

Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood

Luke 10:25-37

August 12, 2018

David arrived home yesterday --
he's been overseas for a couple weeks now,
on his annual writer's retreat,
sitting in the great coffeehouses of Eastern Europe with pilot pen in hand.
I picked him up at JFK,
and on the way back, driving along the Van Wyck expressway through Jamaica, Queens,
David pointed out the window as we passed one particular park,
and said "you know, I played ball on that field."
In truth, every time we drive up the Van Wyck,
David points to that same ballfield;
every time he sighs a nostalgic sigh.
That was his neighborhood.

I am lucky enough to have my parents still living in the same house I grew up in,
so when I go back there,
I turn the corner of the street I grew up on,
and there's **my** childhood neighborhood.
I know who lives in each house.
Or at least, who did.
The Sauniers were our neighbors two doors up -- I used to play 'kick the can' with their
boys.
And our across-the-street neighbors were the Duffys -- I remember sledding down the
hill with them,
riding our Flexible Flyers right down the middle of the street.
Mrs. Early lived on the corner -she gave the best Halloween candy.
That was my neighborhood -- like David's, the stuff of nostalgia.

Jesus was once asked about **his** neighborhood.
Or, rather, he was asked what makes a neighborhood.
What makes a *neighbor*.
And the way he defined it kind of blew people's minds.
It's the scripture story that Jason just read --
I'll give you just a quick reminder.

So a young lawyer has been listening to Jesus preach,
and being maybe just a little bit of an arrogant young guy,

he decides to quiz Jesus on his theology, put him through his paces, as it were. So the young man asks Jesus, "Hey, Rabbi, how does one obtain eternal life?" And Jesus quizzes him right back: Well, he says, do you know what the scriptures says, have you read them? "Of course," says the young guy, "Of course I know my religious laws. The rule says that I'm supposed to love God and love my neighbor." "So there you go," says Jesus. "Love God, love neighbor, and you will live."

"But wait wait wait," says the young expert in religious law, "Who is my neighbor?"

"All right then," says Jesus. "Let me tell you a story about neighbors." Because that's what Jesus did – no lectures, lots of stories. And this is how he told it: "So this man, like any one of us, left Jerusalem on the Jericho road. You know how dangerous that road is, how crime-ridden. And sure enough, he was robbed and beaten and left for dead." The crowd murmured with sympathy. "So along came a priest," said Jesus. "Someone else who knew the laws of love, just like you. He saw the beaten man there, it's not that he didn't see. But he walked on by. And then there was a second guy, another religious scholar. Somebody else who knew the law of love. But he did the same thing. Walked on by."

"Then," said Jesus, "Then came a Samaritan."

The lawyer, listening, the whole crowd, listening, knew what was going to happen next. If a priest and holy man wouldn't touch this dying man, the Samaritan sure as heck wasn't going to. Samaritans back then hated Jews almost as much as Jews hated Samaritans, and everyone knew that. They lived in different regions, looked different, talked different. And the loathing ran deep on both sides. So everyone listening knew the story was probably about to get worse.

But Jesus has a surprise ending.

"So the Samaritan sees the beaten man," says Jesus.
"And you know what he does?
He goes over to him,
kneels down, cradles him in his arms, and cares for him."

"What?" said the audience, astonished.
"What?" said the young lawyer, horrified.
"So, tell me," said Jesus. "Tell me this.
Who treated the dying man like a neighbor?
Who was a neighbor?"
And the lawyer knows the answer, but he's so shocked he can't even say the word Samaritan --
"It was the one who showed him mercy," he finally says.

Jesus expanded the definition of neighborhood in a way that blew people away.
All of a sudden, he announced, the neighborhood now included Samaria.
Whaaaaat?
He redefined neighbor.
It wasn't just the people next to you,
the nice lady across the street with the best candy.
Your neighbor? well, it could be anyone who needs you to be neighbor.

Last week, I went to see a documentary
about a man who redefined neighbor and neighborhood
for a whole lot of us.
The movie is called 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?',
and it is the moving, genuinely inspiring story of Fred Rogers, whom I and so many
other kids knew simply as Mr. Rogers,
of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.
It's been in theaters all summer,
because people have been enjoying it so much --
and as soon as I saw it, I knew it was something I wanted to talk about with you.

I grew up with Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood on TV,
so his world is very familiar to me --
but in case it's not so much to you,
just a brief description.

Every episode of his show, a show that ran for a couple decades on PBS, began the same way:

the image of a little town would appear on the screen,
and then we'd be in a living room,
and through the door would come Mr. Rogers,
in a jacket and tie, singing "It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for
a neighbor, would you be mind?"
And in every single episode, as he sang, he took off his jacket,
put on a cardigan and zipped it up,
and then sat down to put on his sneakers.
And then our visit would begin.
Mr. Rogers would talk directly into the camera to us,
about what was going in the neighborhood,
and, sitting crossed legged on the floor at home,
in front of the set, we would talk back.
Sometimes Mr. Rogers would introduce us to other neighbors --
Mr. McFeely, the mailman,
or YoYo Ma, the nice man with a cello.
(Yes, the YoYo Ma)
And each episode would always include a visit to the Neighborhood of Make Believe,
where puppets like King Friday the Thirteenth and X the owl lived, all brought to life by
Mr. Rogers himself.

What the movie does beautifully is to make sure we understand just how remarkable Mr.
Rogers' Neighborhood truly was.
Fred Rogers, in a gentle but radical way
created a neighborhood that included everyone.
He constantly affirmed our responsibility for one another
and most especially for the children around us,
whom he took very seriously.

He had an exceptional ability to connect with children,
and that was because he quite simply listened to them.
"Children have the same very deep feelings that any of us have,"
he explained,
and he understood and honored that.
His show talked about things that make us happy,
but also things that upset us ...
gently, lovingly, Mr. Rogers talked to children about everything from divorce to death,
often through the voices of the puppets.
The way he valued the hearts and hopes of little ones was extraordinary.

In one part of the film, a small child in great distress, tells Mr. Rogers that the ear of his doggy, his stuffed doggy, came off in the dryer. And Mr. Rogers says "sometimes that happens to our favorite toys, but it doesn't happen to us. Our ears don't fall off." He understood what was *really* scaring that little boy.

And he did create a neighborhood that included all, truly all.

His show began in 1968, during a hot summer when people of color were being hounded out of town swimming pools -- a particularly horrific news story showed a hotel owner dumping chemicals into a pool to chase a young black family out of it.

So this is what Mr. Rogers did: on his next show, he talked about how when it's so hot outside, sometimes it feels good just to put your feet in cold water, and he set up a little wading pool, put his feet in it, and invited Officer Clemmons, the black police officer of the neighborhood, to put his feet in it too.

There it was -- what now is a wonderfully silly image of two grown-ups, sitting by a wading pool with their feet in the water and talking. But it was one of the most important images a child could see right then, and my five year old self took it in as I watched it on our black and white TV.

Remember the way that Jesus exploded people's understanding of neighbor with his Good Samaritan story, widened their definition of neighborhood.

Mr. Rogers was doing the same thing. In that episode, and again and again and again.

Whether it was a child who deserved to be understood and respected, or an adult, Mr. Rogers honored them, and loved them.

Loved them.

"The greatest thing we can do," said Fred Rogers more than once, "is to let someone know that they are loved and that they are capable of loving."

Love is at the heart of everything.”

The truth is that what Fred Rogers was doing, day in day out, was sharing the love of God,

preaching Good News through a television screen.

Which was, in fact, exactly what he set out to do.

Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian pastor;

he had managed to persuade the Presbyterians to ordain him not to serve a church, but to serve people through television.

As his wife says in the film “that was pretty far out for Presbyterians, but they did it.”

He never wore a pulpit robe,

he never put on a clergy collar,

he never spoke on the show about being a minister,

a Christian,

but Mr. Rogers was *preaching* love in everything he did.

And although Saturday Night Live

and some cynical talking heads

would mock him for saying that everyone was special,

the truth is that that’s the heart of the gospel message:

everyone **is** a cherished, worthy, uniquely gifted,

child of God.

Now, if the point of this sermon was just to say

what a good man Fred Rogers was,

how faithfully he lived the Gospel,

well then, this wouldn’t actually **be** a sermon.

It would be a eulogy of praise for a man whose passing, I confess, made me cry like I’d lost a dear friend.

But a sermon, a sermon is supposed to ask what this means for us, for each of us.

This. This:

Fred Rogers found a way to make sure that everything he did preached Christ, even while no one knew he was a minister.

His respect for every child of God,

including literally every child of God,

was his way of proclaiming God’s unconditional love.

His welcome of all people into his neighborhood

was Christ’s own welcome.

And that welcome was the same welcome
that said a Samaritan could be the good guy,
the same welcome that said your neighbor is simply the next person who needs you.
Everything he did in the neighborhood he created
was Gospel. Was **the** Gospel.
He preached, but often without saying a word.

So I'm calling you, on all of us, to preach like that.
Yes, like Mr. Rogers.

To proclaim the Gospel, the Good news –
often without saying a word.

To witness to the powerful love of God
in the way we are with others,
in the respect we accord to others,
in the gentleness with which we live
and the kindness we offer.

To redefine neighbor as anyone who needs a neighbor,
and to redefine neighborhood as that place where all are welcome.

In other words, to let our lives say this:
"Won't YOU be my neighbor?"

Amen.