

Series: Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Part I: Neighbor Is a Verb
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September 23, 2018

Fred Rogers, or Mister Rogers, as he was known to many of us, created a TV show for kids. The name of his show? *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Some of us grew up watching it. Some of us raised our children as they watched it. It was the opposite of a fast-paced show like *Sesame Street* that tried to teach while being cool and flashy. Mister Rogers talked slowly and quietly. He put on his tennis shoes at the start of every show as he zipped up that cardigan sweater. While there have been a number of spoofs of his "style" over the years, Fred Rogers knew *exactly* what he was doing.

You may not know this, but he was an ordained Presbyterian minister. He had a deep theological understanding of humankind. Amy Hollingsworth writes about this in her book, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, when she says, "At the center of Fred's theology of loving your neighbor was this: Every person is made in the image of God, and for that reason alone, he or she is valued – 'appreciated,' as he liked to say." (78) So, Fred Rogers created a TV program grounded in this idea of loving your neighbor. That was *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. This morning I want to show you a trailer from the recent movie called *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* to give you a glimpse into Mr. Rogers and his neighborhood.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnkGejHOMu4>)

So, who is my neighbor? What does it mean to be a neighbor? Our scripture from Luke 10:25-37, can help answer that:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Who is my neighbor? It is the question asked by an expert in the law who Luke tells us is trying to “test” Jesus – maybe to catch Jesus saying something that goes against the Jewish law. Jesus answers his question with another question, as Rabbis often do – like the old joke in which someone asks the rabbi, “Why is it rabbis always answer a question with a question?” To which the rabbi responds, “What makes you say that?”

For Jesus, his answer to this question went back to the Jewish law that is at the core of most everything the Bible has to say about what we should do in life: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind – Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus tells the expert in the law that he got the answer right, but Jesus adds “Do this and you will live.” Do this and you will live. Now think about it, repeat it, believe it – but do it, and you will experience what “eternal life” is about here and now.

Luke then tells us that the expert in the law “wanted to justify himself” – which is why he asks the question “Who is my neighbor?” On the surface, it seemed like a perfectly normal question, but the only reason we try to “justify” ourselves is if we know we haven’t done what we were supposed to do. So, in asking “Who is my neighbor?” the expert in the law is looking for the legal and moral loophole. Someone suggested that the legal expert really wants to know is who is not his neighbor, so he can write them off his list of whom he needs to love.

Jesus responds by telling a parable, as he often did. When Jesus tells these kinds of stories, there is usually a “Gotcha” – a twist in the story when it looks like it is going one way, but then it takes a sudden turn, and when the point is made -- that’s the “Gotcha!” In this case, Jesus talked about a man who was robbed and left for dead beside the road in a deserted place where he might never be found -- at least not found alive. A priest and a Levite come by and both avoid going near him. If the man were dead, then these religious leaders would be considered “defiled” if they came in contact with a dead body. Maybe those listening thought that Jesus would say that you could ignore the hurt man because you were supposed to stay ritually pure – so he was not really “a neighbor.” But, Jesus did not say that.

Jesus then talks about the next traveler – a Samaritan. To the Jewish audience listening to the story who were racial/ethnic enemies of the Samaritans, they were waiting for Jesus to say something bad about this Samaritan. Instead, Jesus tells them that the Samaritan is the one who stops, helps the wounded man, puts him on his own donkey, administers first aid, takes him to an inn to care for him, pays the innkeeper to continue watching over him, and promised to pay for anything else the man needed. Gotcha! That was not what the people were expecting.

Jesus then asks the expert in the law, “Which of these do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? Notice Jesus did not repeat the question the expert in the law had asked. Jesus did not say, “So, who is my neighbor?” No, Jesus asked, “Who was a neighbor?” The Jewish expert in the law cannot bring himself to identify the man as “a Samaritan.” He can only say, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus tells him, “Go and do likewise.”

In this brief encounter, Jesus changes the question from “Who is my neighbor?” to “What does it mean to be a neighbor?” It is not about something going on “out there” with identifying who is

and is not my neighbor. It is about what is going on “in here” with each one of us. It is not enough to know the right answer to the question. It is about doing. Being a neighbor is about showing mercy – especially to those in need. I think that the word “neighbor” as it is described in this parable, is a verb. Now, I first thought I was making up the idea that “neighbor” is a verb, but, when I checked an online dictionary, it said that to neighbor is “to be situated next to or very near.”

A recent *Wall Street Journal* editorial may remind us what the verb “neighbor” looks like:

Since Friday, when Hurricane Florence made landfall on the coast of North Carolina, the story has been about men and women fighting to survive a death struggle with windblown water. So far the people of North and South Carolina and all who have pitched in to help them have given Florence a good fight. The devastation from the hurricane’s 11-foot storm surge and relentless rain is significant. The hurricane had killed an estimated 15 people as of Sunday. Still, it is impossible not to be moved by the determination of North and South Carolinians to survive this storm and the acts of heroism on their behalf. Deaths have been minimized in large part because, with enough advance warning, most people heeded public directives to move inland. Typically in these circumstances, though, there are individuals who can’t flee because of age or health, or didn’t flee due to bad judgment. Rescue teams, often led by the National Guard, have worked around the clock to save the stranded. Skilled rescuers have arrived from New York, Texas, Georgia, Missouri and elsewhere. Examples of looting have been rare. A Journal story Sunday on the Florence rescuers quoted National Guard Sgt. Nicholas Muhar, who captured the simple reality of how so much good work gets done fast. “We’ve just been running and running and running,” said Sgt. Muhar. “It’s just: next thing, next thing, next thing. Just do it. Get it done.” (*The Wall Street Journal*, “Credit to the Carolinas”, Sept. 16, 2018)

To “neighbor” is something we do in response to the need of someone who is close to us. So, neighbor is not defined by ethnicity, tribe, or who is like us. *Neighbor is defined by need and proximity*. So, maybe when someone says, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” -- it is more than just asking to connect with someone. It may be someone we come across in life who desperately needs our help – who needs us to “neighbor” them like the Good Samaritan did in this parable, and like the people in the Carolinas are doing for those affected by the floods.

So, how do we choose to be neighbors, or to “neighbor” here in Johns Creek? For example, do we need to get out of our comfort zones and “cross the road” to connect with the person who needs mercy? My sense is that most of us stay so busy doing other things -- running as fast as we can while looking down at our smartphones for what to do next -- that we forget to do the main thing Jesus says will lead to experiencing “eternal life” here and now. So, choose to neighbor – not figure out who is not my neighbor and undeserving of my attention. Jesus says to be a neighbor. “Do this and you will live.” Choose to neighbor whomever you encounter on the road of life.

However, we can choose whether or not we “neighbor” someone. It is a choice and depending on our choice, there are different outcomes. In C.S. Lewis’ classic book, *The Great Divorce*, which

is not about marriage or divorce, but about a fictional journey people take from Hell to Heaven -- Lewis begins by describing what hell is like. One person puts it this way:

He [Lewis] images hell as a large, gray city, where it is always rainy and constantly in that stage of twilight just as the lights are being turned on. The narrator walks through empty streets lined with dingy boarding houses, small tobacco shops, windowless warehouses . . . The narrator joins a queue at a bus stop and boards a bus that takes him to the outskirts of heaven. We don't see hell again, but we learn more about it as the story continues. The citizens of the city are quarrelsome -- fights break out, even on the bus, and we are told that the streets are empty as residents keep moving further away from each other because they can't stop quarreling with neighbors.

(www.cslewis.com/blog/heaven-and-hell-as-idea-and-image-in-c-s-lewis/)

According to Lewis' story, hell is a place where people choose not to love their neighbors, so they just keep moving farther and farther away from folks. If you do that, the logical end is that eventually you end up completely alone; which is as good a definition of hell as I can think of -- to be completely and utterly alone.

In her book, author Amy Hollingsworth writes about the last time she saw Fred Rogers before his death:

“If you had one final broadcast,” I asked, “one final opportunity to address your television neighbors, and you could tell them the single most important lesson of your life, what would you say?”

He paused a moment and then said, ever so slowly:

Well, I would want [those] who were listening somehow to know that they had unique value, that there isn't anybody in the whole world exactly like them and that there never has been and there never will be.

And that they are loved by the Person who created them, in a unique way.

If they could know that and really know it and have that behind their eyes, they could look with those eyes on their neighbor and realize, “My neighbor has unique value too; there's never been anybody in the whole world like my neighbor, and there never will be.” If they could value that person -- if they could love that person -- in ways that we know that the Eternal loves us, then I would be very grateful.

Amy Hollingsworth adds,

And I think that from where he sits in his new neighborhood, Mister Rogers is just that, eternally grateful.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.