

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

Luke 10:25-37

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Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove

As a child of the 90s, screen-time looked a bit different than it does for kids today. We didn’t have tablets or laptops or iphones. We had TV and a VHS player, and that was it in my house. Though there was really only one screen in our home, my mom was very careful of how much time we were allowed to spend in front of it. So, she made what she called “TV tickets.” They were bright green rectangular pieces of paper made to look like dollar bills. There were 30-minute tickets and one-hour tickets. On weekdays my brother and I each got one 30-minute ticket, and on weekends we each got a one-hour ticket in addition to our 30-minute ticket.

The tickets served two purposes: limiting our screen time and making sure we didn’t argue over what to watch. We both got to pick what we wanted with our ticket, and most days one of us picked Mister Rogers. Those initial piano notes from “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” would begin, and both of us were locked-in for our 30-minutes in the neighborhood.

Mister Rogers Neighborhood first aired in 1968. Fred Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, looked around at the world around him and saw a world that existed on a mindset of scarcity—some humans were more important and valuable than others, there were haves and have nots—and he knew children were watching and absorbing all of it. He sought to create a show that was quiet instead of loud. He created a safe space where children could fully be themselves and express their feelings—whatever those feelings might be. He taught and showed children for decades that they were loved and that their lives mattered. And he showed them that there was enough of this for everyone, every single person was worthy of love and every single person’s life deeply mattered. There was plenty to go around.

One episode of the show always stood out to me as a child, even though at the time I certainly did not understand the significance. On a hot day in the neighborhood, Mister Rogers gets out a plastic pool and fills it up with cool water and puts his feet in to cool off. When Officer Clemmons walks by, Mister Rogers asks Officer Clemmons to join him and put his feet in the pool too. Here’s the catch: this episode aired in 1969. The Civil Right Act passed in 1964 “outlawed” segregation, but many public pools (and other spaces) across the United States still would not allow Black folks to swim in the pools.

When Officer Clemmons walks by and Mister Rogers invites him to join, Officer Clemmons, a black man, initially declines and says he doesn’t have a towel. Mister Rogers says, “well, that’s okay. You can share mine.” Mister Rogers and Officer Clemmons dip their feet in the pool and cool-off together. When they’re done, Officer Clemmons dries his feet off first and then Mister Rogers dries his off with the same towel. It was a simple action, an act of solidarity, because Officer Clemmons was his neighbor—a child of God made in the image of God. Mister Rogers knew it wasn’t just his life that mattered, but that Officer Clemmons life mattered to. Mister

Rogers knew that Black lives matter regardless of the ways this country legislated (and still does legislate) against them, denying their basic human rights.

When the lawyer approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life, it's pretty clear the lawyer is his own main concern. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer is not concerned about his fellow humans, his fellow children of God, he's concerned about himself. Though he answers Jesus's question correctly, "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," it's clear from the outset that he's missed the point.

The lawyer makes it even more clear this is all about himself when he tries to justify to Jesus why he asked the question by asking who is neighbor is, "Well, Jesus, who is really my neighbor? Who do I really have to love? Who do I have to be a neighbor to?" The lawyer asks this, but what he's really asking is, "Who do I not have to bother with? Who can I ignore?"

Jesus responds with a familiar parable, arguably the most familiar parable in the Bible. A man was going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The road was 18 miles long and rocky. It was well-known that this road was a dangerous one and it was a risk to make the journey. The man traveling the road falls into the hands of robbers who strip him of his clothes and belongings, beat him half to death, and leave him on the road to die. A priest happened to be walking down the road, saw the dying man, crossed over to the other side of the road and kept on walking. Then, a Levite comes down the road and does the same thing.

Now, many interpreters and preachers have used these instances of the priest and Levite crossing to the other side of the road to make false claims about Judaism, calling it legalistic or saying that Jesus is critiquing Judaism with this parable. This is not the case! We see that this is not the case when Jesus asks the lawyer what the Jewish law says, and the lawyer in part responds, "you must love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus uses a priest and a Levite in the story because for his audience these two figures represent the leaders the community looks to to do what is right and good. Jesus uses these two figures to show his audience and by extension all of us reading the parable today, that sometimes the people we look to to do the right thing, the people we ask for advice and wisdom, sometimes they get it wrong too. Whether it be priests, pastors, political leaders or elected officials, elders, whomever, sometimes the people we trust and seek council from can fall into the trap of Empire, of scarcity—believing there is only so much to go around and crossing to the other side of the road.

For Jesus' audience back in the day, after the priest and Levite come down the road, the next person to come down the road is expected to be an Israelite. Jewish biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine says, "mention a priest and a Levite and anyone who knows anything about Judaism will know that the third person is an Israelite."¹ But, all of us modern readers know that Jesus is going to flip the script and the least expected person is going to be coming down the road next.

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, 103.

And sure enough, here comes the Samaritan. There has been a longstanding feud between the Jewish people and the Samaritans. The feud goes back many, many years, and it is a family feud. Samaritans descended from the northern kingdom of Israel while the Jewish people descended from the southern kingdom of Judah, which makes their feud all the more painful and perhaps makes each side dig their heels in harder. The feud began over true and false worship, with the Jewish people worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem and the Samaritans worshiping on Mount Gerizim. But like most feuds, it had spiraled and now the groups did their best to have nothing to do with each other, with each side making assumptions about the other. And in an empire that divided groups and limited their power, the Samaritans had the least.

So for Jesus' audience, of course the Samaritan coming down the road and helping the dying man is a shock. It turns everything they've convinced themselves they know upside down. It takes their prejudices and presuppositions about the Samaritan people and challenges them. The Samaritan comes upon the man while traveling and has compassion. The Samaritan goes to the man and cares for him.

The Samaritan man has compassion on the man, and it might be in part because the man was dying. But, I think his compassion stems not from the man's obvious need, but it stems from seeing the man on the road and knowing that that man regardless of who he is is related to him, a Samaritan. In a sermon from 1951, pastor, writer, theologian, and civil rights activist Howard Thurman says, "We are not related to his need. We are related to him...When was the last time you gave something to help somebody? [Do] you remember? How did you feel? What made you do it?...Is it because you relate yourself to the other person's need? Or is it because you relate yourself to the other person? There's a difference. There's a difference."²

Mister Rogers put his feet in the pool and shared a towel with Officer Clemmons because he knew they were related as human beings as children of God made in the image of God. The Samaritan helped the dying man because regardless of who the man was and how the dominant narratives said the Samaritan should or shouldn't relate to him, the Samaritan knew that they were connected and related simply because they're both human beings. When the lawyer asks Jesus who is neighbor is, he's trying to get Jesus to tell him which folks he is supposed to help based on their needs. Jesus uses this parable to say, "That's not the point!"

Being a neighbor is not helping someone because they need help. Being a neighbor isn't helping someone because you have a history of helping people or standing in solidarity with people. Being a neighbor is seeing each person as a beloved child of God made in God's image, just as you yourself are a beloved child of God made in God's image—and *because of that*—standing in solidarity, helping, advocating, sharing, speaking out, working together, no matter how the Empire tries to drive people apart, no matter who says you should cross to the other side of the road.

² Howard Thurman, *Sermons on the Parables*, 53.

Wendell Berry has a poem that is a gut-punch. When I read it, it often makes me wince. It convicts me and makes me ask where my priorities are, where my loyalties lie, who is Empire—the powers and principalities—trying to convince me is not my neighbor, and why. The poem is called “Questionnaire.”

“1. How much poison are you willing to eat for the success of the free market and global trade? Please name your preferred poisons.

2. For the sake of goodness, how much evil are you willing to do? Fill in the following blanks with the names of your favorite evils and acts of hatred.

3. What sacrifices are you prepared to make for culture and civilization? Please list the monuments, shrines, and works of art you would most willingly destroy.

4. In the name of patriotism and the flag, how much of our beloved land are you willing to desecrate? List in the following spaces the mountains, rivers, towns, farms you could most readily do without.

5. State briefly the ideas, ideals, or hopes, the energy sources, the kinds of security, for which you would kill a child. Name, please, the children whom you would be willing to kill.”³

“State briefly the ideas, ideals, or hopes, the energy sources, the kinds of security, for which you would kill a child. Name, please, the children whom you would be willing to kill.”

There are a lot of narratives running around in our world today, many from trusted sources and leaders, about who we should and shouldn’t help, what we should or shouldn’t speak out

³ Wendell Berry, *New Collected Poems*, 375 (Originally published in *Leavings*).

about, what things we should let slide for the sake of certain things, when we should look the other way or cross to the other side of the street. There's a lot and they're convincing and manipulative and because of that it's really easy to hear those narratives and decide to not be a neighbor. Because the reality is it's not easy to be a neighbor, it's not always popular but it is good and it is right and it is what we are called to as followers of Jesus no matter how hard or uncomfortable it might be.

Dip your feet in the pool. Share the towel. Go to the dying person on the road. Refuse Empire's questionnaire. Show mercy. Relentlessly and unwaveringly follow Jesus no matter how hard or unpopular it might be.

"It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood,
A beautiful day for a neighbor..."

Won't you please?

Won't you please?

Please won't you be [a] neighbor?"⁴

⁴ "Won't You Be My Neighbor?", *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*