveler is attacked by robbers and stripped, beaten, and left for half dead on the road. A priest walks by, and he passes by the other side of the road. Then a Levite walks by – the equivalent of a subdeacon or an acolyte, I suppose – and does the same thing.

Finally, a Samaritan walks by. The Ancient Israelites avoided Samaritans because they were viewed as unclean and heretical, since Samaritans believed that the true Temple was not located in Jerusalem. Ironically, it was the Samaritan who stops to care for the traveler. He bandages the traveler's wounds, brings him to an inn, and even gives the innkeeper two denarii – that is, two days' wages – to care for him.

Most people think of this parable as an exhortation by Jesus to care for the least among us. And that it certainly is. How many times do we ourselves walk by people lying on the sidewalks of Manhattan or in the subways – and then pass by on the other side? How many times do we play the role of the priest and the Levite in the parable? I wish that I could say that I always stop. But I don't.

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But the parable is more than just that. It is also a theological reflection on who our neighbors are. At the beginning of our gospel passage, Jesus is speaking with a lawyer who is trying to test him. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the lawyer asks Jesus. After much back and forth, the lawyer asks: “And who is my neighbor?” And that’s when Jesus tells him the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable is a response to the lawyer’s question of “And who is my neighbor.”

Jesus’ point is this: If you are asking “Who is my neighbor?” then you are asking the wrong question. To ask “Who is my neighbor” is to divide the world into two halves: neighbors and non-neighbors. If you engage in this line-drawing, then you are basically giving yourself permission to love your neighbors and to ignore the non-neighbors, just as the priest or the Levite did.

Ironically, it is the Samaritan – who is seen as unclean and heretical – who understands that the right question is: “Does the person in front of me need help?” In other words, instead of spending all of our time trying to figure out what side of the “neighbor” line a given person falls on, we should be asking: “Is this person in need, and, if so, what are we going to do about it?”

That is why *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* was such a gospel-based program. Mr. Rogers treated *anyone* who was watching his program as his neighbor. He said that the space between him and his viewers was holy ground. He believed that the Holy Spirit occupied the space between the television and the viewer. Fred Rogers’ neighborhood had no borders or walls. His program was intended to minister to whoever happened to be watching at the time.

I learned from the documentary that *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood* never shied away from difficult issues. When segregated swimming pools were an issue, Mr. Rogers made a point of inviting Officer François Clemmons, an African American cast member, to sit next to him and to put his feet in the same wading pool. During the civil unrest of the Vietnam era, Mr. Rogers filmed an episode in which the residents of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe convinced King Friday the XIII to take down a wire fence that he had placed all around the royal palace.

Over the last few weeks and months, we have seen horrifying images in the news about the escalating humanitarian crisis at the border. Children and infants being separated from their parents. Overcrowded and unsanitary housing conditions. Immigration raids beginning yesterday in cities all across the country – including our own.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a challenge to move beyond the either-or way of thinking that divides the world into neighbors and non-neighbors. Or, in contemporary terms, legal and illegal. As we sang in today’s gospel hymn: “In Christ there is no East or West. In Him no South or North.” The question for the Christian is not whether someone is a neighbor or a non-neighbor, or legal or illegal. The question is: How do we alleviate suffering in the world when we see it?

Let me be clear. This is not a liberal vs. conservative issue. It is not a left vs. right issue, or a Democratic vs. Republican issue. It is a Christian issue.

This is why the Episcopal bishops from all six of the dioceses in the State of Texas released a statement on Monday decrying the conditions at the border detention camps. They wrote: “[W]e feel it in our souls, for these are our neighbors, and we love them.”

I’ll be honest. It’s easy to fall into despair and feel like there’s nothing we can do. In his recent comments on the humanitarian crisis, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, has

acknowledged this. He said: “The enormity of the challenge is daunting. It is easy to feel helpless to make a difference. [But,] while we cannot do everything, we can do *something*.”

If you want to do something, I would encourage you to visit the home pages of the Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Office of Government Relations, or Episcopal Migration Ministries. There are numerous links on those pages on how to take action – ranging from watching educational webinars to sharing “Know Your Rights” information to participating in an immigration detention visitation ministry to simply praying together.

Before he died in 2003, Fred Rogers said that his mother taught him a wonderful way of responding to frightening situations. “Always look for the helpers,” his mother said. That is, if you find yourself in the midst of a scary situation – such as violence, injustice, cruelty, or a disaster – always look for those who are helping. The first responders. The volunteers. The caretakers. Seeing the helpers will move you from a place of despair to hope.

At the end of the day, that’s who the Good Samaritan was. He was a helper. He didn’t ask whether the traveler was someone of the same nationality, race, or religion. All he saw was a neighbor in need. And that is who Fred Rogers was. A helper. And a neighbor.

Who is *your* neighbor?