

“Please Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

January 13, 2019

Won’t You Be My Neighbor? Learning from Mister Rogers series – Season of Epiphany

Note: We’re grateful to Rev. Amanda Rohrs-Dodge for the idea for this series

I grew up in the country just south of Mason - about seven miles out of town on Plains Road. My closest neighbor was my paternal grandmother. Her house was actually on my parents’ property and just a short walk across a driveway and past a couple of barns. I was there all of the time - usually finding the spearmint leaves in the candy bowl or some other treat!

The next closest was Mrs. Ellsworth and the Lawson’s - probably at least 1/4 mile away in each direction, then a little farther was Snow’s and Forrester’s. From there, neighbors were a mile away or a couple of roads over. And yet, we called them our neighbors.

Sometimes my parents and our neighbors showed up in each other’s driveways or barns to chat. They helped each other when it was time to cut hay or when someone was sick and needed help with farm chores. At Halloween, we went to neighbors’ homes where we received homemade goodies or regular-size candy bars because they didn’t get a lot of kids - just the neighbors.

Certainly the idea of neighbors and the neighborhood has changed since Mister Rogers first aired in 1968. Think about how differently we approach the notion of neighbors. My parents still live in my childhood home, but there are more neighbors on Plains Road now - newer homes, fewer working farms, and not as much connection.

Perhaps your neighbors have changed over the years because you’ve moved or because new folks have moved in. We’re more transient these days for lots of reasons like job changes or less family ties that keep us in one place. It’s possible that we may not even know our neighbors well at all. We know our immediate neighbors, and sometimes we chat when we’re outside, but I don’t know everyone on Clayton Avenue or in our subdivision, even though we wave to each other as we pass by.

Some would say that we’re more insular and isolated. I think that depends on where you live - and probably who you are. Technology may connect us in some ways, but we know that face-to-face contact between people who live in close proximity isn’t quite the same. Neighborhoods are what we’ve hung onto more than neighbors. That’s true for us - we live in Norton Shores or Lakeside or the name of the housing development. We talk about where we live - location - rather than who our neighbors are.

The spontaneity of “dropping in” doesn’t happen even with the closest of friends, let alone neighbors. It might even be strange to have someone just “stop by” without warning - or without an invitation or setting a date and time. We just don’t do it. And when was the last time you borrowed a cup of something from a neighbor?

So what about the invitation Mister Rogers offers? “Please, won’t you be my neighbor?” It’s an invitation to relationship - to community. For Mister Rogers, the neighborhood was a safe place and a place where people cared about each other. That may not ring true for some, especially for those who live in areas where violence and chaos reign. But I wonder if we can reclaim the call to neighboring - to being a neighbor?

Jesus calls us to connection with each other, and he also challenges the notion of neighbor. The word “neighbor” appears as far back as Exodus and continues to show up - mostly referring to “your people.” And the concern was in how one treated a neighbor - not taking what wasn’t theirs or coveting a neighbor’s stuff.

But Jesus seeks to expand the idea of “neighbor,” which had become very limited by religious leaders. For Jews in Jesus’ day, a neighbor was a faithful Jew. Everyone else was considered an enemy. So when Jesus quotes the Law and then includes enemies as those we’re called to love, it was a completely upside-down notion!

The idea of praying for our enemies is a powerful word to us as we face a time of great division in our country. To seek revenge is not the way that we live out our belovedness - or reflect the image of God in ourselves or others. And Jesus calls us to perfect love - to keep on striving for the love of God to control our hearts and minds. When we struggle to love our enemies or when we vilify and fear those who don’t look like us or speak the same language or come from the same country, we should hear Jesus again. Perfect love casts out fear, and Jesus calls us to live in love without fear.

And Jesus tells a parable about neighboring with the Good Samaritan when someone asks, “Who is my neighbor?” It turns out that a neighbor isn’t someone who’s just like us or who lives close by, but a neighbor is someone in need. How does that challenge us to serve others in our community and beyond it?

For Paul, his conversion and his journey to spread the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles show that his understanding of being a neighbor meant that he was conscious of how his faith walk affected others. He was concerned about anyone being a stumbling block for others. He experienced the incredible grace of God and the power of God’s salvation, and he wanted everyone to know that it was possible for them, too.

He wrote to the church in Rome and called them to be diligent in caring for each other. He told them to accept one another because they were accepted and loved by God. Their witness was just as important as his as they grew in faith together. Paul

would agree with Fred Rogers when it comes to the connection between loving God and loving neighbor.

SHOW SLIDE: “The more I think about it, the more I wonder if God and neighbor are somehow One. ‘Loving God, Loving neighbor’- the same thing? For me, coming to recognize that God loves every neighbor is the ultimate appreciation!” (Rogers, p. 163)

Perhaps you know Walter Strickler. He sits in his lawn chair on Pontaluna Rd. and waves - every day. Take a look...**SHOW MEDIA**

I hope you heard his answer when Andy O’Reilly asked if he had a title. “Just a neighbor...” And why does he sit and wave? “To promote Jesus. People are looking for something, and Jesus is the answer.”

Walter has a deep sense of his calling - that even his small act of kindness, hospitality, and community makes a difference. Maybe it changes the perspective of someone who’s having a bad day or reminds someone that they’re not alone. Without anything other than a friendly wave of his hand, Walter shares the love of Christ boldly and freely.

Today in your bulletin you have a page of suggestions - an invitation to consider how you might be a better neighbor. Maybe you do these things already, but maybe you could add one or two to your daily living. I watched people smile when I or my kids hold a door open - nothing big - but something that was helpful and kind. Some of the suggestions here are a reminder that we are connected to each other, and we can celebrate that connection even in small ways.

Hear Fred Rogers: “Imagine what our real neighborhoods would be like if each of us offered, as a matter of course, just one kind word to another person. There have been so many stories about the lack of courtesy, the impatience of today’s world, road rage and even restaurant rage. Sometimes, all it takes is one kind word to nourish another person. Think of the ripple effect that can be created when we nourish someone. One kind empathetic word has a wonderful way of turning into many.” (Rogers, p. 185)

What would it be like for us to extend that invitation – won’t you be my neighbor? - maybe not with words, but with small acts of kindness and grace where we are? That’s what Jesus calls us to. That’s what Fred Rogers did using television as a tool. That’s what Walter does. And we can do something.

Friends, it matters - and it makes a difference. May God help us be good neighbors.

Thanks be to God. Amen. PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE...