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**September 23, 2018**

**Won't You Be My Neighbor – “In Some Ways We're Different”**

### Invitation to Worship

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

This morning we enter the second week of our three week series looking for the lessons of faith we find in Mr. Roger's Neighborhood – the children's program that is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Last week kicked off the series by looking at the ways this television program embodied the heart of the second commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself by teaching children to be kind and to recognize and celebrate the uniqueness of each individual. This week we listen for how we're called to love our neighbor, even when it's really hard... when differences divide and separate us, when hatred builds up and forgiveness is hard to come by. Even when it's hard, especially when it's hard, our faith challenges us to ask...

*Won't you please, Won't you please, Please won't you be my neighbor?*

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**Proverbs 10:12** - Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

**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."

Fred Rogers knew what it felt like to be different, to not fit in, to be picked on. In fact, as a child, he was scared to death to go to school. As a shy, overweight eight-year-old, Freddy Rogers was a prime target for schoolyard bullies. That's why he was usually driven to and from school each day. But one day, when the students were released early, Freddy started to walk home by himself. A group of boys followed. After looking over his shoulder, he began to walk faster. So did they. Soon they were closing in, shouting, "Hey, Fat Freddy!" and threatening, "We're going to get you, Fat Freddy!" Little Fred Rogers ran and ran and ran. He knew if he could get to the home of a family friend, a widow named Mrs. Stewart, who lived nearby, he could find refuge. While the bullies kept taunting, he silently prayed that she would be home. He banged on the door, and Mrs. Stewart swung it open to let him in. The bullies took their defeat and went on their way.

Well-meaning adults told him to shrug off the incident. "Just show them you don't care," they suggested. "Then nobody will bother you." But even as a child, Fred Rogers knew that wasn't the answer: "I resented the teasing. I resented the pain. I resented those kids for not seeing beyond my fatness or my shyness." He wanted someone to tell him it was okay to feel that way, it was okay to feel bad about what happened, and even to feel sad. He told a friend once, "I cried to myself whenever I was alone. I cried through my fingers as I

made up songs on the piano. I sought out stories of other people who were poor in spirit, and I felt for them.” It was a pivotal moment in his childhood, a moment with the potential to turn him irreparably inward—or worse, into a bully himself. Instead, he recounts that it set him searching: “I started to look behind the things that people did and said and . . . after a lot of sadness, I began a lifelong search for what is essential, what it is about my neighbor that doesn’t meet the eye.” He noticed a need in the world and chose to do something about it; rather than view it with despair, he viewed it with hope. . . . Out of his deep hurt came a longing to soothe the pain of others, and out of the callous disregard of schoolyard bullies came a determination to only lift up—and never demean—his neighbor.<sup>1</sup> What an amazing gift that was, not only to himself and his classmates, but eventually to an entire generation that grew up with his words of care and compassion coming through the television.

One of the stories I imagine he came across was our scripture – the parable Jesus told about the Good Samaritan. We read it last week, but this week we turn our attention to the underlying tension within the story we might not see unless we take a deeper look. When we read this story from our 21<sup>st</sup> century context, the fact that the hero was a Samaritan means nothing to us today... but for Jesus’ original audience, would have been terribly surprised by the provocative idea that a Samaritan would be the only one to stop and care for the wounded man. Samaritans and Jews had a deep seeded animosity towards each other. They HATED each other! Imagine the hatred between Serbs and Muslims in modern Bosnia, the enmity between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or the feuding between street gangs in Los Angeles or New York, and you have some idea of the feeling and its causes between Jews and Samaritans in the time of Jesus. Both politics and religion were involved. The fact that there was such dislike and hostility between Jews and Samaritans is what gives the use of the Samaritan in the Parable of the Good Samaritan such force! The Samaritan is the one who is able to rise above the bigotry and prejudices of centuries and show mercy and compassion for the injured Jew after the Jew’s own countrymen pass him by!

At the end of the story, when Jesus asks the lawyer who had acted as a neighbor to the hurting man, the lawyer couldn’t even bring himself to form the words... “the Samaritan”... he responds by saying, “THE ONE who showed mercy”. Because he has to process that. One of THOSE GUYS is the hero?????

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<sup>1</sup> Hollingsworth, Amy. *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World's Most Beloved Neighbor* (pp. 124-126). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

This is such mind blowing, expansive thinking, that God could work through Samaritans, that God would work through the people that we culturally hate, that God could work through the people that we are so angry with because they did something to us. But at the end of the story, Jesus says, go and do likewise, be like the Samaritan who offered mercy to a stranger... Be the good neighbor who is able to put all the differences and animosity aside in order to what is right, what is good, what is loving. Love your neighbor as yourself... even when they're different from you.

Mr. Rogers taught this 2<sup>nd</sup> greatest commandment to the kids over and over again, through his television show. Respect each other, care for each other, be kind – love your neighbor as yourself. But every once and a while he got provocative – pushed this teaching to its limits, and never apologized for it! Some of you might remember an episode in the late '60's when Officer Clemmons comes to visit Mr. Rogers on a hot day. Mr. Rogers is soaking his feet in a little kiddie swimming pool, and invites Officer Clemmons – a black man – to take off his shoes and refresh his feet in the pool with him. This episode aired during a time when race relations were really hot! Folks were wondering if people with white skin and people with black skin could be neighbors... friendly neighbors, could they share pools together? And some had very strong opinions on that. The news would have been full of stories of these racial tensions – like when a group of black teenagers were swimming in a hotel pool reserved for whites and the owner came out and threw bleach into it, while they were still swimming! With the news so full of hate and division based simply on the difference of skin color, Mr. Rogers, in his calm way, with his Christian faith, demonstrated for children around the country, "This is fine!" There's nothing to fear from people who are different than you... Your idea of who a neighbor is can be so much wider because love has no limits. Loving your neighbor as yourself means setting aside those things that divide us, even when there's hurt and pain that goes with it.

My guess is that every single one of us can think of someone on the other side of the tracks, or some invisible line that divides us, that we really struggle to respect, because maybe we fear them, or we've been hurt by them, or we've been taught that there's no reason to love THEM! We place them outside the limits of our neighborhood, giving ourselves permission to demean, demonize, and ignore their struggle.

This morning, I'm going to encourage you to reflect about who are the people in your life that you need to open up to a little bit more. To imagine

what it would look and feel like to really live into Jesus's instruction that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, that we are called to respond BEYOND our prejudices, BEYOND what we've been taught about others, BEYOND our grudges and anger and fear, and really love others! What would it look like to love the terrorist, the person on the other side of the border, the immigrant, the racist, the one with the extreme opposite of your political persuasion, the one who has hurt you and you're struggling to forgive... It's hard... it's really hard! We don't want to have these prejudices, we don't want to have these hang-ups... it's just easier to label them as "other" and disregard them, rather than get to know them and hear their stories. But part of the Christian life is learning how to step beyond these divisions, how to open our arms and doors a little bit wider and ask, who is it God is calling me to expand my heart to? Who am I called to love – and what does that look like in action!

Last week, I asked you to think of one thing you could do to BE the good neighbor.... This week, I invite you to pick one person you've been struggling with, maybe because of their cultural, racial, or political background, or because of something they did to hurt you in the past, and do something intentional to break down the walls that divide you. Get to know them, hear their story, share an act of kindness with them – and invite God to expand your heart toward them. It is only as we break down the walls that separate us that we can truly follow God's command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Please God, may it be so! Amen.