Won’t You Be My Neighbor
A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
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Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ He answered, ‘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.’ And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

THE STORY OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN is fairly well-known, even for those who did not grow up in the church. It has found its way into our culture and has kind of morphed into its own thing that isn’t always connected to its scriptural roots. In fact, there are even laws named after it: The Good Samaritan Law. This law protects people who come to the aid of someone in an emergency and tries to do what they can to reasonably help. Generally, I like that this law encourages people to do something and to provide some kind of help, even if you might not do it perfectly. And that’s kind of the point, isn’t it? To not penalize someone for trying to do the right thing? You may not be a doctor; you may not be a nurse, but if you see someone in an emergency situation, and there’s something you might do to help, it allows you to try and do it without the fear of being sued.

IT DOES MAKE ME PAUSE AND RECOGNIZE, however, that there must have been situations where people were being sued for trying to help, and I just have to shake my head at our litigious society. Jesus also lived in a litigious society. People didn’t sue each other as much as we do in the United States, but the community was very centered around laws, and dissecting the law, and figuring out the meaning of the law, and in this particular lawyer’s case, trying to find some loopholes in the law. And it’s important to remember that in this biblical context, the word “lawyer” can also be translated as scribe; they’re synonymous. This was someone who was a scribe for the Torah, and the Torah was the law. Not only did he copy the words of the Torah, but he helped teach about them and interpret them. It’s a concept that’s difficult for those of us who are raised in a context where we value or at least strive for the separation of church and state. But in Jesus’ day the religious text was the legal text. And the religious leaders were also interpreters and lawyers of the law. So here is this lawyer, this scribe, this religious leader who knows the law who has read it and copied it and taught about it, and who has been trained for years in the law. And he wants to test Jesus and asks him about eternal life. At first, Jesus simply refers him back to the law. “Well, what does the law say?” And the lawyer sums the law up perfectly, all the laws he knows so well boil down to these two things: Love God; Love Neighbor. Gold star! That’s the exact right answer. Jesus replies, in so many words, “Great. You know it; now go do that. That’s the secret to life. That’s it. It’s that simple.”
Yet, as Steve Jobs was known to say, and I paraphrase: “Simple is actually quite hard to achieve, and oftentimes much more difficult than something that’s complicated.” And so the scripture tells us that the lawyer wanted to “justify” himself.

I DON’T KNOW HOW ELSE TO INTERPRET that except to think, he has not been treating other people very well. That whole, “love your neighbor as yourself?” thing? I get the feeling he’s left out a few words and chosen to just love himself. So he wants some clarification. And essentially, he’s asking, “How can I love the least amount possible and still make the cut?” That’s when Jesus launches in to this now-famous story. When we read and hear it today, it doesn’t seem to hold much controversy. People often sum it up to mean, “Be nice and help others” or “Being a good neighbor means being kind to others.” That’s not untrue. But there’s so much more to this story that gets lost to us reading it today in the 21st century. It was a scandalous and shocking story when Jesus first told it.

A PERSON IS GOING FROM JERUSALEM TO JERICHO. Everyone would’ve immediately thought, “uh oh, that’s dangerous.” And it wouldn’t have surprised them that this man was mugged, beat up, and left for dead because this road had that kind of reputation. A priest comes by – someone from the same religion, class, and race as this man. But the priest doesn’t stop to help him. A Levite comes by – also someone from the same religion, class, and race as this man. But the Levite doesn’t stop to help him. Now, some folks would be mildly surprised that these men would just walk by because they’re religious leaders and should perhaps be more inclined to help a stranger, but most would understand why they ignored him.

IT IS A DANGEROUS ROAD, and stopping to help someone makes you vulnerable. So, at this point, nothing has really shocked the first listeners of this story. But then Jesus says, “A Samaritan while travelling came near him.” And now those first listeners are likely thinking, “Oh great. This is how the man dies. The enemy has found him. And that Samaritan is gonna either kill him or rob whatever’s left. That’s how Samaritans are.” The word “Samaritan” was politicized, dehumanized, and despised in Jesus’ time, maybe a bit like the phrase “Bad hombres” or “Nasty women” was in 2016. And no Jewish person was an actual, physical neighbor to a Samaritan because they lived in segregated neighborhoods. But what does the Samaritan do? The Samaritan shows kindness. The Samaritan shows mercy, and goes above and beyond in caring for this hurt man. It is incomprehensible for those first listeners of Jesus’ story that a Samaritan would be capable of such things.

Amy Jill Levine who is a Jewish, New Testament scholar says:

“We should think of ourselves as the person in the ditch and then ask, “Is there anyone, from any group, about whom we’d rather die than acknowledge, ‘She offered help’ or ‘He showed compassion’?

And more, is there any group whose members might rather die than help us? If so, then we know how to find the modern equivalent for the Samaritan. To recognize the shock and possibility of the parable in practical, political and pastoral terms, we might translate its first-century geographical and religious concerns into our modern idiom.”

Amy Jill Levine has said that as a Jew, perhaps for her that would be members of Hamas.

FOR US AS AMERICANS, perhaps it would be members of ISIS, or the migrant caravan, or even your opposing political party? I don’t know. But think to yourself for a second, from whom would receiving help make you cringe or recoil in disgust, like, “no thanks. I’m good. Please move along; and do not touch me!” Any one or any group come to mind? That’s the Samaritan in this story. And that’s our neighbor. The lawyer cannot even utter the word “Samaritan” when Jesus asks him who was a neighbor? He can’t even bring himself to say it. So instead he says, “The one who shows mercy.” Dorothy Day, a radical Catholic warrior for social justice used to say: “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.” That bears repeating: “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”

SO YES, this story is about the kindness of strangers, of being a good neighbor to those whom we may not know. But it’s also a radical show of inclusion and welcome and neighborliness by Jesus. The lawyer wanted to know: “How can I love the least amount possible and still make the cut?” And Jesus’ answer blows those boundaries out of the water. If a Samaritan can be loved; if a Samaritan can be a neighbor, than our love must be limitless, infinite, fully inclusive of every possible human being. One commentator says: “The lawyer wants to define who deserves his love,
but Jesus’ parable suggests that love seeks out neighbors to receive compassion and care, even when established boundaries or prejudices conspire against it.” (Matthew Skinner, Feasting on the Word). Jesus’ parable suggests that we ask everyone and anyone, “Won’t you be my neighbor?”

EVERY DAY, AS A CHILD, this question came into my living room via the television show, “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Later, I would learn that Mr. Rogers was a Rev. Rogers ordained in the very same denomination that I am: the Presbyterian Church (USA)! But long before I cared about any of that, Mr. Rogers would come on my screen; interrupting my other louder, flashier shows, like the Transformers, Muppet Babies, and the Smurfs, and through the television we would have what seemed like a conversation. Margaret Whitmer, a producer on the show, said, “If you take all of the elements that make good television and do the exact opposite, you have Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Low production values, simple set, an unlikely star. Yet, it worked.”

EVERY DAY, MR. ROGERS, in the most unthreatening way, invited people in, welcomed them with the question, “Won’t you be my neighbor?” And children all over the country from every, kind of background, said “yes” because he created an environment where it was safe to accept that invitation. The movie, Won’t You Be My Neighbor? is a documentary about Fred Rogers and the show, and it is a must-see. One of the stories that it tells is of Mr. Rogers and the neighborhood police officer, Officer Clemmons. One article, written by Hannah Anderson, eloquently captures this in writing:

Over the course of thirty-one years and 865 episodes, Rogers would use his Neighborhood to show the world as it should be—a microcosm of kindness where neighbors love and support each other through difficult times of death, divorce, and danger. It was also a space where Rogers helped viewers confront their own fear and prejudices, leading them past them in his own non-threatening way.

From the beginning, Rogers specifically challenged the nation’s understanding of race through his friendship—both on and off-screen—with Francois Clemmons, the Neighborhood police officer who just happened to be an African-American…

“Fred came to me,” Clemmons recounts in a StoryCorps interview, “and said, ‘I have this idea…you could be a police officer.’ That kind of stopped me in my tracks. I grew up in the ghetto. I did not have a positive opinion of police officers, [said Clemmons]. Policemen were sicking police dogs and water hoses on people. And I really had a hard time putting myself in that role. So I was not excited about being Officer Clemmons at all.” But Rogers prevailed and Clemmons joined Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood in August 1968, only four months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In doing so, Clemmons became the first African-American with a recurring role on a children’s television series. But as progressive as this was, [Mr.] Rogers decided to press social convention even further.

Episode 1065, which aired only a few months after Clemmons’ debut, opens in the typical manner with Rogers inviting viewers to be his neighbor; but instead of putting on his iconic cardigan, Rogers talks about how hot the day is and how nice it would be to put his feet in a pool of cold water. He moves to his front yard where he fills a small plastic pool with water and begins to soak his feet.

Soon Officer Clemmons drops by for a visit and Mr. Rogers invites him to share the pool with him. Clemmons quickly accepts, rolls up his pant legs of his uniform, and places his very brown feet in the same water as Rogers’ very white feet.”

WHEN THIS EPISODE AIRED, pools, much like counters at a diner and seats on a bus, were the site of protests against segregation and Jim Crow laws. Black bodies were not supposed to be in pools with white bodies. In fact, there are images of acid being thrown into the water where black men and women are swimming.

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1 https://christandpopculture.com/wont-you-be-my-neighbor-mister-rogers/
“But here in Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood... a quiet Presbyterian minister and an African-American police officer show the world how to integrate swimming pools. Rogers invites; Clemmons accepts. As Clemmons slips his feet into the pool, the camera holds the shot for several seconds, as if to make the point clear: a pair of brown feet and a pair of white feet can share a swimming pool, (ibid).

THROUGH THIS EPISODE, Mr. Rogers and Officer Clemmons normalized for the next generation what was ghastly inappropriate and shockingly wrong for their parents. No one would have thought that this kind, mild-mannered, gentle soul in a cardigan was such a revolutionary, but he was. Not only did he push the bounds of what was acceptable; he challenged people in power, standing up to congress and actually changing minds about funding for public television. One of the most-quoted Mr. Rogers’ lines is “look for the helpers.” Even I’ve used this in a children’s meditation. In this day and age where so many of us feel so helpless and hopeless with the onslaught of tragedies we see and hear about daily, it can be a comfort to hear Mr. Rogers’ voice telling us, as though we are children, to ‘look for the helpers.’

But Ian Bogost, writing for the The Atlantic, challenges us on this. He writes:

Mr. Rogers was an expert at translating the complex adult world in terms kids could understand: a grown-up emissary to a children’s nation. ‘Look for the helpers’ was advice for preschoolers. But somehow, when it got transformed into a meme, the sentiment was adopted by adults as if they were 3-year-olds.”

BOGOST REJECTS THAT THIS MESSAGE from Mr. Rogers is for adults. As adults, we are to be the helpers, not look for the helpers. And as adults, he poses that it is selfish to find comfort in this. He says, “We were entrusted with these insights to make children’s lives better, not to comfort ourselves for having failed to fashion the adult world in which they must live.” Mr. Rogers would have expected the children watching his program to grow up to become the helpers he talked about, those who would make a difference, a Good Samaritan to someone who needs help; a radically kind and inclusive human being whose actions would transform the world. And we can only truly do this through love. Jim Palmer says, “Telling people that God loves them is good theology. Showing people that you love them is what transforms the world.” Mr. Rogers both told and showed people that he loved them. These are some lesser-known quotes by Fred Rogers on love. He once said, “Love isn’t a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like ‘struggle.’” He also said, “The greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they’re loved and capable of loving.”

MR. ROGERS DID THIS THE BEST WAY HE KNEW HOW, through a simple, children’s television show. Through it, he found ways to love God and love neighbor. Unlike the lawyer from our scripture lesson this morning, Mr. Rogers knew how to inherit eternal life. It wasn’t about asking “Who is my neighbor?” but about asking the most unlikeliest of people: “Won’t you be my neighbor?” He was radically inclusive and kind, always willing to show his love. And because of that, he transformed our world into a better place. Somehow, we are all called, in our own way, to do the same. Are we able to ask “Won’t you be my neighbor?” to the asylum seeker hoping for a new life at our nation’s southern border? to the unhoused people living on the streets of San Francisco? to those struggling with addiction or with their mental health? to those whom we consider the absolute “other”?

MR. ROGERS ONCE SAID, “Well, I suppose it’s an invitation, ‘Won’t you be my neighbor?’ It’s an invitation for somebody to be close to you.” The question “Won’t you be my neighbor?” is an invitation, and it is a commitment to notice and care about all God’s people. So, put on a cardigan, change your shoes, and ask those around you today, in your own way, “Won’t you be my neighbor?”

Amen.