

Becoming a Good Samaritan
"Who Is My Neighbor?"
Luke 10:25-37

As children, many members of my generation watched a television program called "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." I'm guessing that you've probably heard of the show, even if it didn't coincide with your own childhood. It featured a warm, compassionate man named Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who was dedicated to creating a nurturing television experience for children. This was not a flashy or fast-paced program. It consisted mainly of Mr. Rogers talking gently to his home audience of little children, interacting with fictional neighbors, and taking trips to the "Land of Make Believe" which was populated by puppet characters of his own making. If you know nothing else about the show, you've probably heard of the show's opening sequence. Mr. Rogers would enter his home, take off his jacket and shoes, and then slowly put on a sweater and tennis shoes, all the while singing a song called, **"Won't you be my neighbor?"** The assumption of the entire program was that children, no matter where they lived, or what their lives at home were like, were neighbors of the kind and gentle Mr. Rogers. As he'd finish his little song, he'd then greet the children by saying, "Hello neighbor!" Mr. Rogers succeeded in creating a place - even if it was only on the TV screen - where little ones could feel safe and loved. No matter who they were or where they were, without regard to race, religion or politics, even if their real world lives were chaotic or frightening - they had a friend in their good neighbor Mr. Rogers. I'm pretty sure Mr. Rogers was influenced by today's reading from Luke, which is all about being a good neighbor.

In the reading, we find Jesus being questioned by an expert in Jewish law, who asks him what one has to do to inherit eternal life. More precisely, he wants to know what Jesus has to say on the subject so that he can contrast it with the teachings of other Rabbis and then stand in judgment of Jesus. We must not think the expert in the law is sincerely coming to Jesus in order to learn. The Bible says his goal is to test Jesus. Sensing this, Jesus doesn't give him a direct answer. Instead, he throws the question back at the man, asking "What is written in the Old Testament Law? How do you read it?" In other words, "You're an expert in the law - you should know this." This puts the man on the defensive, because he is no longer putting Jesus to the test, but rather being tested himself. So he falls back on a well known answer - one that had been articulated by other respected Rabbis - "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus agrees with this interpretation of the law. In fact, elsewhere in Scripture, these words appear on the lips of Jesus as his own summary of the Old Testament law. But, since the expert is trying to test Jesus, and doesn't want Jesus to succeed in turning the tables on him, he persists with another question: "Who then, is my neighbor." In response, Jesus tells the story that we know as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. During the next several weeks, we will be exploring the implications of this parable for our lives as followers of Jesus. But today we're going to focus specifically on this one question, "Who is my neighbor?" The answer may or may not seem obvious to you - but just to make sure we are all on the same page, let's consider what the Bible tells us about our neighborhood.

First of all, **you don't choose your neighbors.** In the parable, Jesus tells us about a man, almost certainly a Jewish man, traveling the dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho. The road was dangerous because it was remote, and a frequent site of violent robberies. This

is exactly what happens to the man in the story. He is attacked, beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the side of the road. As he lay there bleeding, several people come along. The first two are his countrymen - fellow Jews. One is a priest and the other a Levite, both of whom have leadership roles at the Temple in Jerusalem. They are both very religious men. And yet, when they see the bloody robbery victim, both of them keep walking, passing him by on the opposite side of the road. They couldn't stay far enough away. There has been much discussion as to why these religious leaders would ignore the injured man, but that isn't the point of the parable. What is important is that the next traveler on the road does stop and help. Not only does he bandage his wounds, but he anoints the man with costly oil and wine, and then takes him to an inn and pays the innkeeper to take care of him. More than that, he says that he'll come back in a couple days to pay for any additional expenses the innkeeper might incur in caring for the wounded man. Jesus tells us that this compassionate traveler was a Samaritan.

A lot can be said about Samaritans. To summarize, Samaritans and Jews, as a rule, hated each other. This hatred emerged from a long history of ethnic and religious prejudices, and resentment over actions those prejudices had inspired. Again, the details of this are not important to the parable. The important thing is that the relationship between Jews and Samaritans was just about as warm as the relationship between Rush Limbaugh and Nancy Pelosi. The remarkable thing about the parable, then, is that the one who comes to the aid of the wounded Jewish traveler is not a fellow countryman, and not a good religious Jew, but rather a Samaritan that he would have hated. And yet, it is the Samaritan who shows compassion and acts as a neighbor.

We don't get to choose our neighbors. You may select where you live, but you don't control who lives next door. Neither do you control who lives in your city, state, country, or world. Each one of us is born into a world populated by billions of other people - over six and a half billion people at this point in time. We have no say over who these other people are, what they believe, or how they live. They are, nevertheless, our neighbors, because we all share the same planet and are all created by the same God. Do you think the Jews and Samaritans would have chosen to share the same earth? Each group would have rejoiced if the other group completely ceased to exist. No doubt, there are people, groups, or nations that we might feel we could do without. But when we indulge this feeling, we set foot on a slippery slope that has too often led to things like genocide, slavery, racism, terrorism and hatred. These evils never succeed in making a world of mutual peace, security and happiness - they only make things worse. A fundamental fact about this global neighborhood is that we don't get to choose our neighbors. By God's providence, we all share the same planet. Each one of us has six and a half billion neighbors that we don't get to choose, and they aren't going anywhere. In this context, we hear Jesus affirming the commandment: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

Of course, the fact that we have all these neighbors doesn't mean we acknowledge them. Consider the priest and the Levite who walked by their injured countryman. They would certainly have preferred that he not be there. It would have been much easier on their consciences if he wasn't. Even so, they pretended that he didn't exist. This can be a temptation for us as well. We may not choose who we share the planet with, but we can pretend they aren't there. We'd certainly be more comfortable if we weren't confronted with

people who are suffering, oppressed or in need. It would be more pleasant for us if we weren't forced to deal with people who have very different ideas and lifestyles. Like the priest and Levite, we might try to "walk by on the other side of the road." But even this is getting hard to do. In these days of mass media, instant communication and the internet, it is increasing difficult to pretend our neighbors don't exist. I know because I've tried. During the days following the September 11th terrorist attacks, I began to feel overwhelmed by the horrific suffering and violence that filled the news. In an attempt to escape it, I began watching CMT - the Country Music Television network, instead of CNN. I don't even like country music, but I was just desperate to avoid the terrible pain of those times. Even so, there was no ignoring the tragedy. It had entered my consciousness and my conscience. I'm sure you know the feeling - that feeling of knowing horrible things are happening to people, and wanting to close your eyes to it because it is so terrible and so overwhelming. But we can't genuinely plead ignorance of our neighbors and their suffering because they are always before us - whether in person or via the news media. We can't choose our neighbors, and we can't pretend they aren't there. We hear Jesus affirming the commandment "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

While we can't choose our neighbors, Jesus clearly teaches that we can choose to obey the commandment. We can choose to be good neighbors. That's what the Samaritan chose to do and what the priest and Levite chose not to do. Everyone on this planet is our neighbor. We are all connected; what happens to people on one side of the globe has an impact on the people on the other side. We are all in this together. Jesus challenges us to recognize this reality and to live as good neighbors to one another without regard to prejudice, politics, religion, nationality or any other distinction. Jesus challenges us to take off our blinders and see the suffering of our neighbors, and do something about it rather than ignoring it. The commandment is to "love your neighbor as you love yourself." In answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus shows us that everyone is our neighbor. The only question is how good a neighbor we will be. He invites us to make the choice to be a good neighbor.

Jesus told some very provocative parables. The parable of the Good Samaritan is especially challenging, because it tears down our walls of self-satisfaction and rationalization. We can't refuse to care about or to help someone because they are of a different race, nationality or social class. They are our neighbors, no matter how different they may be. We can't refuse to help them because it is inconvenient, or because it will cost us time or money. They are our neighbors. We can't pass them by on the opposite side of the road and pretend we don't see them. Let's not kid ourselves and act like we don't know. We know our suffering neighbors are there, even if we shun the hard work of learning more about their plight so that we might make a real difference in their lives. They are our neighbors whom we are called to love as much as we love ourselves. Jesus calls us to follow the example of the Samaritan; to have compassion, to make the time and effort to learn about our neighbors suffering, and then to do something about it. The expert in the law wanted to engage Jesus in a theoretical discussion about who this neighbor was that he was supposed to love. Jesus challenge to him, and to us, is simple: Everyone is your neighbor, so go and act like it. "Love your neighbor as you love yourself!"