



'Won't You Be Their Neighbor?'

Lectionary 15 – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
8:30 & 10:45 am, July 10, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Deuteronomy 30:9-14](#); [Psalm 25:1-10](#); [Luke 10:25-37](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It seems altogether fitting to begin in this manner. (Note to reader: Projected onto our screens is the introductory song to the television show "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." Check out this YouTube video at https://youtu.be/_4nI7AgUKwk.)

I was a tween by the time "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" hit the television screen in 1968, so I can't say I watched the show much at all. My younger cousins, however, were in the right demographic, and they apparently watched it, one might say, religiously. In fact, their mother—my Aunt Trudy—noted that when my cousins John and Matt watched "Sesame Street" (which began being televised about a year later), they'd be bouncing all over the room. They were hyper-stimulated by the fast-paced, frenetic world of sound and color and movement from letters to numbers to music to Muppets. But when "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" would come on, there was a noticeable change in my cousins' demeanor. A certain calm filled the air, and they would sit and listen very carefully to Fred Rogers and the various neighbors he met. We can make jokes at the hokey set, the array of sweaters hanging in his closet, Mr. Rogers' folksy way of being. But still, there was something about Fred Rogers and how he looked out at children everywhere through that television camera and talked gently and truthfully with them about life. What a wise, faithful, and loving man.

Sometimes I wonder if Fred Rogers wasn't practicing discipleship on his show, modeling Jesus. Consider Luke's Gospel, which offers us numerous accounts of Jesus just talking with people, teaching them, listening to their stories, and then telling stories to them. And I imagine Jesus looking at each of them—these people who come to him with many, many questions—looking at them and gently speaking truth to them about life. About what it means to live in the kingdom of God. Just as Mr. Rogers encouraged and invited children into his neighborhood, I read Luke and see Jesus encouraging and inviting those around him into God's neighborhood.

Ahh, but the way that Jesus encourages and invites is surprising. Our gospel reading today is a great example of this. A lawyer comes with a question, and then a secondary question. First he asks Jesus what he must do to be saved by God, to "inherit eternal life." So Jesus asks the man about Jewish Law and what it has to say on the matter. The lawyer quotes well, saying that you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and then to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus would have left it at that, if the man hadn't pressed the issue with that second question: "And who is my neighbor?"

That's when Jesus tells a story. If you look at the passage as a whole, note that Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's 2 questions specifically. Oh, the lawyer insists on asking them, but what Jesus does is change the conversation. This conversation is no longer about what you do to get into heaven and who are the people you should label as your neighbor. Instead, Jesus changes the conversation to this: What does it look like to BE a neighbor in God's world?

And even more surprising than the changed conversation is the person who becomes the example of what it looks like to BE a neighbor in God's world. The example does not appear to be someone like Mr. Rogers. A kindly neighbor who looks so much like one of us. Sweater and sneakers and front door leading to a friendly neighborhood.

Instead, the example is a Samaritan. Note that Luke never calls the Samaritan "good." For that would have been somewhat of an oxymoron in Jesus' time, and for Luke's audience. "Samaritan" and "good" would most likely never have been uttered in the same breath. Because Samaritans were not-quite-ready-for-prime-time Jews. They were kind-of Jewish, and kind-of pagan. They had their own temple, scripture, and religious practices. Half-breeds at best. Enemies at worst. History attributes their presence to the forced migration of foreigners into Israel's northern kingdom by the Assyrian empire in the 8th century BC. Even generations later they were still considered foreigners. Thus they were not to be associated with, or risk reputation and ritual purity, or possibly life and limb. Avoid a Samaritan like the plague. Pass by on the other side of the street if you come upon one. The hostility between Jew and Samaritan was long and bitter in tradition and memory. Consider that other to be your "neighbor"? Not on your life.

Knowing this, perhaps we would have expected a story from Jesus that told of a **Samaritan** in the ditch, and how some nice Jewish man had compassion on him, even if he was somehow an "other" and "different." A little bit of a surprise for the lawyer, perhaps, but such a version of the story would fit into so much of what Jesus often preached and taught—you know, love your enemy and all that. Take care of the poor and lowly and outcast, and so on and so forth. Pretty much following Jewish Law. Instead, Jesus surprises—no, positively JOLTS—the lawyer and all of us with a story of how it was a **Samaritan** who entered the scene, after a good temple priest and a good Levite passed by on the other side of the road. Luke says this Samaritan was "moved with pity" on the man who had been beaten and left for dead in the ditch. This Samaritan was good. He didn't look one bit like Mr. Rogers, but like Mr. Rogers, he acted with compassion, offered gentleness and healing, entered into God's neighborhood.

I'm not one to go into big word studies in a sermon, but you might want to know that in Luke there are only 2 other times that this particular Greek word rendered "moved with pity" is used. It's a word that means being moved viscerally by someone else's pain and suffering, being moved not just to tears, but feeling that other's suffering deep in your gut. So here is where that very specific word is used. This Samaritan. And then Jesus back in chapter 7 when he comes upon a funeral procession, and is moved with pity for the grieving mother and her dead son. And then in chapter 15 in the story Jesus tells of the prodigal son. When the wayward son returns home after squandering his father's inheritance, his Father (a figure representing God) has compassion and runs to meet and embrace and welcome his son home. Yeah, so the born-on-the-wrong-side-of-the-tracks Samaritan, Jesus, and God are the only 3 mentioned in all of Luke who exhibit such

compassion. Surprise!

The Samaritan, of all people, is a Christ figure for us. The Samaritan represents God's activity. So if we want to know what it looks like to be a neighbor in God's neighborhood, in God's kingdom, it looks like the Samaritan. Who'd have thunk it?

Turns out our neighbor is anyone in need, whatever side of the tracks they may have born on. Turns out being a neighbor is having compassion for that very "anyone." And it turns out being a neighbor is something **anyone** – including you and me – can go and do. **AMEN.**

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