



“Belonging in the World: Won’t You Be My Neighbor”

Luke 10:25-37

February 9, 2020

I’m going to violate a personally-imposed ban on singing from the pulpit and open with a tune you’ll likely know despite my voice: *“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood. A beautiful day for a neighbor...could you be mine, would you be mine...”*

If you were a child between 1968 and 2001, raised children during that time, or have been paying attention to the recent resurgence of the man in the zip-up cardigan, there is a good chance you recognize the opening bars of the theme song from *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*—no matter how poorly they are sung. Fred Rogers, a personal hero and childhood icon of mine, was an educator, author, children’s television personality, and ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church. His show reached millions of children with messages of kindness, compassion, responsibility, and love. These messages also characterized his life. Rogers had a gift for describing complex topics in simple words as he used pictures, songs, and stories to convey meaning and impart wisdom. At our house these days, Mr. Rogers’ successor, a cartoon tiger named Daniel, carries that message forward. I’m often surprised by how Daniel Tiger’s memorable and simple lyrics stick with all three of us. For instance, a personal favorite, *“it’s okay to feel sad sometimes. Little by little, you’ll feel better again.”*

At the heart of Mr. Rogers’ (and Daniel Tiger’s) agenda is the call to neighborliness. As the opening song closes, a question is asked of the audience, “Won’t *you* be my neighbor?”

The topic of neighborliness is also the focus of the most memorable story Jesus ever told. At least one thing Fred Rogers and Jesus had in common was the ability to distill complicated questions and broad concerns down to their essence. Often this was done

by using the powerful medium of storytelling. So it is with the parables of Jesus.

The phrase “Good Samaritan” is well known to us two thousand years after the story was told. It is synonymous with compassionate do-gooder. But it is precisely this familiarity that can make the story seem predictable. When in fact, the story defies conventional wisdom and demands transformation. How can we reclaim the original power of this ancient parable?

One way is to examine the context in which the story is told. We’re in the tenth chapter of Luke’s gospel. At the end of chapter nine, “Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem” beginning a journey from the Galilean countryside to the holy city. At the outset, Jesus sends messengers ahead to prepare a place for him to stay. But there is a problem. Jesus and his followers are Judeans and the town he wants to stay in is a Samaritan town. For reasons historical and theological, animosity between the two groups ran very deep in Jesus’ time. His disciples are offered no hospitality in the Samaritan village. The disciples suggest commanding fire to come down from heaven and consume these ungracious hosts. This is perhaps an overreaction. Jesus dismisses it and the group moves to the next village hoping for a friendlier reception. Still, as we begin this morning’s story it is helpful to know that the bitter conflict between Jews and Samaritans would have been on the mind of Jesus’ audience. It should be on our minds as well.

Just up the road, Jesus is teaching when a lawyer stands up and asks a question to test him. The attorney’s motives are suspect, but I am sympathetic to the simple directness of the question. *“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

Well, he has come to the wrong person if he

is looking for an equally direct answer. In typical rabbinical fashion, Jesus answers the lawyer's question with another question. Jesus asks this Jewish attorney: "What is written in the law? Give me your interpretation." Rather than satisfy the man with a simple response, Jesus invites him to deeper reflection.

Jesus is dealing with a legal professional here and so the answer that he receives is a good one. The lawyer creatively combines two of the most well-known verses in all of Hebrew scripture (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). The lawyer gives a comprehensive statement regarding proper ethical conduct: Love God with all you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself. It's a good answer. In fact, Jesus says something similar in both Matthew and Mark.

And so, Jesus accepts the answer; but, he is not through with the lawyer. Instead, Jesus pushes the man just a little bit closer to the Gospel truth—to the place where sacred words and embodied practices meet. Jesus says, "Do this, and you will live." Please note that the lawyer's original question about inheriting *eternal* life is now reframed by Jesus' instruction to love God and neighbor in order to *live*. Jesus relays how to take hold of life right now.

Again, though the attorney's motives are questionable, his question is understandable. He asks, "Who is my neighbor?" It is the pretext for the greatest parable ever told. Who is my neighbor? Or, put another way, legally whom must I love? At what distance, physically, geographically, emotionally, and spiritually, can I stop loving? When can I simply turn away and say with an exasperated sigh, "I'd love to help; but, you are not my neighbor and therefore I have no obligation to love you." You are not my responsibility. Your skin color or culture or political affiliation or religious conviction is different from mine, and so you must not be my neighbor. The lawyer asks a good question: who is my neighbor? And, importantly, his question implies another question: who is not?

You can almost hear Jesus say under his breath,

"now we are getting somewhere," as he begins the story of the Good Samaritan. An unidentified man walking the treacherous eighteen-mile path from Jerusalem to Jericho is assaulted, robbed, and left for dead. Two professional religious leaders carefully avoid a human in dire need. They have the answers—they know the law. But, their interpretation of the law enables them to abandon the abused man. Finally, Jesus introduces the central character of the parable. And what a shock it is. For the third person to walk down that road has nothing in common with the first two. Rather, he is a Samaritan: an outsider and an enemy of the Jews. You can almost hear the gasps in the crowd as Jesus describes the actions of this hated man. The Samaritan is moved with pity. He acts with tenderness and compassion, despite the major inconvenience. The extravagance of the Samaritan's response is Jesus' way of showing the dramatic contrast between this supposed enemy and the two morally-upright, religious figures.

At the end of this provocative story, Jesus shifts the lawyer's question. The question becomes not, "who is my neighbor?"; but rather, "who acted as a neighbor to the man in need?" If the lawyer was looking for a legal definition of the noun "neighbor," what he receives instead is a picture of neighboring. It looks like loving your enemies. It looks like going out of your way to serve those in the greatest need without regard to who they are or what they have done. It looks like seeing those whom others pass by and then being moved by compassion to reach out with acts of love. It looks like taking a risk.

The night before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. put the parable in perspective in his "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech: "The first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"ⁱ

The shift in perspective makes all the difference in the world. The parable of the Good Samaritan is

a story of relationships. Whose neighbor are you? Whose neighbor are we? It's not a question that can be answered with the right combination of words or a logical equation. The story set before us today is not concerned with theological precision. It is not obsessed with finding the proper location for worship or the perfect statement of orthodoxy.

Jesus asks, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The answer is by now painfully obvious. Once again, although he cannot quite bring himself to say the word "*Samaritan*," the lawyer responds well. He replies, "The one who showed him mercy." Once again, Jesus is not satisfied with mere words. Instead, he commands the attorney, "Go and do likewise."

The parable of the Good Samaritan is not some pithy proverb meant to give us something to think about; it is a call to action. It is a reprimand to a church that spends far too much time obsessed with itself and far too little time serving a world in such deep need. The church often finds itself too busy asking "who is right?" to consider the question, "how can we show mercy?"

The story demands a lived response. A couple of weeks ago, I was meeting with a member of our congregation to learn more about our neighbors who attend Greenbriar Elementary school—2.8 miles from where we now sit. I wanted to hear about the wonderful partnership that has developed between Second and Greenbriar and to think about ways that we might deepen and expand it. Our church member shared some of the daunting statistics that tell a different story about the distance between us. As she did, her eyes softened and tears appeared. I asked her about that. She responded, "Chris, the people who work at that school have become my friends. The children who go there are our neighbors." She is right about that. They do meet the definition. I can imagine the Rabbi pushing us a little deeper and asking, "Won't you be their neighbor?" Won't we reach out with love and kindness? Won't we respond with a courageous word or a compassionate act? Jesus could

not be clearer: Do this and yours will be a life worth living. Amen.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech, delivered April 3, 1968, Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Memphis, TN. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.