

“Seeing Our Neighbors”  
March 20, 2022  
Scripture: Isaiah 2:2-5; Luke 10:25-37

Recently I’ve watched several interviews that Fred Rogers gave over the years. In every one of them I’ve been struck by his mannerisms. With each question, Fred would pause and really think about his answer. He doesn’t just toss off a response as if it didn’t mean anything to him. He really engages his interviewer, whether it’s someone nationally known, like Charlie Rose, or just a local journalist in Pittsburgh. You get the feeling, and I think it’s genuine, that Fred is fully present with every person he talks to. At that moment, they’re the only person in the world to him.

In one of those interviews he was asked, “What do you mean when you say, ‘Won’t you be my neighbor?’” And Fred thought about that a few seconds, almost as if he seemed stumped, then he said “It’s an invitation for somebody to be close to you…it’s a parable for the desire for closeness.” In his show every day Fred was inviting his viewers into a relationship; that’s what being a neighbor is all about. It’s not just about living next door; it’s possible to live next door to someone and never speak to them, never really see them. Being a neighbor means having a connection with someone else, no matter how vastly different your lives might be.

I think that’s at the heart of Jesus’ story about the man who was beaten on his way to Jericho. Amy-Jill Levine, in her wonderful book *Short Stories by Jesus*, explains that the people hearing that story would have been shocked by the behavior of the priest and Levite. No self-respecting Jewish person would have just walked by someone in that condition. Jewish ethics demands a response when someone is in dire need. What Jesus seems to be doing is inviting his listeners to put themselves in the position of the man who was left for dead. That’s why he doesn’t dwell on the motives of the priest and Levite. Jesus wants to push the boundaries of the lawyer who asks about this and the people listening to really see in their minds’ eye the person in distress.

When they do that, it doesn’t matter anymore who comes bringing help. Suddenly, when no one else is willing to see, the Samaritan’s attention, shocking though it might be, is a relief. Dr. Levine points out that Jesus does a wonderful job of twisting the listeners’ expectations by following a priest and a Levite with a Samaritan instead of an Israelite; the one who helps isn’t one of us but one of them. And the lawyer, who had wanted to justify himself, to let himself off the hook, is forced to identify a Samaritan as a neighbor.

Seeing our neighbors transcends our assumptions about who is worthy or who is included. When we really see each other, we realize everyone could be our neighbor. Fred Rogers says in one of those interviews, “Everybody longs to be loved and longs to know he or she is loveable.”

Fred began his career in television at NBC studios in New York as a gopher. He was at the very bottom of the ladder when it came to status. He said it was a wonderful experience, but not for the reasons you might think. You might imagine he appreciated seeing how programs are produced firsthand and get the experience of watching all the different roles that are needed to bring a program together, which I'm sure he benefited from. But what he described as so wonderful was interacting with stars and executives and learning how it feels to be unseen. He said there were some folks on the set who never uttered a word of appreciation for anything he brought them, but if he got it wrong would really let him have it. He said he learned how it feels when someone treats you with disdain just for the kind of work you do. He never forgot that. And it shaped how he interacted with people on the crew of his set.

Fred was a huge star. Everybody loved him everywhere he went. And he always took time to see everybody who wanted to be near him. They were all his neighbors. His love for others was genuine because he understood their need to be loved, and he shared that need himself.

Really seeing our neighbors requires taking time to be fully present with them. How often have I walked past someone in need because I was in a hurry and couldn't spare the time. When Isaiah calls on the people to "walk in the light of the Lord," he's calling them to be accessible and available, to be open and welcoming, to not hide themselves away but really see the nations who stream to them longing to be loved.

Really seeing our neighbors is the only way we can beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. It's the only way we can learn to put down our defenses and risk being in relationship. Fred Rogers understood that at the most fundamental level. I don't think he believed what he did was limited to children. He understood that the only way we can hope to find the shalom described in the Bible is to teach our children how to see themselves and each other with real affection, to become models of neighborliness for them.

One of my favorite poems by Robert Frost is "Mending Wall." In it the narrator describes the yearly ritual of walking the line along the boundary of his property and his neighbor's repairing the wall between them after the cold winter. He writes, "I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;/And on a day we meet to walk the line/And set the wall between us once again./We keep the wall between us as we go." He teases the neighbor a little by pointing out that his apples will never get to his neighbor's property to invade the neighbor's pine trees, so why should they bother with a wall? His neighbor only says, "Good fences make good neighbors." But the narrator pushes on that a little, responding, "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know/What I was walling in or walling out,/And to whom I was like to give offense./Something there is that doesn't love a wall,/That wants it down." But his neighbor just keeps repairing the wall, causing the narrator to observe, "He moves in darkness as it seems to me,/Not of woods only and the shade of trees."

When we really see our neighbors and remove the walls that separate us whether they are social or professional or religious or ideological, we step out of the darkness to walk in the light. That's why the work Fred Rogers did was so crucial, so essential. He helped us learn how to be neighbors by really seeing each other, by taking time to be fully present for each other. "Won't you be my neighbor?" he asked over and over, day after day. And for that brief half hour we learned how to see each other. And something was planted in our hearts and minds that brought us close to one another and made us neighbors so we could go and do likewise as we walk together in the light of the Lord.

Amen