

# WON'T YOU BE A NEIGHBOR?

Sermon, July 10, 2022

Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 10:25-37

He was a lonely eight-year-old boy who was a bit of a clumsy, chubby, awkward child. One day after school, a group of school bullies started chasing this boy, calling after him with the taunt of "Fat Freddy." "We're going to get you, Fat Freddy!" Terrified, he ran toward the home of a family friend, an elderly widow who lived in the neighborhood, praying desperately she would be home ... and she was. She graciously opened her door, let him in and gave him safe haven. Years later, as an adult, he said the answered prayer of that gracious encounter with his neighbor greatly increased his faith in God. Freddy's full name was Fred Rogers ... Fred Rogers, as in "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." The memory of this elderly neighbor who took him in and kept him safe from the bullies was one big reason being part of a safe, loving neighborhood ... and BEING a neighbor ... was so important to Mister Rogers.

Some of you may know Mister Rogers was a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ordained minister; he was ordained to a specialized ministry in the Pittsburgh Presbytery as "an evangelist to work with children and families through the mass media." His clerical "robe" was a cardigan, his congregation a television audience of mostly children. I learned his adult daily routine, almost to the day he died in 2003, was to wake up every morning about 5:30 AM, have a devotional time of prayer, Bible reading and singing of hymns, then he would go swimming to exercise. Following the swim, he would weigh himself on a scale. He was meticulous about keeping his weight steady, probably because he never wanted to be called Fat Freddy ever again. He reportedly weighed exactly 143 pounds his whole adult life. In fact, it was reported that 143 was his favorite number. Do you know why? Because it takes one letter to spell, "I," four letters to spell, "Love," and three letters to spell, "You." 1-4-3 "I-love-you." (Now, I was personally bemused by that ... according to my bathroom scale, I would have to say, "I, I love you.")

From a March 6, 2000 article in Christianity Today: "Mister Rogers, in his silent, subtle, mighty way, rescues children from a world that would too soon warp their souls. He summons them to a special place where trust arises and does not disappoint. Hearts come alive, awakened by his unconditional acceptance. 'Everybody longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is capable of loving,' he says." <sup>1</sup> He wanted to provide a safe haven, a place, a neighborhood, a refuge where children could come and be loved, nurtured and protected, which, by the way, is also an integral part of the ministry of the church! It's a rough world out there, and people of all ages are in need of sanctuary, neighbors who can provide a safe and secure place where we can find refuge, protection, and love. And with his opening theme song, Mr. Rogers would give his winsome invitation to his audience, "Won't you be my neighbor?"

Today's parable from the Gospel of Luke is perhaps the most familiar of all Jesus' parables. I think the main point of this familiar parable is not to tell us that if we love God we must also love the neighbor. It's certainly one of the points, but the lawyer apparently already knew that; in fact, he told Jesus that. It's not even the main point of this parable to judge those who have walked past and/or ignored those in need. There are other passages in the Bible that judge us for that. I think the main point unique to this parable is to address the man's question, "Who is my neighbor?", by re-focusing the question, "Who is my neighbor?" to "To whom should you BE a neighbor? Hence the sermon title, a slight adaptation of Mr. Rogers' winsome invitation: "Won't you be a neighbor?"

We read an expert in the law stood to "test" Jesus. "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, many have traditionally understood this question to be, "What do I have to do to get to heaven when I die?" But not everyone thinks so, including me. I've talked about this at least nine times before, (last time October 10, 2021) <sup>2</sup> but the Greek term translated "eternal" can have other nuances to it that don't necessarily apply to time, such as fullness, richness, never-ending (as in overflowing and/or perpetual) abundance ... these are *qualitative* as opposed to *quantitative* nuances. Think of a moment or a time in your life that was just so full, so rich, that you never wanted it to end ... that *could* be the nuance of this man's use of the term "eternal." In the words of Frederick Buechner, "We think of eternal life as what happens when life ends. We would do better to think of it as what happens when life begins."

I think he's asking: "Jesus, what do I have to do to get or acquire a good and full life? What is it that I have to do to get and use and live my life right?" Many of us are here before Jesus each Sunday morning for the same reason this man is before Jesus in this text. We are here because we want to get our lives right. We want our lives to be full; full of zest, full

<sup>1</sup> "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" Christianity Today, March 6, 2000 by Wendy Murray Zoba. Also at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/march6/1.38.html>

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from that sermon: "The ancient Greek term translated 'eternal' has other nuances to it that don't necessarily apply to quantitative time; nuances such as fullness, richness, abundance ... nuances that are about quality of life as opposed to quantity of life. Think of a moment or a time in your life that was just so full, so rich, that you just wanted the clock to stop, you never wanted that time to end ... well, that's a taste of the nuance of this use of the Greek term 'eternal,' as in 'timeless.' Lending a little weight to this argument is that the word translated 'life' is not the Greek word 'bios' (βίος), which means physical life, but the word is 'zoe' (ζωή) which implies more of a quality of life. In English, we talk about 'living,' as in breathing, and we talk about 'living,' as in 'living it up.'" The latter implies vigorous fullness, rich fulfillment, quality enjoyment ... a zestful life, a life that is full to the hilt. Where we use the one word "live" to mean two relatively different things, the Greeks used two ... again, "bios" is the living, heart-beating, biological life, and "zoe" is the living-it-up, zestful, fulfilling-to-the hilt, quality-kind of life. Somebody can be "bios" alive, but "zoe" dead; in the current vernacular, that's someone who needs to "get a life."

of purpose, full of significance, honoring to God. Jesus' response is to say, "Well, you're a lawyer. What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The man responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." "Right!" Jesus says. "Do this, and you will live!" This IS a good answer, and Jesus affirms it! He's not giving a sardonic reply to a testy lawyer; He's giving an enthusiastic reply of affirmation to a man who apparently wants to fully understand and honor the Law and he apparently got it right! Jesus' reply, "Do this and you will live!" In so many words, "Keep on doing this, and you will come alive! You'll find life to be fuller, more abundant and delightful as you keep on loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself." Again, I really don't think this is solely about esoteric pie in the sky when we die by and by. This man's question is an earnest and practical and immediate question about how to *have* life and *live* life here and now!

The text continues, "But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" This has often been (mis)understood as the response of a self-righteous man trying to "justify himself" in the eyes of others; however, again I don't think so. In its simplest terms, to "justify" means to *get* or *put* something right, to get something "lined up" right. When you justify a document on the computer, you are trying to get everything lined up and neat and "right" as it can be. I think his "Desiring to justify himself" is a good thing, because this man really wanted to get his life lined up right; he really wants to know how to straighten out his life. And he keeps pressing ("testing" as in *examining*) Jesus for answers on how to do so, and that's commendable! Try reading this as, "Trying to get his life just right, he asked, 'And who is my neighbor?'" It is in response to that question Jesus tells this parable.

You know the story. A man left Jerusalem, walking toward Jericho, a seventeen mile hike in a relatively desolate wilderness. Along the way he fell into the hands of robbers who beat him, robbed him and left him half dead. The first person to walk by after this incident was a priest, who saw the victim, passed by on the other side, and kept going. The next person to come by was a Levite, who also saw him, also passed by and kept walking. Now, both of these men were religious professionals. We don't know why they walked by this man who was clearly in need; some scholars think they didn't want to come near because the man appeared dead, and to touch a corpse would have defiled them according to ceremonial law, rendering them unfit for duty for weeks so they wouldn't be able to serve or do their professional duties. I think that's giving the religious professionals a significant benefit of the doubt, but that's one thought. (Or maybe they thought he had Covid! Lord knows how many people have used that as an excuse to not do what they are supposed to do, but I digress.) Others think it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over at that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around, or maybe they thought the man on the ground was faking, acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to lure them for quick and easy mugging, which is not all that uncommon a ruse for thugs. "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" (instead of asking, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?") We really don't know why they walked by ... maybe they were just being jerks, which is the most common interpretation. However, we don't know and it's as if Jesus is telling us, "Don't look for the moral of the story there. Keep going." Next comes the Samaritan. When he sees this victim in need of mercy, he immediately takes the risks involved to care for him and tend to his needs at considerable cost and inconvenience to himself. Then Jesus asks, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Notice the twist. The lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" has been changed, as Jesus now asks, "Who was a neighbor to this man?" Like all good teachers, Jesus is constantly trying to get people to ask the right questions. Do you want to learn how to get a good and full life? Do you want to get your life right? Well, begin by asking the right questions! Our question shouldn't be, "Who is my neighbor?" but "To whom shall I be a neighbor?" In the end, it is not really about who our neighbors are; it's about who we are. As someone put it, "If you want to make a difference, you have to BE different." You learn and practice what it means to be a neighbor yourself! Won't YOU be a neighbor?

So, to ask the question as Jesus reframed it, "To whom shall I be a neighbor?" The short answer is, "Anyone God brings across your path who is in need of mercy." To be a neighbor is to look with the eyes of grace and mercy upon **all** whom God brings your way who may be in need. Now, that's a lot of people! The great seventeenth century theologian Jeremy Taylor used to counsel aspiring ministers to "Speak kindly to everyone you meet, for everyone has a problem." Everyone has been or is being beat up by some "robbers" in life; all of us have our battles. The great twentieth century theologian ... Ann Landers ... wrote basically the same thing. She wrote, "Be kind to people. The world needs kindness so much. You never know what sort of battles other people are fighting. Often just a soft word or a warm compliment can be immensely supportive. You can do a great deal of good by just being considerate, by extending a little friendship, going out of your way to do just one nice thing, or saying one good word." We come across people every single day who are being beat up by the "robbers" and vicissitudes of this life or are being harassed by threatening bullies calling them names. Won't you be a neighbor? A neighbor who displays mercy and offers a graceful hand or a caring word of help.

You want to get your life right? Do you want a life so full you just don't want it to ever end? Then love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And then go on to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Do this, Jesus affirms, and you will come alive! And in doing so, you become the very hands and feet and voice of Jesus Christ reaching out in love and compassion for all in need of mercy whom God brings your way. **Won't you be a neighbor** ... if for no other reason than there once was a time Jesus stopped and showed mercy to you.