

“The Church In Action: Being A Neighbor”

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Luke 10:25-37

Children Time

Have you heard of Mr. Rogers? He used to have a TV show called “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Every show began the same way. Mr. Rogers would enter his home, take off his jacket and shoes, and put on a sweater and comfortable tennis shoes while singing his theme song “Won’t You Be My Neighbor.” The song started out like this...

*It's a beautiful day in this
neighborhood
A beautiful day for a neighbor
Would you be mine
Could you be mine*

And it ended like this...

*Won't you be
Won't you please, won't you please
Please won't you be my neighbor.*

When Mr. Rogers died almost 15 years ago, he had millions of “neighbors” all over the world and, although he was quite famous, he never thought of himself as a TV

star. He said, “I always thought I was a neighbor who just came in for a visit.” Fred Rogers was a minister himself and knew what it meant to be a good neighbor.

One day, a lawyer asked Jesus what he had to do to have eternal life. When Jesus asked him what God's law said, the lawyer answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said he was right. But the man wanted to know “Who is my neighbor?”

So, Jesus told a story about a man who was walking down a road and attacked by robbers. They beat him, took his money, and left him beside the road to die.

A priest came along, saw the man, and he crossed over to the other side of the road to avoid him and continued on his way.

A little while later, a man who worked in the temple came along. He also saw the man lying there and passed by on the other side of the road.

Finally, a man from Samaria came along, and when he saw the man, he stopped to help him. He put medicine on his wounds and gave him some clothes to wear. Then,

he took the man to a hotel and gave the hotel manager money to care for him.

So Jesus asked, “Which of these three men was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by robbers.” The lawyer answered that it was the one who helped him.

Jesus said “Yes, now you go and be a good neighbor like him.”

The world is full of people who need a good neighbor. Like the man from Samaria in the story, Jesus wants us to be good neighbors to everyone.

Sermon

READ LUKE 10:25-37

An educated man, a lawyer man, who was trained in presenting arguments and defending positions, tried to put Jesus on trial to test him with an argument. But Jesus was very shrewd in his reply.

The lawyer man asked what he needed to inherit eternal life. Rather than give a concrete specific answer, Jesus turned it back to the lawyer man with a question about his own position in the matter — to what part of the law

did he go regarding this question, and how did he interpret that passage which led him to his position. How wise of Jesus!

The man provided a good solid answer from scripture about loving God and loving neighbors.

But the lawyer man wasn't finished. He took another tactic asking who was his neighbor. If he was going to receive eternal life, he recognized that he needed to love God and his neighbor. This was his ticket in. Nobody would likely question the call to love. But the lawyer man's question revealed his selfish orientation to the question.

The lawyer man was assuming that his action of love was to be offered as a requirement to fulfill a legal code. All he needed to know was who that specific kind of person might be then he could do his due diligence and complete what the law required of him.

“So,” he asked, “who is my neighbor?”

In his reply, Jesus' parable story, he made the point that it was morally important to help people in need, regardless of who they were.

This kind of action was exhibited recently after Hurricane Harvey in Texas when a black man rescued a woman and her husband, who was clutching a Confederate flag as one of his most prized possessions. The black man said he didn't care about the white man's political or social perspective, he was a human being who needed saving and that was all that mattered.

This is an important moral point, however, it didn't really address the lawyer man's question about who was his neighbor, so we have to go a bit deeper.

In his parable, the man who was beaten and left to die was Jewish. We know this because he was traveling from Jerusalem. The man who helped him was from Samaria. Samaritans were viewed by the Jews as filthy half breeds who didn't worship the same God and therefore were hated by God. Because of this, it was part of their legal code and religious obligation to stay clear of people like the Samaritans.

By including a Jewish man and a Samaritan man, Jesus was highlighting the clear racial tension that would have been very clear to anyone living in the region in Jesus' day.

Jesus addressed the moral issue that had people justify their position of superiority, leading them to turn their back on certain groups of people, even in their time of desperate need.

Jesus was highlighting the moral wickedness of racial and religious prejudice.

I imagine that if Jesus was here today he might have made the same point regarding Rosa Marie Hernandez, a 10-year-old girl who went to the hospital this past week in Corpus Christi, Texas for emergency gall bladder surgery. Border Patrol agents followed the ambulance to the hospital where they stayed through the night, getting involved in all aspects of her surgery and care citing that the girl, who also had a debilitating condition of cerebral palsy, was a flight risk.

Five armed guards stood outside her recovery room waiting for her to be discharged, at which point they did not allow her to go home to her family but took her to a juvenile detention center where her mother cannot visit her and where she will be kept for several weeks as she is processed and a determination made if she will be sent out of the country.

The girl's crime? She has been in this country without documentation since she was three months old. For government officials, Rosa Marie, who although ten-years-old functions similar to a five or six-year-old, fits into the category of dangerous criminals who need to be sent away in order to protect the safety of American citizens — not such a different perspective from the way Jews thought about Samaritans in Jesus' day.

If we go back to the parable, this moral point made by Jesus, while being sharp and culturally relevant, still didn't quite address the man's question about who was his neighbor. We need to dig a bit more.

Let's go back to the lawyer man's question. He asked Jesus about his legal responsibility, like it was a transaction. It was as if he was asking, "Who might I come across in my daily life, who falls into this category of "neighbor," who I must love in order to fulfill my legal obligation, and thereby get the reward of eternal life?"

Jesus' parable turns the lawyer man's question around. Rather than identify the category of people out there, Jesus asks a different question at the end of the story,

"Which person in the parable was a good neighbor?"

Here is the twist that addresses the question. Eternal life, being part of God's realm, is certainly about caring for the weak, the poor, the injured, the sick, but service only done to get a reward is misplaced motivation.

Instead, all service begins with who we are being and the condition of our hearts.

So, the better question with us: "Are we being a good neighbor?"

In other words, consider our motivations. Do they lead to actions that are done with humility, selfless generosity, and unconditional love?

It is not about who, out there, is my neighbor, but, How can I be a better neighbor to those around me?

Let's make this personal for our church community. My friends, we as a congregation have a center for our life together here in Birmingham.

Are we being good neighbors to those around us here?

In the five months I have been here, I am struck by several things related to this question. I have heard stories about how the demographics of the congregation have in the past decades consistently shifted from a predominantly Birmingham-centered membership to one that now is much more scattered with only a few living in the city.

Secondly, in the past there has been some focus placed on ministry in Detroit, or other places beyond the local community.

As I have listened, I have heard a number of people reflecting on the same thing — that while the ministry further away has been and is currently worthwhile and good, God might now be leading us to focus much more locally in our immediate community of Birmingham.

At the same time, this feels daunting because as congregation, we are more prominently living outside of Birmingham, and there feels a growing disconnect between our experience and the experience of the people of Birmingham.

Then, we have the Bates Street Extension development just north of our church building that will be started in less than a couple of

years. This includes new condos, shops, entertainment, and business right next to the church building and a significantly expanded parking facility.

There is no denying that this development will be a hassle during the construction phase and there are certainly concerns that need to be addressed, however, in about five years, the church building will have moved from the edge into the center of city activity bringing with it all kinds of new people with new opportunities and possibilities to connect with, minister to, and include those who are working or living on our doorstep.

If God is calling First Baptist Church of Birmingham to re-orient our ministry to the local city of Birmingham, then we sit with significant tension. It would seem God is calling us to ministry that we currently feel unprepared to accomplish.

Yes, this tension can be uncomfortable. We will need to stretch out of our comfort zones. We will need to do new things, think in new ways. We will need to expand beyond what is familiar.

If we were called to something small and easy I do not think that it would be as worthwhile and we

would not grow so much. But I believe that God is calling this congregation to something much more substantial, to a bigger vision that will make all the difference in the lives of lots and lots of people.

This now feels daunting, but take courage, the Holy Spirit is leading us one step at a time.

Let us pray that God would transform us to be good neighbors to the people around us. That God would transform us from within so that our neighborly actions are full of generosity, selflessness, and unconditional love.