

## **OPENING**

This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of our Stewardship Season, our month-long journey where we identify and proclaim who we are, the people of Good Shepherd.

TO RECAP: we began two weeks ago with our identity in the eyes of God, the reality that “We are Beloved” and made in the image of God. For our faith community that story began in 1878 as the Church of the Good Shepherd down the road but, for humanity, that story has been going on since the story in Genesis. Last week, the Stewardship Season and our story continued with our identity as friends, as members of a something beyond ourselves as individuals. Therefore, “We are Beloved” and “We are Friends.”

Today I focus on our identity as Neighbors as although “We are Good Shepherd” we don’t exist in a vacuum but rather within a complex social/political/geographical/ religious context that constitutes our neighborhood in this part of the world.

## **DEFINITION**

Defining what a neighbor is is a good starting place. Luckily, someone asks Jesus that very question in the Gospel of Luke, and Jesus answers with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.<sup>1</sup> That story serves as a good definition, although a difficult one, as Jesus’ definition of neighbor is so frighteningly all-encompassing that it can be daunting. Similarly, in our Gospel today, we witness Jesus crossing barriers of class and ability to reach out to a neighbor whom he sees, but most others don’t. It was a struggle for his disciples, a struggle for the early Church, and a struggle for us today. It is an important question, however, to consider as we think about the stewardship of our resources, how we understand Good Shepherd’s relationship to our neighborhood.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10.29

### **THREE VIEWS:**

Here's one way of looking at it:

In terms of neighborhoods, it is said that *Medieval* Man (and Woman) woke up and, first thing, said their prayers, joined in the knowledge that all others in the village were doing likewise, and would do so throughout the day, confident that their collective prayers meant something.

*Modern* Man (and Woman) woke up and reads the newspaper, skipping the prayer part, but joined himself and herself with their neighbors by looking over the news about the community

Postmodern Man (and Woman) wakes up and is surrounded by social media, technology bringing the virtual reality of neighborhood to one's fingertips.

Because we are human, all of those are flawed visions and demonstrations of "neighborhood", even the Medieval village with the church at its center, or our current "digital neighborhoods" that actually seem to offer more division than community.

### **DEFINITION of NEIGHBORHOOD**

I recently watched the documentary *Won't You be my Neighbor?* —which came out this year and profiles Fred Rogers, the host and creator of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*—the long running PBS television show that I remember watching and adoring as a child.

In the documentary, Fred Rogers says "Television has the chance of building a real neighborhood out of a whole country."<sup>2</sup>

The tragedy is that that of course did not take place. But that sort of radical definition of neighborhood has its antecedents in Jesus' understanding of neighborhood.

Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, who was ordained, the documentary relates, as an 'Evangelist for Television' and spent his whole life trying to break down barriers through the then new medium, and trying to connect with children, the most vulnerable members of our community.

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<sup>2</sup> *Won't You be My Neighbor?* Morgan Neville, dir. Universal. 2018.

## **CONTEXT:**

*Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* debuted in 1968, 50 years ago, in a time notable for the deep divisions in American society, over the Vietnam War, over racial issues, and over political violence through assassination. The polarized society bears much resemblance to our own, the documentary is quick to suggest, and therefore it makes it a helpful document to interpret our own times.

In the show, Fred Rogers tackled all those subjects and more: war, violence, death, divorce, change, grief, anxiety. Although there was a “Make-Believe Land”, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* was not an escapist dream that could insulate children, or adults, from the world. Rather, as one commentator in the documentary states: “The neighborhood is not a fantasy place, but a place where you have conflict, real conflict.”<sup>3</sup>

## **TEMPLATE:**

Instead, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* provided tools and strategies to deal with the realities of life.

Recall the famous images from the show: Fred Rogers interacting with the handicapped (not unlike the blind Bartimaeus from our Gospel), Rogers communicating with Coco the Chimp, Rogers cooling his feet in a pool of water and then inviting the African American police officer from the show to join him, a scene that looks an awful lot like how we understand the foot-washing of the disciples.

In doing so, Rogers tried to make the “Space between television and individual (child)... holy ground.”<sup>4</sup> In that effort, we see a template both for defining what a neighborhood is, and for figuring out how to live in that neighborhood and what the responsibilities and demands of the Gospel are.

Fred Rogers did not see it as a burden of course, I am not sure how he did this. Rather he saw the answer to the question “Won't you be my neighbor?” as (quote) “An invitation to love. (Because) the greatest thing we can do is make sure someone knows that are loved and capable of love.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## **STEWARDSHIP:**

Those are good marching orders for stewardship: the realization that knowing and understanding your neighbor is nothing short of an invitation to love.

Luckily, we don't have to do it alone, because I know that I could never live up to that example. We do it as a community. As a beloved community, a community of friends. "We are Good Shepherd" and we live in this neighborhood. For 140 years, we have tried to seek out the needy, and the blind, those who are in need of Christ's healing. Very often, those persons are our selves. Other times, they are folks that we know and love, from near and far, and that through our outreach programs, our personal witness, our affiliation with community partners, we reach out our hands and feet to be Christ's hands and feet in the world.

We yearn to be a community, a neighborhood, that is a community of joy, not a crowd that does not see the beggar in our midst. True healing comes with the formation of a community of joy.<sup>6</sup>

In doing so, we join with Bartimaeus, with the disciples, and with Fred Rogers, as we go on our path of discipleship, "on our way" to the Cross. We know that by doing so, it requires us to throw off our cloak, to give up who we are, our former lives, in order to join Jesus and follow him on that path. But by doing so, we regain our sight, we truly see our neighbor, and we come into full knowledge of God.

**AMEN**

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<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. "Healing the Blind Beggar." *The Christian Century*. 116.