

Jake Miles Joseph

Candidate Weekend Sermon: *Won't You be my Neighbor?*

Luke 10

July 10, 2016: Plymouth Congregational UCC, Fort Collins, CO.

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,
A beautiful day for a neighbor,
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?

It's a neighborly day in this beautywood,
A neighborly day for a beauty,
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?

I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you,
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

So let's make the most of this beautiful day,
Since we're together, we might as well say,
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?
Won't you be my neighbor?¹

Hi neighbors,

How many of you have ever heard this song called *Won't You be my Neighbor?* It came into so many of our homes over countless TV sets beginning in 1963 and ending in 2006. As the opening sequence of *Mr. Rodgers' Neighborhood*, this simple song has come to symbolize a way of communicating educational content to children through the medium of public television, but more than any other contribution of this iconic show, Mr. Rodgers' Neighborhood came to represent (for many of us) the very idea of "neighborhood" and "neighborliness" to generations (literally) of Americans and Canadians.

What Mr. Rodgers was subtly and perhaps even subversively teaching, beyond the superficial lessons about how to make apple cider or music classes with Yo-Yo Ma, was **fundamental lessons in community ethics** in diversity and how to be a neighbor, a friend, and a good person. Mr. Rodgers taught us all ethics lessons for children. Like Jesus, Mr. Fred Rodgers used object lessons (simple stories) or parables to teach a subtle, really simple yet consistent message of love and community pillars of love, hope, and sharing of resources and life in the global neighborhood.

Now, you might ask yourselves, why or how on earth is there so much similarity between the message of Jesus and the message implicitly placed within the adventures and stories of Mr. Rodgers' Neighborhood? Mr. Rodgers, as it turns out had a secret. He wasn't a "Mr." Rodgers at all, but rather he was actually The Reverend Fred Rodgers of the Presbytery of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Shocking, I know! Who knew that ministers could ever be THAT interesting? My guess is that the name, "The Reverend Rodgers' Neighborhood," just didn't have the same appeal to the marketers as *Mr. Rodgers' Neighborhood*. During seminary at The Presbyterian Church's historic Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Fred Rodgers who held another degree degree in music composition felt a calling to ministry for families and community hope through television. It was not a traditional or a settled ministry in a pulpit like this one, but it was a

¹ Fred Rodgers, "Won't you be my neighbor," *Mr. Rodgers Neighborhood*.

calling to bring God's radical realm to a new wider neighborhood of a television audience without ever naming God or Jesus at all. It was a radical ministry of parable and example... much like Christ's ministry.

Fred Rodgers was an unsettled minister with a deep call that was affirmed well before this sort of thing was ordinary in his calling by his denomination. His message is simple and, as we will see, very radical as encapsulated/ summarized in this question: "Won't you be my neighbor?"

We hear this song over and over, know the tune, and recognize the words, but do we ever stop to think how counter-intuitive and even counter-cultural they are? Won't you be my neighbor? What is The Rev. Rodgers trying to say about being a neighbor in this song?

Most of us have moved several times in our lifetimes. Already, in the past several years, I have moved more times than I would like to count through college and graduate school. We all lead pretty unsettled modern lives in these times. We are constantly forced to recreate neighborhoods. ***But, think back to the last time you moved, did you have the option to choose who would be your neighbor? Did you pick your house or apartment based on the neighbors?*** Think about it...before you put money down on the house or before signing the lease, did you go [KOCK LOUDLY ON PULPIT] door to door and ask everyone, "Hi, won't you be my neighbor?" How often do we get to really get to pick and choose our neighbors? Can you imagine your neighbors' reactions if you were to go door-to-door asking that question!? More likely than not, they would be scared away by you and your strange question. "Hi, will you be my neighbor?" The usual response to this question is: Do I have a choice? Generally, with rare exception, we do not get to pick who our neighbors will be! So The Rev. Rodgers isn't talking about a real physical neighborhood, but he is getting at something bigger (perhaps theological) as he looks out of the screen and asks countless people, over vast differences and distances, over 40 years to be his neighbor. He doesn't say, "You should be my neighbor!" He also doesn't say, "Hi, I'm your neighbor." No, he asks, "won't you be my neighbor?" It is invitational.

So, if not a reality in life that we get to walk up to our very favorite people and ask them to move in next door to us, why did Mr. Rodgers start every show directed at a young audience with the odd question of, "Won't you be my neighbor?"

What Mr. Rodgers is talking about is being like a neighbor to everyone. The neighborhood is a metaphor for the realm of God. **We are all neighbors as humans in this journey together! This is not, however, always as easy co-existence as Rodgers implies.**

Do you remember where you first learned certain words like theology, denomination, or covenant? I remember my first exposure to phrase "**board of directors**" and also my first exposure to a word that has haunted me ever since I first heard it, [the dreaded] "**committee**." I was around 5 years old, and we had just moved from a solitary ranch out in the county to a new home off Lemay near Tavelli Elementary and into the first *real* neighborhood in my memory, and it was there that I likewise learned my very first acronym... a synonym for a loving neighborhood: H.O.A!

Almost immediately, as these things usually happen, my mom was drafted to the secretary and then Vice President role on the (H.O.A.) Home Owners Association, and it turned out that Mr. Rodgers was **not** a member of the board. Isn't that how that works? I was so proud of mom for this title! I was sure to tell all my friends that mom was the vice president of **the** H.O.A! In an early sign that I might be called to ministry or something equally odd, I loved attending the meetings and observing the proceedings. It all seemed so formal and official at the time. **It was**

by observing those meetings that I subsequently learned a LOT more words, none of which is appropriate to be repeated from the pulpit.

In those conversations about street repaving, liens on houses because of poor lawn maintenance, and contracts with snow plowing firms (none of which was ever mentioned in *Mr. Rodgers' Neighborhood*), I learned that being a good neighbor all the time is impossible. None of this was like the tidy neighborhood I saw on TV. I learned that being a neighbor is different from the utopian vision of *Mr. Rodgers Neighborhood* with perfect houses and accord, and we often fall short of the goals that Jesus sets for us in neighborliness as well. We also sometimes, while we aspire to great goals, get more focused on the details of church work than the goals of God- the work of the HOA side of the Church (and that becomes neighborhood or God for us) rather than the work of being a good neighbor or Christian.

What The Reverend Fred Rodgers envisioned was the ideal of a place where all people, no matter who they are or where they are on life's journey, are neighbors in what we might call Mr. Jesus Christ's neighborhood of life, light, and love that overcomes hatred, fear, and hopelessness. How, Plymouth, do we continue to be neighbors in the United States of America in a time when powerful forces are trying to bulldoze the neighborhood Mr. Rodgers envisioned and replace it with iron fences and impenetrable terraces of wealth and social inequality?

How do we work here at this church to be a home for all of God's people in the neighborhood of Jesus Christ? In these dark, confusing, untidy, and violent times (Orlando, Dallas, Baton Rouge, Saint Paul) for our country and world, we turn, as Mr. Rodgers did to Scripture to find out how to be neighbors once again:

Today from the Gospel of Luke, we get a wondrous and confounding story. A scholar of the law asks Jesus how to have eternal life, and Jesus simply says in reply, quoting both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 18:5, "Love the Lord your God with all your soul and all your strength and with all your mind; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

This, on the surface, would have seemed to the scholar of religion Jesus was talking with to be reasonable enough... a sort of paraphrase of ancient teachings... totally Kosher, or it would have if Jesus would have *JUST* stopped talking and left it there. Jesus has a habit of saying something acceptable to tradition and then adding a final caveat that flips it on its head! Jesus tells a story about a man who is nearly murdered by robbers who steal his clothes, *dignity*, and possessions. When all hope, dignity, resources, and almost life are stripped from him, a stranger who is from a hated, vilified yet historically similar religion/ tribe saves his life, pays for his health care (without an insurance card), puts up a promissory note for his time in the local rehab center, clothes him, and leaves without repayment. Jesus asks, "Which of these do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The word Jesus used here, as "neighbor" in Ancient Greek (Plesion) was understood up to this very moment in Scripture as meaning anyone who was a member of the Hebrew nation and commonwealth.² It meant the people like us. It meant those we choose to live next door to us. It meant easy neighbor. Jesus literally, according to Biblical scholarship *redefines* the word neighbor, the concept of community member, and friend right here in **THIS** Scripture. Here is the creation of our religion of Christianity itself! Neighbors are those who show mercy to others despite whom culture says is deserving of mercy, worthy of grace despite who deserves grace, love and healing despite what is earned, merited, or a good investment. Neighbors are those who

² Blue Letter Bible, G4131.

show mercy to others despite whom culture, the HOA covenants, the norms, the history, the common courtesy customs say is deserving of mercy. Won't you be my neighbor? Christianity is not a meritocracy.

And we all thought "Mr." Rodgers was just a nice fatherly figure teaching us how to make apple cider or to play the cello on any given day on PBS. We were duped in the best possible way. In this time when we are all forgetting, progressive and liberal alike, how to be neighbors in this time of police violence against minorities in Baton Rouge, Saint Paul, and elsewhere (daily and unreported), of the sniper killing of police officers in Dallas, of murder of the LGBTQ community in Orlando, fear and isolation everywhere, and of political polarization, small encampments of identity, violent language, and the disintegration of civil discourse... In this time when Not in My Backyard Neighborhood Campaigners can stop affordable housing communities from being built because of fear... maybe we all need (adults and children alike) a little more of Mr. Jesus' and Mr. Rodgers' radical, increasingly counter-cultural message of neighborhood- the realm of God. Won't you be my neighbor?

Mr. Rodgers was a called minister, but he was never settled into a rut. It is funny that the term we use in the UCC for a called long-term minister, a "settled minister!" Why would you ever want a settled minister or rather a minister who *would settle*? Rodgers wasn't obsessed with the title or the ecclesiastical privileges of his work. He was a called person, an ordained minister, but not a settling minister. I hope that you might vote to call me here today, but I never claim the word... settled. Like The Rev. Rodgers, I don't want to settle you. May none of us ever be **settled** and contented with culture, but let us be called to continue redefining the idea of neighbor. I pray that I might serve you with the same compassion and unsettling yet kind vision of that minister we all knew but whose title never got in the way of his work of compassion and teaching... or his simple weekly prayer that wafted so lovingly into our living room's, a prayer for us, a prayer for the world, a prayer of hope to God, a prayer for children being raised in this world we helped create... for this is indeed a prayer for the world, a hope utterance, an a litany of life:

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Amen.