

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

Colossians 1:1-14 Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 10:25-37 July 10, 2016

7th Sunday after Pentecost

(video clip of “Won’t You Be my Neighbor)

Do remember that song, that children’s program on PBS? That was the way that Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, would live out his faith; by becoming a caring, gentle, supportive neighbor to millions of young children through the medium of television. His show, Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood, ran from 1968 until his death in 2002, and continued on reruns until 2008. Fred Rogers became my neighbor for a few hours, back when our kids were in elementary school and I was a pastor in Red Oak, Iowa. Unbeknownst to any of us, Fred Rogers and his film crew had come to town to film a documentary, part of a series on senior citizens relating to children. His director called on Saturday and asked if it would be okay if Fred Rogers attended church with us the next day. And he did—and word had gotten out, so we had an Easter-sized audience in church that day. Fred Rogers was indeed in real life just like he was on TV—gentle, witty, genuinely friendly, and great with kids. I discovered from his director that he had 2 weaknesses—he loved photography and ice cream. So we all took pictures on the church step, and went out for ice cream sundaes before he and his crew left that afternoon. He had latched onto our kids, and a few weeks later we received in the mail some heavy packages—all the LP records that he had made. We still own them, even though we no longer have a turntable to play them on. Fred Rogers was the epitome of a good neighbor to millions of children in America. He liked them all, just the way they were, which reflected his belief in the love that God has for us. But it’s his question, “Won’t you be my neighbor” that I want us to think about today.

Speaking of neighbors, you heard that word a lot this morning in the Gospel lesson, a very, very familiar story, one of the most beloved in the Bible, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Maybe the story is too familiar and too beloved, because it wasn’t meant to make us feel good. It was meant to shake us up; to make us think; to make us say, “I never thought of it that way,” or even, “Well, I never!” Those whom Jesus’ audience would identify as the good people, the respectable people, came out looking not so good. The one that his audience would identify as the scum of the earth, one of those stupid, crude redneck yahoos from down the road, was the hero.

The story begins with a lawyer's question. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Maybe the lawyer was hoping that Jesus' answer would pigeonhole Jesus—which party, which sect did Jesus belong to? Where was he coming from with his teachings?

Jesus tossed it right back to him. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" Answer a question w/a question. Good form. The lawyer returned with the creed of all Judaism, the foundational teaching, right from the Shema, the "Hear, O Israel," in Deuteronomy 6. "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." but he didn't stop there. He added another important teaching from Leviticus. "and love your neighbor as yourself."

Now it was Jesus' turn to be impressed. "You have given the right answer; *do this*, and you will live." Saying the right answer is easy; living it out is something else.

The lawyer was on the spot, now. The ball was back in his court. He tried to justify himself. "And who is my neighbor?"

To answer, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I've seen the general area where Jesus set the parable, and it's scary, even today. Picture a narrow donkey path along the side of a deep ravine in a dry, dry desert, with lots of boulders strewn about, and no shade trees. You know how sometimes they will call dangerous highways today "blood alley" if lots of accidents happened there? They called the Jerusalem-to-Jericho road "The Bloody Way" because of the muggings, robberies and murders. Jericho was in a deep rift, 1300 feet below sea level, about 20 miles away from Jerusalem, which is on high hills, 3900 feet above sea level; it's a steep and dangerous climb.

In this setting, we meet first the victim, who gets mugged, stripped and beaten. A priest comes along, perhaps returning to his home after serving at the temple; he passes by on the other side. Perhaps he feared that the beaten man was already dead, and that to touch a dead man would make him unclean, and unable to perform his duties without extensive purification ceremonies. A Levite, an expert at religious law, at least stopped to take a look at the suffering man, but he didn't do anything except to turn and walk away. Then came the Samaritan, maybe a traveling salesman, with one donkey for his goods and one for himself. He stopped where the others didn't. He disinfected and bandaged the fallen man's wounds, comforted him, then loaded him on his extra donkey to take him to the inn. The Samaritan took him to an innkeeper, whom he evidently knew and

trusted, and paid him in advance for future care. "So, Mr. Lawyer," Jesus might have asked, "Who was the neighbor in this situation?" The lawyer couldn't form the word *Samaritan* in his mouth. He said, "The one who showed mercy." Jesus said, "Go, and do likewise."

You see, the lawyer, the one who knew that we were supposed to love God and love our neighbor, wanted to limit things—he wanted to hedge his bets. "Who is my neighbor?" The Samaritan, the outcast, was considered an enemy, not a neighbor, but he made himself a neighbor. And that's what Jesus wants of us—not to limit our concept of neighbor, but to expand it. It's easy for us, like the lawyer, to want to cop out, to avoid taking responsibility. Sometimes we blame the victim. "The traveler brought it on himself, walking that dangerous road at that time of day. He should have known better." Sometimes we just leave it to others—it's not our job, we say.

But it is our job. We are called to help, to be neighbors to those in need. Just look at the work we do for the Caseyville food bank and for Beacon; the individuals and families in distress helped out by our Good Samaritan Fund and Deacon's Fund; and the ministries that we support through our loose change offerings. Look at your giving for Week of Compassion to help those in tough situations around the world. And that's what we do corporately, as a congregation. Add to that all the nonprofits that you individually support with your contributions and your time, all the ways that you minister and serve.

This is your heritage, folks. This is part of who you are. You are called to be a people who cares, to become neighbors to those in need. Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and loving your neighbor as yourself is great theology. But if that love is only words, if that love is only warm, fuzzy attitudes, it isn't really love. Jesus said to the lawyer, in essence, your beliefs are good. You're on the right track. But he didn't say, "*Believe* this and you will live." He said, "*Do* this and you will live." Our salvation is through God's grace, a gift of love. But that love has to be shared, or it shrivels up and dies. If love is to be love, it has to be an active verb. If love is to be love, it has to have legs. Be a neighbor. Won't you be my neighbor? Won't you be a neighbor to hungry families and abused women and children? Won't you be a neighbor to those who are starving and hurting and abused around the world? If you do, you're following the example, walking the path, of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon