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Won't you be my neighbor?

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Luke 10:25-37
Lent 3

In the book *Secret Life of Bees*, Lily lives on a peach farm in rural South Carolina with her abusive father. Lily's mother died and she was taken in by three black women, August Boatright and her sisters, June and May. May was prone to spells of depression. The three sisters never married and supported themselves through bee keeping and selling the honey. One day Lily asked August, "How come if your favorite color is blue, you painted your house so pink?"

August laughed. "That was May's doing. She was with me the day I went to the paint store to pick out the color. I had a nice tan color in mind but May latched on to this sample called Caribbean Pink. She said it make her feel like dancing a Spanish flamenco. I thought, "Well, this is the tackiest color I've ever seen, and we'll have half the town talking about us, but if it can lift May's heart like that, I guess she ought to live inside it."

"All this time I just figured you liked pink," I said.

She laughed again. "You know, some things don't matter that much, Lily. Like the color of a house. How big is that in the overall scheme of life? But lifting a person's heart—now that matters. The whole problem with people is..."

"They don't know what matters and what doesn't," I said, filling in her sentence and feeling proud of myself for doing so.

"I was gonna say, the problem is they know what matters, but they don't choose it. You know how hard that is, Lily? I love May, but it was still so hard to choose Caribbean Pink. The hardest thing on earth is choosing what matters."

Jesus told a story to the lawyer who was peppering him with questions about how to inherit eternal life. Jesus could have just replied, "Choose what matters." Instead, when the lawyer asked, "What do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "Love God and love your neighbor." The lawyer followed up, "Yeah, but who is my neighbor?"

Jesus told the hypothetical story of a man beaten and robbed lying on the side of the road. The priest saw him yet carried on his way. The Levite saw him and crossed on the other side. The Samaritan saw him and went out of the way to care for him. The Samaritan chose what mattered.

Perhaps, Jesus tells this story to make the point that the definition of the neighbor is less about the other and more about the self. The person lying on the side of the road was clearly supposed to be a neighbor to the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan. But only the Samaritan was willing to be his neighbor. Jesus' definition of neighbor would probably be anyone to whom we can show mercy. So it isn't really about figuring out who is in and who is out, it is really about our own capacities. Can we be a neighbor to people in need of our mercy? Can we give and serve and love and more importantly, will we? We must choose to be the neighbor. The question is not whether that person lying on the side of the road is my neighbor, the question is am I willing to be a neighbor to that soul?

Fred Rogers was the model neighbor. He was the guy who saw people as worthy and with dignity and deserving of kindness. Especially the vulnerable. He loved children and was an advocate for their rights and needs. His work as a Presbyterian minister became a ministry of teaching others to be neighborly with the basic attributes of listening to children, of honoring their stories, and being respectful and kind. It wasn't slap happy comedy for kids - he was talking about dealing with anger, divorce, war, abuse, bullying, self-image and all the issues that kids were facing at the time. When the recent movie came out about his life and legacy more people learned that Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister. It gives us all something to be proud of – a Mr. Rogers kind of Christian is something we can get behind.

I can imagine Fred Rogers seeing the man lying beaten and dying on the side of the road. He would stop his Oldsmobile, take his briefcase out of his trunk, walk over to the man calmly, roll up the sleeves of his cardigan, and begin to wash his face, and hum a jingle while caring for his needs, “Would you be mine, could you be mine, won't you be my neighbor?” But maybe it should be this way, “Would you be mine, could you be mine? I will be your neighbor!” Because the person in need isn't really going to discriminate. They are desperate for help, and they aren't going to stop and think about whether they want to be neighbors with us. We are the ones called to be the neighbors, to do right, to show mercy, to minister with kindness, to tend to wounds, to listen to stories. Being a neighbor is about choosing to do so. You have to make a choice to see people, to care for them, to extend mercy.

The lawyer wanted to inherit eternal life and so he wanted to understand from Jesus exactly what he must do to check that box off his list. But Jesus reframes this not as something to do but something to be. Loving neighbors is not about going out and finding the people who fit the bill and doing something nice for them. It is about becoming the type of people who will be neighborly to others. More often than not, we already know the right thing to do, it is just a matter of whether we or not we are willing to do it. I don't need to convince you that forgiveness is more life giving than revenge. But I might have to compel you do choose forgiveness. I don't need to convince you that hospitality is godlier than exclusivity. But I might need to encourage you to live it. I don't need to convince you that generosity is more worthy than greed. But I might need to push you in that direction.

That is because choosing the right thing, the Christian thing, the life-giving thing, the thing that matters - isn't always as easy as it should be. Being selfless, generous, compassionate, hospitable, kind, merciful – these things don't just happen – they take work and faith and intentionality and sacrifice. Some people make it look easy but all of us are making choices about being neighborly or not.

Fred Rogers did this every day – he lived his life and chose to be a neighbor to the people who needed his care and kindness and mercy. Some of you will remember Dick and Ginny Thornburgh, who were longtime members of this church. Dick was the governor of Pennsylvania and then the U.S. Attorney General. Dick's first wife was killed in a car accident and their son Peter was left with physical and intellectual disabilities. Dick remarried Ginny a few years later and they cared for Peter throughout his life and gave him the best love and advocacy any child could ever ask for. Perhaps not surprisingly, Peter's hero was Mr. Rogers.

Like the Thornburgh's, Mr. Rogers was from Pittsburgh. Dick and Ginny were able to give Peter the chance to meet and become friends with his hero. When I visited their apartment in DC, Peter showed me his room with his toys and his baseballs and was stood out to me the most was a giant poster, a giant signed poster, of Mr. Rogers. Peter told me Mr. Rogers was his friend. I bet there aren't too many other Presbyterian ministers who have been asked for their autographs never mind had their posters hanging in bedrooms of their adoring fans. Fred Rogers would meet someone like Peter and think, I can be his neighbor. This is a soul I could love; I could affirm, I could bless with my friendship and my compassion. Like August, picking the pink paint to lift her sister's weary heart, Fred Rogers lifted Peter's heart and made him feel whole.

This is what Jesus did at every turn. He stopped what he was doing to talk to children. He welcomed in the outcasts to his table. He spent time with the sick. He touched the unclean. He forgave the sinners. He saw people as his neighbor's. He found a way to lift their hearts and the minds and the souls. Every day we must choose if we are going to be neighborly or not.

After Jesus told the lawyer the story about the man lying on the side of the road, he asked the lawyer. "Which of these three - the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan was the neighbor?" And then Jesus answered his own question, "The one who showed mercy."

Faith is not just a matter of knowing the answers. Faith is about choosing what matters. We do not need to spend our time trying to figure out who is or is not our neighbor, we just need to spend our time being neighborly. Or as Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood!

Amen.