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September 16, 2018

Won't You Be My Neighbor? – Being a Good Neighbor

Invitation to Worship - *Opening Song: It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*

*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, A beautiful day for a neighbor,
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

Many of us remember with great fondness this tune, either from our childhood, or the days of watching our own children or relatives grow up. *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* modeled an ideal neighborhood for us all, where children were taught how to respect one other, to love and care for each other, to value self as well as understand and process their feelings. Today we start a three week series, spring boarding off last week's conversation about the Greatest Commandments, to Love God and to Love our Neighbor as our selves. We will use themes and concepts from *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* to explore what it really means to Love our Neighbor as Ourselves. May God bless us on this journey to being the best neighbor we can be, always reaching out to ask... *Won't you please, Won't you please, Please won't you be my neighbor?*

Galatians 5: 13-14 - ¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;^[a] only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,^[a] but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Luke 10:25-37 - The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.^[a] "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ He answered, "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." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "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. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So

likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii,^[b] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

This year, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* celebrated a milestone, a 50th Anniversary, from its premier in 1968. I know that not everyone here has watched Mr. Rogers, but his show ran for 33 years with 895 episodes, and had great impact on an entire generation. A new documentary was released this year and as everyone is remembering again this wonderful man, I wanted to spend a few weeks getting inspiration from Fred Rogers and the neighborhood he developed to connect with and teach children. Whether you realized it or not, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* had a lot of Christian themes in it, the loudest of which was "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself."

Fred Rogers grew up in a Christian family. He got his Bachelors in music composition and planned to go to seminary to become a Presbyterian pastor... until his senior year when he saw something he had never seen before... the television! He was in awe of this form of media and its power to connect with the viewer. He went home during spring break and said, "Mom and Dad, I need to go into the TV business!" Not only was Fred inspired by the communication possibilities of the television, but he was angry at the way it was being used. He told reporters, "I got into television, because I saw people throwing pies at each other's faces, and that to me was such demeaning behavior. And if there's anything that bothers me, it's one person demeaning another. That really makes me mad!"¹ Mr. Rogers didn't want television to be used simply to entertain but to nurture, especially children who are so eager to learn about the world. Mr. Rogers devoted his life to developing story lines and characters, and writing songs to help teach children about the world, to love others, and to love themselves.

After starting his career as a puppeteer with a program called *The Children's Corner*, Fred Rogers completed his seminary studies during his lunch breaks and was eventually ordained by the Presbyterian Church as an evangelist with a unique charge to serve children and families through the mass media. A pastor at heart, he rarely used God's name on his show... instead, he taught the children the 2nd greatest commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself.

In our scripture this morning, we heard the parable of the good Samaritan, which is all about neighbors...

¹ p. xxii

A lawyer once came to Jesus and said who is my neighbor... he was trying to understand what Jesus expected of him, who did he have to consider inside and outside his neighborhood. If someone were to ask Jesus this today, we might hear, "How far of a radius do I need to draw... how far do I have to go from my home or my church to reach out, to share God's love and care? And not just how far, but who do I need to include?"

Instead of simply answering the question, Who is my neighbor?, Jesus told this story about the Good Samaritan... This story is placed on a road between Jerusalem and Jericho... an incredibly dangerous road. The people who heard Jesus tell this story knew this road well... a person could very easily be beaten up and left for dead by robbers... they could very well be victims on this road... But who is going to help... First a priest sees the man suffering, and this man of God steps to the side and walks on by... then a Levite, another person of religious responsibility steps to the side and continues down the road. We could debate why they leave him there, but the point (for today) is that they did not help! The hero of the story is a Samaritan who sees someone suffering and feels pity, stops his day and binds up the man's wounds, transports him to a place where he can get medical care, and even offers to pay for his long term bills.

Instead of answering the lawyer's first question, with something about who the neighbor was, or what limits are there to define the neighbor, he tells a story about OUR actions, OUR willingness to reach out. For Jesus, it was not about who was your neighbor... the question was about how do YOU live and act as a good neighbor to others... how do YOU show mercy to those who are suffering. Jesus transformed the question "Who is my neighbor?" into the directive "Be the good neighbor."

If there is a central biblical theme to Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, this is it. The program wasn't named after Mister Rogers alone but after his community of neighbors. "I'd like for you to know my television neighbor," Fred said to frequent guests as he looked into the camera at his audience. His definition of neighbor was simple: the person you happen to be with at the moment—whether that person is a Samaritan, a hermit bearing gifts, or a television viewer. This is even more the case if the person you happen to be with is in need, as was the hurt traveler in Jesus' parable. But beyond how he defined neighbor, our charge to love and care for them is clear... It is about US... how we act and treat others... how we live as the good neighbor to everyone we meet.

In the book, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember* we can read the following quote from Fred... "Imagine what our real neighborhoods would be like if each of us offered, as a matter of course, just one kind word to another person. Sometimes, all it takes is one kind word to nourish another person. Think of the ripple effect that can be created when we nourish someone. One kind empathetic word has a wonderful way of turning into many." (Rogers, p. 185)

Today, I invite us to think about how we act with our neighbors... not just those who live around your house, although that is important too... I'm using Jesus' definition of neighbor... anyone you meet! How would our lives be transformed and how would God use

us to transform our neighborhood if we took being a neighbor seriously? I challenge each of us to reflect and pray about one thing you can do differently this week to be a good neighbor... and then DO IT! Maybe it's smiling at a complete stranger, maybe it's offering to carry something heavy for another, or holding the door, sharing a meal, taking time to call or visit someone you haven't seen in a while. Jesus said that everything else we do in our faith and our life hangs on two basics... love God and love our neighbor... I pray that you would grow in your faith this week as you practice being the good neighbor to all. Amen!

1. What do you remember most about Mr. Roger's Neighborhood? What lessons was he teaching?
2. What does it mean for you to be the good neighbor?
3. How would our lives be transformed and how would God use us to transform our neighborhood if we took being a neighbor seriously?
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