

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
August 28, 2022  
Luke 10:25-37  
The Sacred in the Ordinary: Neighbors

Our scripture this morning is a familiar one – whether you were raised in the church or not, most people in the US have heard the Parable of the Good Samaritan or are familiar with the concept of the Good Samaritan. This morning I invite you to try and hear the story with fresh ears, putting aside what you already know about the story. Jesus has just left Galilee and has begun the journey to Jerusalem. There is much to teach the disciples to prepare them for what lies ahead. Crowds and religious leaders are beginning to press in on Jesus, asking him questions, and getting responses that are not in their comfort zones. And often not in our comfort zones either. I invite you to think about how this familiar text is speaking into your life today, August 28, 2022. If you are able and willing, I invite you to come to the sermon talk back (in person or via Zoom) during the Adult Ed time to share your thoughts. Listen now for these words from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10.

An expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus 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 Jesus said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

But wanting to vindicate himself, the expert in the law 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 took off, 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 traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. The Samaritan 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?” The expert in the law said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

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I’m going to start my sermon this morning with a confession. I find the parable of the Good Samaritan really challenging to preach. We know the story. What more is there to say? We are called to be compassionate. We are called to be compassionate even those who may be different from us and those whom we may not like. This is what it means to love God and love neighbor. And we, as the capital “C” church are pretty good about that. I suspect that across the denominational, theological, and cultural divides that separate 21st century Christians, there would be a common embrace of this scripture as foundational to our faith. Everyone loves “The Good Samaritan.” So much so that it has become a synonym for anyone or any group who helps out those in need. A quick Google search of the term revealed entities as diverse as medical centers, food pantries, senior centers, shelters for the unhoused, and auto

repair shops. There are good Samaritan laws on the books in Michigan and many states that protect those who offer aid. And my favorite find is a restaurant in Nashville featuring a drink called the “Good Samaritan.” It is described as similar to a whiskey sour that has been “anointed with fragrances of a faraway lands.”<sup>1</sup> All that said, the ubiquity of the term “good samaritan” often affects the way hear this scripture. As soon as the opening lines are said, our brains can go into auto pilot – I know the story – I can tune out for a few minutes. After all, I know the correct answer when I am asked, “Who is my neighbor?”

For me, and maybe for some of you, my understanding of neighbor was shaped by a special neighborhood on TV, and in particular, a song that greeted me each afternoon, asking “...Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor?”<sup>2</sup>

*Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* was an eclectic place – there were the regulars like Mister McFeely, Officer Clemmons, handyman Negri and Bob Trow, the resident Mister Fix-it. And then there was the neighborhood within the neighborhood – the *Land of Make Believe*, governed by King Friday XIII and Queen Sara Saturday, featuring Lady Elaine Fairchild, Henrietta Pussycat, X the Owl, the Platypus family, and Daniel Striped Tiger.

You see in Mister Rogers' neighborhood, the definition of neighbor stretched beyond the conventional. You might say it stretched to the biblical.

“Who is my neighbor?” asks the lawyer in the passage we just heard from the Gospel of Luke. For the second week in a row, I will quote, writer and theologian Frederick Buechner. Buechner took up the case of the lawyer from this passage.

“When Jesus said to love your neighbor, a lawyer who was present asked him to clarify what he meant by neighbor. He wanted a legal definition he could refer to in case the question of loving one ever happened to come up. He presumably wanted something on the order of: “A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's own legal residence unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever.”

Buechner continues, “Instead Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, the point of which seems to be that your neighbor is to be construed as meaning anybody who needs you.”<sup>3</sup>

The lawyer in this parable asked, “Who is my neighbor?” But what I think he really meant was “Who is not my neighbor?” Whose pleas for health care can be ignored? Whose children do I not need to fund schooling for? Whose lives don't matter?

There are times in my life when I can see myself as the lawyer in this parable - wanting to carefully define just who deserves my attention, my care, my money. Times when I am living

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<sup>1</sup> <https://cocktailpartyapp.com/drinks/good-samaritan/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://genius.com/Fred-rogers-wont-you-be-my-neighbor-lyrics>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/5/21/neighbor>

with a mindset of scarcity and of fear. Living in a zero sum world where something for you means less for me. But Jesus modeled living in the abundance of God's love, where the view of neighbor and justice and mercy are expansive and not legalistic.

A view that is a lot like *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Fred Rogers showed us what it is like to live in a world where there were no barriers to being neighbors. And it wasn't just with his words, but with the actions on his show. In an article in *The Huffington Post*, Michael Long recounts two powerful storylines that model Fred Rogers' views on neighbors.

Long says, "By the time *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* went national in 1968, white backlash against the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and urban violence had taken the form of "white flight." Fearful for their lives and property, white residents had fled their city neighborhoods in unprecedented numbers. Against this backdrop, the first week of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* saw Mister Rogers enjoying a home visit from Mrs. Saunders, an African American teacher, and a small interracial group of her students. It was a simple visit with a hard-hitting message: Whites and blacks live, study, and play together in the *Neighborhood*.

Less than two months after Mrs. Saunders's visit, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and riots erupted in black neighborhoods across the nation. As televised images of the riots flooded the nation's households, Rogers began to develop a completely different image for his viewers: a startling image of a black police officer keeping everyone safe in the *Neighborhood*. This radical idea came to fruition in August 1968, when Francois Clemmons debuted as Officer Clemmons on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*."

Long continues "The role of Officer Clemmons took another symbolic turn in 1969, just after the first anniversary of the assassination of King, when Mister Rogers invited Clemmons to join him in soaking his feet in a wading pool. The four soaking feet, pasty white and light black, positioned Rogers as a thorough-going integrationist opposed to segregated swimming pools, backyards, and friendships."<sup>4</sup>

For those who know about Fred Rogers' background, it may be no surprise that his definition of neighbor was closer to that of Jesus. Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister, having earned his Master of Divinity degree from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 1963. He studied at the seminary while he was working as a puppeteer on a local TV show, a show where he developed many of the characters that would later appear on his PBS program. Rogers never pastored in a church, but he viewed his career in broadcasting as a ministry.

I have a somewhat "personal" connection to Mister Rogers. Both of my parents are from Pittsburgh. My dad remembered watching Rogers' local show *The Children's Corner* on TV. And when I was young, my dad took me to the studio where *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was filmed. I remember being shocked that the *Land of Make Believe* was in fact make believe. But that didn't matter to me in the long run, because each day when I came home from school, Fred Rogers taught me how to be a neighbor through words, music, and stories that reminded me over and over again that we share more in common than we realize.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/was-mister-rogers-racist\\_b\\_7939498](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/was-mister-rogers-racist_b_7939498)

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Fred Rogers said, "We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say, 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes."<sup>5</sup> So did Jesus.

Jesus was quoting texts from the Torah – the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy gives us the command to love God with heart, soul and mind. In the book of Leviticus we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourself and to care for the refugee or stranger in the land.<sup>6</sup> Part of that command to love is recognizing the dignity of each person God puts in our path. Recognizing their humanity. Recognizing their sacredness. Recognizing the value in relationships.

A few months ago, Kent Workman introduced me to an indigenous translation of the New Testament known as the *First Nations Version*. The First Nations Version is a retelling of Creator's Story from the scriptures, attempting to follow the traditions of the storytellers oral cultures. It is not a word-for-word translation, but rather a thought-for-thought translation. One of the delights in this version is the names of persons and places. The council of authors have followed Native naming traditions and used the "meaning" of names. Many names are used for God, including Creator, Giver of Breath and Most Holy One, depicting the varied attributes of God.<sup>7</sup> Jesus is named "Creator Sets Free," a beautiful definition of who Jesus is and what Jesus' mission was. I want to share the opening of our parable from the *First Nations Version*:

A scroll keeper, one who was skilled in his knowledge of tribal law, came to Creator Sets Free (Jesus) to test him and trap him in his words.

"Wisdomkeeper," he said. "What path must I walk to have the life of the world to come that never fades away, full of beauty and harmony?" He answered him, "What is written in your tribal law about this? Tell me, how do you see it?"

The scroll keeper spoke from the words of the law, "You must love the Great Spirit from deep within, with the strength of your arms, the thoughts of your mind and the courage of your heart, and you must love your fellow human beings in the same way you love yourselves."

"You have answered well," Creator Sets Free (Jesus) said back to him. If you walk this path you will live."

But the scroll keeper, wanting to look good to others, asked him, "Who are my fellow human beings?"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.fredrogersinstitute.org/archive?search=1&search\\_topic=6](https://www.fredrogersinstitute.org/archive?search=1&search_topic=6)

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18

<sup>7</sup> Wildman, Terry, M. *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*. First Nations Version Translation Council (Consultant Editor) Intervarsity Press, 2021. p.x -xii

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* p130

Who are my fellow human beings? This translation speaks me to me because it reminds me of our connectedness. It reminds me that we do not walk this earth not alone. We have a God whose love knows no bounds. A love so vast and deep, God chose to come to earth as a human so that we could more fully learn to value other human beings. God made a choice. And each of us makes choices each day. Hundreds and maybe thousands of choices.

In a commencement address he gave at Dartmouth College in June 2002, just about nine months before he died, Fred Rogers asked the graduating students to think about choices. He said, "I'm very much interested in choices, and what it is, and who it is, that enable us human beings to make the choices we make all through our lives. What choices lead to ethnic cleansing? What choices lead to healing? What choices lead to the destruction of the environment, the erosion of the Sabbath, suicide bombings, or teenagers shooting teachers. What choices encourage heroism in the midst of chaos?"<sup>9</sup>

What choices are we going to make in our lives? Are we going to strictly define who gets our mercy? Who gets daily bread? Whose debts are forgiven? Or can we rise to the challenge of loving our fellow human beings in the same way we love ourselves. If so, I suggest we start with prayer. In a few minutes we will engage in our Prayers of the People in a different way. In a way that reminds us to find the sacred in the ordinary rhythms of life – our daily prayers for the world and each other and in the extraordinary moments when we are connected to each other through the love of Creator Sets Free. Join me in prayer...

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<sup>9</sup> <https://home.dartmouth.edu/news/2018/03/revisiting-fred-rogers-2002-commencement-address>