

“Look for the Helpers”

January 27, 2019

Learning from Mister Rogers series – Season of Epiphany – Blessing of the Helpers

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

We started this series claiming the truth that each of us is beloved by God – and that when Jesus condenses the commandments of God into two - love God with everything you are and love your neighbor as yourself – he's challenging us to see ourselves as beloved – not better than anyone else, but truly loved and cherished by God our Creator.

Last week, we talked about the gift of diversity – how we're called to be unified - not uniform – as we live out our faith in Jesus. Today we celebrate so many who are helpers in our community and give thanks for them as a part of our larger neighborhood.

It's so important for us to remember that we're not alone in a crisis. A part of my field education in seminary was serving as a chaplain in a trauma hospital. It helped to know that I wasn't called to chaplaincy, and it was an incredible learning experience, and I'm forever grateful for the many people who serve as first responders in times of tragedy and those who serve faithfully every day – walking with others in joy and struggle. Those who help are a gift. We heard it earlier, but I invite you to hear Fred Rogers' words again: **SHOW SLIDE:** “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, “Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” To this day, especially in times of “disaster” I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers- so many caring people in this world.” (Rogers, 187)

Rogers' call to find comfort reminds us that we **can** look around and see people helping. Especially when we face uncertainty, remembering the helpers in our lives and in our world matters. I invite you to hear Rogers offer more advice to parents and caregivers about how to help kids in a time of crisis as he was frequently asked to help kids and families - **MEDIA**

Rogers' role as a neighbor is helping someone else in need. And the call is as urgent as ever. In a world where people are bought and sold as property - as many as 20 million caught in human slavery, where economic disparity is a reality, where violence seems to reign in so many communities, where natural disasters happen, where life is sometimes very hard, we need the reminder that we're called to be neighbors – helpers

– to one another who honor one another as beloved children of God. People are “neighbors to love rather than commodities to use.”

Maybe that’s why the parable of the Good Samaritan has stuck over thousands of years. In the Gospel of Luke, it comes right on the heels of Jesus condensing the commandments into love God and love neighbor. It’s the same legal expert who wants Jesus to define “neighbor” for him.

Maybe it’s because he wants to limit that definition – so it’s just people like me. Remember that Jesus, though, seeks to make “neighbor” and “enemy” the same. Love your enemy just like you love your neighbor. The kicker here is that the Samaritan – the enemy – is the one who is the real neighbor. If the man asking wanted an easy answer, he didn’t get it. It’s not the Jewish man who reached out to an enemy, but the one he considered an enemy who reached out to him.

The problem we face is that this parable may be too familiar. This scenario that Jesus uses is so well-known that there are awards given, laws named, and counseling centers and hospitals called “Good Samaritan.” There’s Good Neighbor Pharmacy and State Farm Insurance - “And like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.” Just this week, one of our local State Farm agents was advertising office space and said, “Please won’t you be my neighbor?” It was a total convergence!

So we get it, Jesus. We have to love our neighbor. We have to help those in trouble. But Jesus is really challenging the idea of “neighbor,” which is a big deal. For everyone listening, the idea of “neighbor” is vital to who we are down to our very core. We need and want good neighbors – it’s vital to our health! And we want to be good neighbors, but sometimes with strings attached – neighbors to a few, but not to everyone.

We want it to be easy to be a neighbor. We don’t want to work too hard. We want people to count on us, and we want to count on them, but Jesus has something more in mind here. Being a neighbor is an issue for Jesus, and he makes us look at our idea of “neighbor” because, if we’re honest, we’re asking the same question as this man – *who is my neighbor?*

Have you ever asked someone, “Hey, do you want to be my neighbor?” We don’t usually ask people to be our neighbors; it just happens. We create community around us. Fred Rogers might say, “Neighbors are people who live close to each other.” But it’s not limited to distance or location. He’d also say, “Neighbors look at each other; they talk to each other; they listen to each other. That’s how they get to know each other.”

Jesus is encouraging us to build relationships with people we don’t know, but he’s also going back to the basic principle of responding when someone is in need. The

Samaritan is our guy - the one we should be like. Every time I read this parable, I cheer for him. And yet, it's easy to ignore the challenge.

Think about if the priest, Levite, and Samaritan got together to swap stories, all three of them could legitimately say, "I was there! You remember that time that guy got beat up on the way down to Jericho? Well, I was there!" All three of them could say, "I was there." The priest and the Levite walked by - and walked away. Only the Samaritan was the neighbor and the helper. He was present as the incarnational, in-the-flesh, love of God. And isn't that interesting? The one unexpected becomes the one who represents God.

If we follow Jesus, if we hear him, if we are the Body of Christ, then we have the call and opportunity to represent for the world nothing less than the love of God in action. We're not the only ones who love others or help, but if we don't embody the love of God and offer Christ to others, then how can we be the Body of Christ? Part of the power in this parable is the way that Jesus turns the conversation, but part of the power is how he keeps on calling us to listen. Is the world seeing the love of God through you and me?

"Who is my neighbor?" this legal expert asks. Jesus told him what to do, or at least directed him to what he already knew. He knew the 613 laws, and Jesus sums them up: "Love God with your all, and love your neighbor." This guy is a good Jew. He knows the Law, and Jesus boils 613 points down to the essentials. This man can recite the Law with the best of them, but he wants more. "What do you mean by 'neighbor?' Who is that?"

Luke says it's all a test, but no matter. This man knows what he should do, so why the question? Is he avoiding responsibility? It reminds me of an oral exam. You may know what to say, but what about applying it? He can answer the question about loving God and neighbor, but will he pay more than lip service? Will others see the love of God through him?

Sometimes we want a neat formula for behavior, especially for Christian behavior. Sometimes I just want a clear answer - God, what do I do? How do I make this faith thing work? Well, Jesus doesn't do neat very well. Most of the time, we get into more questions than answers. Or if there are answers, they're tough ones. Here Jesus takes the question from a simple "Who is my neighbor?" to "How do I love my neighbor?"

Jesus is always teaching about the Kingdom of God. "Neighbor" means more than proximity. "Neighbor" means more than people who are like us in race, color, class, creed, lifestyle, education, and so on. "Neighbor" means that we are connected because of our shared humanity. It's about seeing one another as human beings.

That's why this story that Jesus tells is so revolutionary. First, the scene. This road from Jericho to Jerusalem was rough. In 20 miles, it descended 3,300 feet, which made for difficult terrain where robbers loved to hide. Anyone was a target, especially someone traveling all alone! And all of these men seem to be traveling alone.

Secondly, the characters. The priest and Levite are church folk. They are you and me. They have every reason to stop and care for the dying man, but professional excuses or religious laws for not stopping win out. The people listening were waiting for the end. And I bet they figured on a good Jewish layperson stopping to help.

But they have to be so surprised when it's a Samaritan – someone they would've called a "half-breed," no good, doesn't worship like me, dirty, smelly, don't want to be around him, get away from me Samaritan! He has every reason not to stop, and we're even told that he's on a journey. He's not just going from Jerusalem to Jericho, but he's got somewhere to go! How many of us want to be interrupted in the middle of a trip? And yet he is the one who has compassion. He is the one who meets the need. He is the one who knows who is neighbor is.

Someone said, "Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like to live inside somebody else's skin (or walking in their shoes!). It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you, too."

The man from Samaria changes his plans, cleans the wound, pays two days' wages out of his own pocket, and sacrifices for the sake of someone else. He's in it for the long haul. It costs time, money, position, power, and privilege. It means getting over the fact that sometimes people screw up and make trouble for themselves. (You know someone was saying, "He shouldn't have been on that road all alone. What was he thinking?") It means looking to God's mercy rather than our judgment.

Mister Rogers said, "All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we're giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That's one of the things that connects us as neighbors – in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver."

We're more apt to focus on the Samaritan in the parable. And we should hear Jesus' call to compassion. But the Samaritan also challenges us to bring hope. He challenges us to live by Kingdom values – to love God and neighbor – and to get a bigger picture of our neighborhood. He calls us to be helpers wherever we are and wherever we find ourselves in our neighborhood. Jesus challenges us to get over the questions and arguments and look at real life - *how will you love your neighbor?*

Another piece of wisdom from Mister Rogers: “The purpose of life is to listen - to yourself, to your neighbor, to your world and to God and, when the time comes, to respond in as helpful a way as you can find... from within and without.” (Rogers, 167)

How many of us struggle to listen? Who is a better talker than listener? Listening is a powerful tool as we seek to love God and love neighbor. Love forces us to look at ourselves and our community and do something - examine our fears, our motives, our prejudices, and our privilege and reach out to others to seek understanding, engage others in honest conversations around difficult issues, make sure we’re thanking our helpers, and use the social capital we have to make a difference - because we all have some influence where we are.

Yes, let’s look for the helpers. But let’s also recognize that we’re called to be helpers in our community – wherever we are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE...