**The Gospel According to Mr. Rogers: Who is My Neighbor?**

**Luke 10:25-37**

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This week we’re continuing our sermon series on the Gospel of Mr. Rogers. Our text for today is the parable of the Good Samaritan. You don’t have to be Christian to have heard of the Good Samaritan. We have Samaritan hospitals, and motor clubs, and we even have Good Samaritan laws, which means you can’t be sued if you try to help someone at the scene of an accident. This is, in a way, pretty funny. We need laws to protect ourselves when we try to help someone, but that’s a story for another day.

Today we’re starting with Jesus and the lawyer. So I want you to image the setting. Jesus is sitting around having a nice discussion with some of his followers when one of these hot-shot lawyers stands up to throw Jesus a trick question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Now this question sounds innocent enough on the surface, but underneath it we can see what’s going on. The lawyer is trying to check-list his way into heaven. The lawyer is really asking for something to add to his to-do list. Maybe recite a prayer, offer a sacrifice, drop off a box of macaroni for the food drive, and throw a $20 in the collection plate. Our lawyer’s probably thinking, “If I’m efficient enough, I might inherit eternal life before lunch.”

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus, in good rabbic tradition, throws the question back and asks, “Well, what does the law say? What do you read there?”

The lawyer knows his stuff, so he gives the correct answer from Deuteronomy and then all but dares Jesus to disagree with it. “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.”

Our lawyer has given the right answer. “Good,” says Jesus, “You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live.” Now it’s worth noting something right here. The lawyer has asked about inheriting eternal life, but Jesus has given him the answer to a different question. Jesus doesn’t say do this and you will have eternal life, instead he lets our lawyer know that if he lives now in a relationship of love with God, and if he lives now, in a relationship of love with his neighbor, he will truly live now in the present time. Jesus reframes the question so the answer is about living now, not about worrying about eternal life in the future.

Now that’s a pretty big point for the lawyer to chew on, so our friend is not happy. But he’s not done yet, he tries to find the loop-hole, after all, he’s a lawyer. The lawyer drops the big question, the one he’s been holding back to trap Jesus, the one that’s going to show everyone how smart he is. He asks, “Who is my neighbor?”

Our lawyer is expecting a pat answer. He’s waiting to hear, “Your neighbor is your fellow Israelite, your neighbor is your relative and your neighbor is your friend.” Then the lawyer could answer “I have always loved these,” and walk away basking in the approval of Jesus and the crowd. Really the question the lawyer is asking, in a polite way, is, “Who is not my neighbor? Who doesn’t deserve my love? Who can I ignore, and refuse to feed or give shelter to? Who can I oppress? “ Even, “Who can I hate?”

And Jesus tells our lawyer a story. There’s a reason Jesus answers the lawyer’s question with a parable. Because the lawyer wants to have a debate, he’s all ready to argue the idea of neighborness. As long as the discussion can continue around defining a neighbor, there is an excuse for not acting. So our lawyer would prefer to form a committee on neighbors, with a sub-committee on the optimal boundaries for calling someone a neighbor. Maybe a class on the best way to identify neighbors. As long as the question can be debated, there is no imperative to act. The lawyer doesn’t want an answer, he wants an excuse. And Jesus cuts him off with a parable.

Now I’m sure you’ve heard all sorts of sermons on why the priest couldn’t stop to help, and why the Levite had to continue walking down the road. But I’m not interested in that today. Excuses are excuses, and we can always find reasons why we can’t help a brother or sister in need. Some are good, and some are bad, only God really knows which are which. What we can say is that Jesus’ story has the traveler in pain, and humiliated. He has not just robbed of his goods, he’s also robbed of his dignity. He’s beaten and naked, left by the side of the road.

Remember, our lawyer was worried about his own eternal life, Jesus uses the parable to ask, ”How can you not be more concerned about those who are with you in need now?”

We know how the story continues. It’s a Samaritan, a member of the group most despised by Israelites, who saves the beaten traveler. You see we don’t think about that part of the story often. The man by the side of the road could have rejected the offer of help from his historic enemy. He could have said, “I’d rather die then take help from a no-good low down Samaritan.” But Jesus tells us that the Samaritan’s offer of help was accepted. And as neighbor took care of neighbor, the cycle of violence, the history of hate, was set aside. The giving and receiving of help, the relationship it forms, is what is the key of the parable. In loving our enemy, we make them friends. In loving those that make us uncomfortable, we become comfortable.

So where does Mr. Rogers’ come in? Christianity Today wrote an article on the impact of Mr. Rogers’ on society. It stated, “*Rogers' theological messages could be traced to the biblical notion of "neighbor" and Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan. Jesus' point—that the Samaritan and the Jewish man were neighbors in a spiritual sense, if not a physical one—feels right at home on Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, where Rogers greeted you with a daily "Hi, neighbor!" as if the whole world lived in the same close-knit community.”*

Mr. Roger’s lived the idea of the Good Samaritan in his television show. Everybody belonged, and everybody mattered. Every day Mr. Rogers summoned children to a special place where love existed and does not disappoint. Hearts come alive, awakened by his unconditional acceptance. Mr. Rogers said, "Everybody longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is capable of loving," How true those words are, "Everybody longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is capable of loving,".

Mister Rogers called what he did, "loving someone into existence." Fred did this again and again on his show. He loved people into existence. Last week Rev. Nancy showed us some pictures, one was of Mr. Rogers sharing a kiddie pool with African-American Officer Clemmons, and the scene closes with Mr. Rogers’s wiping Officer Clemmons feet dry. This action took place as the newspapers were full of images of little black children being driven out of public pools by whites. While the world was saying blacks and whites can’t even share the same public swimming pools, Mr. Rogers gave us another example. An example of love and grace, where everyone who we encounter is our neighbor.

So that brings us back to the question, “Who’s your neighbor?” Jesus says, everyone is, but especially the person who is in the most need. The one you fear, the one you want to ignore and forget about. That’s your neighbor.

I want to leave you with one last story. A man was sitting at the gate of a town, a wise elder. A man on horseback stopped and asked him, “Old man, what are the people of this town like?”

“Why do you ask this?” the elder wondered.

The rider said, “The people of the town I have come from are very mean and indecent. I was upset and disturbed by them. I had to leave that town. Now I want to become a resident of some new town. So I am asking you how the people of this town are.”

The old man said, “Brother, you had better move on. The people of this town are even viler, wicked, and more indecent. Here you will get into trouble, go look somewhere else.”

The rider moved on. Just behind him a small cart came to a halt and a man looked around and said, “Grandfather, how are the people of this village? I am searching for a new residence.”

The old man asked again, “How were the people of the village you have left?”

Tears came to the eyes of the man on the cart. He said, “The people of that village were very loving and kind, but I had to leave to try to find a job, but someday I will return there.”

That old man said, “You are welcome. You will find the people of this village even more loving and kind than the people of that village.”

Another resident of the village had been sitting there listening to all this. First he heard what the horse rider said and the old man’s answer. Then he heard what this man on the cart said and the old man’s answer. The villager said, “You have really surprised me. You said to one man that this village is very vile and wicked, just move on. And to the other you said this village has very loving people, you have no need to go further, and you are welcome!

The old man explained, “People are just the way you are.”

Love your neighbor and you will live. Amen.