

“WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?”  
I – “WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?”  
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Elkton United Methodist Church  
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World Communion Sunday

Leviticus 19:33-34

Luke 10:25-37

I went to a district clergy meeting the other day and happened to sit next to a pastor who serves in Newark. We were talking over lunch and she shared with me that she had just returned from Kansas after attending a leadership seminar at the Church of the Resurrection, one of the (if not the) largest United Methodist churches in the country. Adam Hamilton is the pastor there, and he is an amazing person. Many of you are familiar with his name, because we have done lots and lots of his studies here.

Well, in the course of our conversation, Tina and I discovered that we had both just started Hamilton's latest study entitled *Unafraid*, and in a very similar fashion. Since people hadn't had time to read any of the book, both Tina and I had simply led a conversation about fear in general. And it was amazing (though perhaps not surprising) how similar were our experiences.

We found out what all of us already know – there is a lot of fear around these days. We're afraid for our safety – why, look what happened in Middletown the other day with the bomb threats and rumors of a shooter in the woods near a school causing lockdowns. We're afraid about the weather and the devastation we've seen it's brought to parts of our country. We're afraid, because we're told all the time, that we don't have, or won't have enough money to live on for the rest of our lives. We're afraid of strangers, because who knows where they've come from, or what they want, or if they might harm us. And most assuredly, especially after the last few weeks of insanity, we're afraid for our country.

What happens when we're afraid? We turn inward - into ourselves. We put up walls. We go on the offensive, and look out for number one. It's not that we're mean, it's that we're afraid.

I think that the lawyer who confronted Jesus in this morning's Gospel lesson – for all his bravado – was, underneath it all, afraid. Let's go back and revisit this very familiar story.

A lawyer comes up to Jesus and, as the passage said, “puts him to the test.” He asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Now, for sure, the test was to see if Jesus would give the correct answer according to the religious law. But I think there was more to it. I think the lawyer was afraid, and just wanted to know that he was doing what he had to, to get to heaven. He really wanted a measuring tool, if you will, to make sure he qualified.

But Jesus wasn't into the letter of the law. For Jesus, it was about grace and love, not checking off boxes of qualification. And he attempted to explain it to this lawyer by way of a story.

One day a man was traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and along the way a band of robbers stripped him, beat him and left him on the road half dead. (Now, while Jesus is saying this, I can imagine this lawyer's mind racing with thoughts like these: the road from Jerusalem to Jericho has a reputation for being dangerous. Why, it was actually called “Bloody Pass.” It was a meandering road that started 1200 feet above sea level in Jerusalem and ended up 2000 feet below in Jericho. It was filled with winds, and curves, and cliffs, and sadly was the perfect road on which to rob someone if that was your intent.)

So right away, the lawyer might have been thinking – that guy shouldn't have been there in the first place. He got what he asked for.

Nevertheless, the story went on. Jesus tells him that the man was lying there severely injured, when along came a priest, who took a look at him, then crossed to the other side of the road and went on his way. Then along came another religious man, a Levite, and he too, also passed by the other side, leaving the man in his suffering.

Then Jesus said something that, no doubt, took the lawyer's breath away. He told him about the hero of the story. He told him that a Samaritan came along, saw the man in agony, went to him, cared for his wounds, and not only that, but took him to others who would continue to care for him, and paid for it to boot!

Now, here's why it took the lawyer's breath away. He was a Jew, and Jews hated, and I mean, hated Samaritans – despised them. They were the enemy, because they had intermarried, and broken other religious laws and the Jews had no use for them, at all. And here, Jesus lifts a Samaritan up as the good guy in the story.

I'll tell you how we know how hard this was for the lawyer to swallow. When Jesus asked him, "Who was the neighbor in the story?" the lawyer couldn't even bring himself to call the man by who he was, he wouldn't say, "the Samaritan." Instead, he said, "the one who showed mercy."

Then Jesus laid out the challenge – to that lawyer and to us – "Go and do likewise."

The parable of the Good Samaritan. It's a great story that most of us have heard more times than we can count in our lifetime. And I would suspect that most times when we hear it we think to ourselves, where am I in the story? What would I have done?

But today, I'd like to invite us to see the parable for its portrayal of fear, for it shows up in so many places in the story. The poor beaten-up man surely had to be scared even being on that dangerous road by himself, and that only ratcheted up when bandits descended upon him. The priest. What was he afraid of? Afraid of breaking God's laws about touching what was unclean. Afraid of being late for his duties in the temple. Afraid of getting involved. The Levite? He too was afraid of breaking the religious laws, he too had someplace he had to be.

And what about the Samaritan? Might he have been afraid? Probably so. I mean, you don't just go up to someone who has been beaten up and is lying there bloodied and dying, and thinking to yourself, "I have no idea what to do."

And then that lawyer. Initially, though he was putting Jesus to a test, as I said, I think he was afraid he wouldn't get into heaven, so he wanted to know exactly what was required of him. And clearly, his other big fear was based on his hatred of someone else – a Samaritan, not because of the man he was, but because of his nationality.

And what did fear do in each of those cases (with the exception of the Samaritan)? Fear put up a wall that kept the other out, that kept people from caring for each other, that kept the "other" being treated as an object, not as a human being.

Sadly, fear still puts up walls in our world today. Fear keeps us from treating others with dignity and respect, because we see people by their race, or economic status, or nationality, or cleanliness, or so many other qualifiers – rather than simply as children of God. We put up walls between us and those who are

different from us, or those with whom we disagree, and so, in our day and time, it becomes Democrats versus Republicans, conservatives versus progressives, citizens versus immigrants, working people versus welfare recipients, those with homes versus those living on the streets – well, you get the idea.

Yet, here in this parable and everywhere else, Jesus calls us to do otherwise. He calls us to be ones who tear down walls, not build them up. He calls us to see everyone – everyone – as children of God, beloved in their own way. He calls us to love and serve others, not stand in fear of them and walk the other way.

Surely you have figured out that the title of this sermon series gives a nod to the great Mr. Rogers. “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” was the title song of his children’s tv show. Did you know that Mr. Rogers was actually Rev. Rogers? He was an ordained Presbyterian minister. When he was ordained, he asked to be in a special ministry – a ministry for and with children. And that’s what he did, his whole career.

And what he was so special at, was helping children to not live in fear, not put up walls. He was very special at helping them see their own value and worth,

and see the value and worth in everyone else, helping them, if you will, see others as their neighbors.

Let me tell you about one day that he did that in a spectacular, yet very simple way. If you ever watched Mr. Rogers, you know that there was a character on the show, a policeman named Officer Clemons. An actor named Francoise Clemons portrayed him. This was in the late 60's when racial tensions were high, and fear was rampant. Francoise Clemons was an African-American, and he became the first African-American to have a recurring role in a children's television series.

Around the time that this particular episode that I'm going to tell you about was taped, there was a great deal of controversy in the country over integrating public swimming pools. There was actually an incident of an angry white man pouring bleach in a public pool so no one could swim there anymore.

Well, Fred Rogers taped a show that week, in which Officer Clemons stopped in to see Mr. Rogers on a really, really hot day and when he did, Mr. Rogers had his feet in a wading pool filled with cold water, trying to get cooled off. When he saw



how overheated Officer Clemons was from walking the beat on that scorching day, he invited him to take off his shoes and cool off his feet as well, which the man did.

And then, after Mr. Rogers got out of the wading pool, he turned and helped dry off Officer Clemons' feet with a towel. And as he did, Fred Rogers knew exactly what he was doing – for it was a picture of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. He was taking care of his neighbor (not seeing him as just a black man different from him, but as a beloved child of God) – when the world outside was screaming instead for him to hate him.

Oh friends, how easy it is for us to let fear or ignorance or labels put up walls between us and others – who are all, when it comes down to it, to a person, our neighbors in God Himself. All people are beloved children of God. All people are worthy of dignity and respect. All are our neighbors.

No matter their race, no matter their land of birth, no matter their economic or home status, no matter their political party, no matter the mistakes they've made, no matter that they intentionally walked down a wrong road in life and ended up in a heap somewhere – no matter what – all people are our neighbors, and Jesus calls us to treat them that way – to show mercy.

It's not always going to be easy, sometimes it will be scary – it certainly wasn't easy for that Samaritan, but it's what we're called to do. So let me just make a small suggestion as a way to alleviate some of the fear, and to be able to start to see everyone as a neighbor. Put away labels. Just put them away. Stop identifying people by their race, or their job, or their political party, or their whatever. See them first as a child of God.

What will that do? It will take away some of the power of that fear, and you'll see the person as a human being, created in the image of God, just like you.

If the priest or the Levite had looked and seen a wounded child of God, rather than one who wore the label "unclean," they might have stopped. If the lawyer had heard the story and not cringed when Jesus said the word "Samaritan," he might have thanked God for that man who truly cared.

If we can look at those who are different from us, or with whom we disagree, or of whom we've been afraid, and not think of them first in terms of the way we've labeled them, but rather as children of God, it will absolutely change the way we think and act towards them.

And once we do that, it will be as if we're taking a brick out of those walls that divide us and slowly and surely, over time, those walls can come down.

You know, in the end, when it comes to being a neighbor to all, the question isn't finally, "who is my neighbor?" because everyone is my neighbor, your neighbor. Rather the question really is "what kind of neighbor am I?" "Am I, will I be the one who stops, sees and cares?"

"Will you?"