

MISTER ROGERS

Mr. Rogers is one of the longest running programs in TV history. Nearly 900 episodes.

We probably don't remember him as such, but he was a minister.

He was an ordained Presbyterian minister, given a special ordination to serve children and families through television.

We are in this series on the power of words, and Mister Rogers knew the power of words.

Before entering his office to film each day, he would pray:

"Dear God, let some word that is heard be yours."

His most famous words: ***"Won't you be my neighbor"***

Now the dictionary defines neighbor as: *"A person near or next door to the person speaking."*

The dictionary's definition is determined by nearness. Proximity.

How we, God's people, define neighbor is incredibly crucial.

After all what Jesus points to as the two greatest commands are love God and neighbor.

Deuteronomy 6:5

you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.

Leviticus 19:18

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself

Neighbor was synonymous with, a fellow Israelite, your people, members of your community

It falls in line with what we'd see in our dictionaries.

This was their script. The lens they operated from. One Jesus affirms later in Luke 10.

But do you know this also the same perspective that made Jesus' home church in Nazareth attempt to throw him off a cliff at the very beginning of his ministry?

Why?

He elevated and ultimately challenged their definition of neighbor.

In Luke 4 Jesus stands up to read Isaiah 61. They were ready to crown him as Messiah.

But in an instant, they were ready to kill him when he implied that ministry would never be limited by racial, cultural, or tribal boundaries, pointing to the ministries of Elijah and Elisha.

... they drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.

They were triggered. This was troubling to them.

We see the trouble is in a definition.

They held a shallow definition of the word **neighbor**. It crippled their love. And it put them at odds with Jesus' ministry, somewhere you never want to be.

In Luke 4 Jesus is riding a wave of support and then he throws this curveball.

He does a similar thing in Luke 10...

READ LUKE 10:25-37

The Lawyer - “*an expert in the law*” - We no doubt think of an expert in civil law. But here it is speaking to a man who was an expert in biblical law. He’s a scholar. He’s the guy that won the twitter debates and knows all the verses.

He comes to Jesus with a good question: “*what do I have to do to inherit eternal life?*”

Jesus as he often does responds to a question with a question. He looks at this expert in the law and asks him – “what does the law say?” appealing to his expertise.

The lawyer responds with the texts we opened looking at, Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

Jesus says he’s right. So at this point the lawyer has to be feeling pretty good about himself. He could have let it go there and left patting himself on the back.

But it says – “*looking to justify himself*” – he asks, “*Who is my neighbor?*”

He likely expects Jesus to reply with notes from Lev 19, implying a select community.

If this is where Jesus goes, he can check the box – I’ve earned eternal life.

The folks around him would think, “this guy is good,” and he could bask in that.

But ultimately Jesus’ answer gives him more than he bargained for.

We too get in trouble again and again when we seek to justify ourselves. This lawyer thinks, as we often do in our culture, that we can earn our way into God’s good graces. But does anyone here feel like they’ve loved God with all their heart and all their mind, as well as perfectly loved their neighbors with the same energy that they care for themselves?

That’s the point. We can’t. The religions of the world fool us into thinking we can earn our way. The Gospel is we’re saved by grace. Justifying myself isn’t in my hands. Its in Jesus’ hands.

But rather than going for the jugular as this man seeks to justify himself, Jesus uses a parable of this man who had been beaten within an inch of his life by robbers... The Good Samaritan.

The Samaritans date back to the 8th century BC when the Assyrians conquered Jerusalem and exiled its people, leaving only the most poor behind. They were half-breeds: half Jew and half Samaritans.

Its in Jewish teaching that to eat the bread of the Samaritan is like eating the flesh of the swine. In fact, the Jews would actually pray in synagogue ceremonies that God NOT show grace or mercy to the Samaritans. And this went both ways. There was no love loss.

They believed horrible dehumanizing caricatures of one another.

“All Samaritans are _____.”

“All Jews are _____.”

Sound familiar?

“All conservatives are _____.”

“All progressives are _____.”

“All immigrants are _____.”

“All pro-lifers are _____.”

Jesus calls us in this text- as he calls us always- to see beyond the broken cultural caricatures and see one another’s common humanity again. Not static caricatures and objects.

Jesus' ultimate **ANSWER** is so crucial.

Because for the lawyer, his question treated the idea of a neighbor as an object he would act upon. We read the parable and we consider the man jumped and whether qualifies as neighbor. But Jesus flips the question.

Jesus ends by asking a new question, "**which of the three was a neighbor?**"

This lawyer who had grown up amidst Jewish nationalism and racism couldn't even get himself to say the word "Samaritan" and identify him by his race when he was the good neighbor. It would have been confounding for him to consider the reality of a "Good Samaritan." He could only say – "the one who showed him mercy."

The lawyer tried to assess who is his neighbor.

The better question Jesus gives him - ***Am I a neighbor who shows mercy to those in need?***

We LOVE to use scripture as a **microscope**. To assess others.

Is this indeed my neighbor? Is this need actually valid? Should they even be crying?

Jesus takes the question about the word neighbor and flips it as a **mirror**.

Get off your high horse and assess yourself --- Are you neighborly?

Do you show grace and mercy to those who desperately need it? **That** is what makes a neighbor.

Neighboring well, loving our neighbors, learning to walk in the greatest commandment, it's ultimately about MY IDENTITY, not theirs.

When we adopted Raj, our now three and a half year old son from India, I had a lot of conversations about it along the way. And along the way I got questions like:

"Why don't you adopt from your own?"

"Why don't you take care of the kids who need help on your own soil?"

What I made sure they all heard – the love that Jesus gives me for people isn't defined by proximity, but humanity. It's not dictated by nearness, but need.

Jesus clearly teaches that a neighbor isn't defined by proximity, but by humanity.

If it's defined by humanity – guess what – ethnicity doesn't matter.

If it's defined by humanity – nationality doesn't matter.

If it's defined by humanity – religion doesn't matter.

Love your neighbor. Period. The end.

But to the expert on religious law this Samaritan was a non-neighbor.

Because to the religious Jew one was only concerned with other religious Jews.

The ancient Jewish book of wisdom Sirach explicitly says in chapter 12 to not help a 'sinner.'

But people have value before they have virtue.

They have dignity before they ever show devotion.

We get caught up in questions about who we are supposed to help, if they qualify as a neighbor, or will it cost me?

The priest had *legitimate* cultural reasons to not help. Being made ritually unclean by a potentially dead body would have meant time and money invested in the sacrifice it would have taken to be made clean again. He and the Levite would have been out of time and money.

But we will never know their reason or excuse.

Why? Because Jesus doesn't give them. His point?

Any excuse is irrelevant, what's relevant is they actively chose not to obey the command to love one's neighbor. Jesus is saying whatever your cultural excuse is for withholding compassion: it's trash. Throw it away.

The priest also could have said- "*It's his fault for traveling alone on this dangerous road.*"

This road Jesus references is a real one. It was one well traveled but dangerous.

There was a part known for robbers and even called "the pass of blood."

And this man was on it alone, perhaps at a time it wasn't well traveled.

The Priest or Levite could have said: He shouldn't have put himself in this situation. How often do we put ourselves in a position to assess the situation of those who are in need and its validity.

Jesus doesn't ask, "was the man in need a neighbor worthy of helping?"

He asks "who was the neighbor to the one in need?"

The answer: "the one who showed mercy"... Now?

"Go and DO..." Be a neighbor. The world asks "won't you be my neighbor?" Be one.

Three things that keep us from neighboring well and being a neighbor.

Ethics in abstract.

Jesus is adept here as he was throughout his ministry, at taking abstract questions and turning them into real life applications.

We should take special note in our day and age.

Social media has created the ability to reflect on tragic situations in the abstract. Read up on it. Maybe post about it... followed by a hashtag. Followed by logging off and forgetting all about it.

We do something similar by "logging into" church services... when we log off or leave... we forget about it.

All of this serves to divorce our heart and our ethics from our actions.

There are plenty of Christians going to church that are like this religious leader in this story. We've got the latest Christian best seller on our coffee table. We talk theology and debate doctrine. We clean up our own act. *But there's no GO and DO.*

We talk about issues in abstract, but never get dirty. It's why religious people can make the worst neighbors. We're the priest and the levite in this parable. We're the expert in the law.

We've got head knowledge that stops at the neck. We never get to being God's hands and feet. Information isn't how we fulfill the call to love God and love neighbor. Love is.

When we talk about "GO and DO" it's important to make clear the reason. God justifies us by grace as it says in Ephesians 2:8-9. This is our justification before God. They key to eternal life. But then Ephesians 2:10 makes it clear – this is so we can get to work loving and serving others.

But we don't get to that, and sometimes the trouble may not be ethics in abstract, but that we are:
Numbed by suffering

Social media and media in general has increased our exposure to events. It has increased our exposure to tragedies. *Awareness* is a good thing, but when we take in suffering after suffering, we can become numb to it. Desensitized. When we become numb, we cut off compassion.

Mister Rogers quote - *"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."*

It's such a beautiful reminder as we all face tragedy. But we should remember- Mr. Rogers was speaking to children. Children don't have full agency. They can't go volunteer at a pantry on a whim or take off to go help dig through the rubble.

But we can. We have agency. We can make choices to be a helper in significant ways. We can choose to not just look for helpers, but be a helper.

What does that take? Compassion.

The Samaritan came along and ***"felt compassion for him"***

Compassion's definition here is key. It's not some shallow idea. It's to have such strong love for somebody that their situation hurts in your gut. The Greek word for compassion comes from the same root as the word for spleen. Compassion is the opposite of numbness. It's being pained by a situation so much it all but hurts you physically.

Which is why our constant exposure to suffering and the numbness that follows is dangerous. Because to be numb to those in need is to be numb to Christ.

We sing songs they cry out: *"I just want to be where you are"*
"I'm caught up in your presence... I just want to sit here at your feet"

In Matthew 25 Jesus himself said – ***"whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."***

Want to be close to Christ? Bring the needs of humanity into your proximity.

Go and do. Regardless of ethnicity, race or creed.

The Franciscan author Richard Rohr put it this way:

“To be Christian is to see Christ in everyone.”

We brought Raj into our home from Pune, India. Over some 8000 miles away. But there’s up to 20 million orphans in India. Raj was ONE. To adopt him and say we made a difference can feel like me taking a bucket of water out of a Noah-sized flood and saying I’ve made a difference.

But let me take some pressure off - being neighborly isn’t about helping everyone with every need. It’s about becoming a piece of the bigger puzzle. There’s a void somewhere that you were created to fill.

Jesus died for YOU, by name, so that you could be saved by grace through faith as Ephesians 2:8&9 outline. But Ephesians 2:10 says there is work that God prepared for you, by name, in advance for you to do. To be a help for humanity. To be a helper.

Mr Rogers also said:

“A high school student wrote to ask, 'What was the greatest event in American history?' I can't say. However, I suspect that like so many 'great' events, it was something very simple and very quiet with little or no fanfare... The really important 'great' things are never center stage of life's dramas; they're always 'in the wings.' That's why it's so essential for us to be mindful of the humble and the deep rather than the flashy and the superficial.”

To love our neighbor and fulfill that command:

We can’t allow ourselves to have ethics in abstract.

We can’t allow ourselves to be numbed to suffering.

And we can’t allow ourselves to be numb to the state of the Body of Christ. The Church.

Lastly: we can’t be ***Blind to the State of the Body***

Last weekend was another wave of mass shootings that spanned from moments before our service and into Sunday. I don’t pivot to address any and everything from the pulpit.

But this has to do with the pews. If a limb on your body is broken or injured, you tend to it. To be numb to it or ignore it is spiritual leprosy.

Jesus says in **Matthew 16:6** - ***“beware of the yeast of the Pharisees.”***

In the Bible, yeast is often a metaphor for **pride**.

Because when you put yeast in dough, what does it do? It puffs it up.

Pride – when you boil down to it – is the worship of self. It is putting yourself at the center.

When you’re prideful and you worship self, you either consciously or unconsciously exalt your own attributes, your own tribe, and you make a god out of it.

It’s the root of racism. Tribalism. Nationalism.

And this isn’t some new problem.

Much of the New Testament is the HS uprooting the Church from these flawed ways of thinking: It starts with **Luke 4**, the account we opened with where Jesus announced that his calling as the Messiah wouldn’t be in any way hindered by racial, tribal, or cultural boundaries.

And on from Christ's ascension through **Acts** and the epistles we see the Holy Spirit uprooting God's people, the Jews, from the way they had separated and isolated themselves from Gentiles and Samaritans for generations.

The Jews weren't so much looking to see the Gentiles saved as much as they wanted to see them nationalized when Paul was condemns their thinking in Galatians 5:9:

"this false teaching is like a little yeast that spreads through the whole batch of dough!"

Again yeast. Again pride. Again this centering of self and our tribe and our image and exalting it. Nationalism isn't new. All those tribes in Galatians were brown skinned. There aren't white people present.

But white nationalism is simply America's brand of nationalism, because those in power have long been white.

White supremacists and white nationalists and racists of any kind should never feel comfortable for long in pews. Because they certainly won't be comfortable in Heaven where EVERY tribe and tongue is praising God together!

But we allow for their thinking when we cling to a shallow definition of neighbor that doesn't reflect Jesus' teaching and application.

It's not based on common proximity, or common ethnicity...

It's based on common humanity.

A low definition of "neighbor" in the command "love your neighbor" is what allows John T Earnest's to grow up in the Church.

Who is John T Earnest? The man who recently shot up a synagogue in April of this year.

His manifesto contained a clear articulation of Christian theology.

He was a member of a local church.

He was raised in pews not unlike ours.

The first impulse in our tribal culture is to distance our tribe from the shooter

... but this man was a member of the church.

The second impulse? We get to demonizing the mass murderer

... but Jesus loves John T Earnest. Jesus died for him and every perpetrator of mass shootings.

As a pastor I think how tragic it is that nobody in the church loved John enough to call him out of his bigotry, even if it was indirectly from the pulpit. To tell him, *hey, if you draw lines in your love that are dictated by race or cultural distinctions, you aren't a follower of Jesus, you're a part of the crowd that wanted to throw him off a cliff.*

You aren't for him, you're against him. And that's a dangerous place to be.

Bigotry and white nationalism isn't just a danger to society.

It is a danger to the one who believes it, because it is a way that seems right to man but leads to hell. It doesn't always lead to violence and physical damage. But it does spiritual damage in the

one who clings to it. It doesn't always lead violence and damage. But it can lead to conversations and considerations of people that do damage to our spirit.

Our heart should break for the fact that that mindset can grow within a church. It won't here. And I don't bring all this up to pretend to have answer for the fresh wave of the same polarizing political debates. And these are important debates. Because politics involve people. God loves people.

But these things won't bring revival. That won't come from any government or a candidate or law from capitol hill. It will come through the spirit-filled church.

Ultimately the chief concern of the church is Kingdom Come.

The Holy Spirit dwelling in the Church and using the Church to spark revival.

This is the cry of the church for revival – make us like the church in Acts, the early church!!!

My cry: Why don't we live like the early church?

What am I talking about?

The Emperor Julian was a Roman emperor not long after Christ walked the soil of the Roman Empire. Christianity at the time was growing while paganism was on the decline. We have his lamenting and venting about the situation on record, where he says:

"The religion of the Greeks does not prosper. Why do we not observe how the charity of Christians to strangers has done the most to advance their cause? It is disgraceful that these Christians support OUR poor in addition to THEIR own, while everyone is able to see our own people lack aid from us."

Greeks were taking care of Greeks. Romans were taking care of Romans. What Emperor Julian called "our people." Meanwhile Christians were supporting– listen to his words:

"Our poor in addition to their own."

The culture was operating from a script of US and THEM or US vs. THEM – sound familiar?

Again - Tribalism isn't some new issue. Racism isn't some new issue.

Meanwhile - Christians were showing the love of Christ for strangers - US FOR THEM.

Because really, ultimately there's only US – a humanity in need of a savior.

What was causing the growth of the Church? Being a neighbor to strangers.

What was grabbing the attention of emperors and kings? Being neighborly.

Not based on ethnicity. Not based on common proximity. Based on common humanity. Dignity.

Seeing a need and meeting it.

Mister Rogers would have been a fan. To come full circle and close, he once said:

"We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say, 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes."

Jesus Christ was the ultimate hero. He wasn't just a piece. He saved the whole puzzle. The whole world. We- Christians, little Christs, his followers – should be moved with the same compassion.

Jesus is always THE hero, but we play a heroic role finding our piece in the puzzle.

We look like him when we serve a need and show mercy.

Not being neighborly based on nearness, but meeting needs.

Not numbed. Feeling compassion that can come like a punch in the spleen.

Not blind to the yeast of the enemy and the divisions fueled by pride.

Not practicing abstract ethics, but heeding the call to “go and do likewise”

May we GO and DO likewise, see the need and respond, showing mercy to the one in need.

Not asking who is my neighbor?

But replying to the call of so many in our world – won't you be my neighbor?

Whether it's the kid alone at the lunchtable. The person on the corner with a cardboard sign.

Ones that don't vote like us, talk like us, look like us.

Eventually we come to realize – there is no US and THEM.

Only us. Only humanity. And we all need Jesus. And we all seek Jesus.

THEN we will see revival.