

“Who Is My Neighbor?”

Luke 10:25-37

July 11, 2010

Pastor Lin Grace Rohr in Dialog Sermon with Pastor Tom Williams

Set Up: Two stools on chancel with sneakers on them.

Play 1967 Song: “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” by Fred Rogers.

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,

A beautiful day for a neighbor.

Would you be mine?

Could you be mine?...

It's a neighborly day in this beauty wood,

A neighborly day for a beauty.

Would you be mine?

Could you be mine?...

I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like you.

I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

So, let's make the most of this beautiful day.

Since we're together we might as well say:

Would you be mine?

Could you be mine?

Won't you be my neighbor?

Won't you please,

Won't you please?

Please won't you be my neighbor?

[Tom and I walk down 2nd & 4th Aisles to stools on chancel. Each of us sits on a stool, change shoes and then go to the lectern (Tom) and pulpit (Lin)].

Lin: Introduction

Did hearing that theme song bring back memories of childhood, either your own, your children or your grandchildren? For thirty-three years from 1968 to 2001 another Presbyterian pastor defined neighbor and neighborhood for thousands of children in the television show, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. When it first came out, I was a little too old to appreciate it as a child and a little too young to appreciate it as an adult. You may ask how I know this. It's from a question I remember asking the first time I watched it, “Why can't he change his shoes before the show?” I had no idea in 1968 that the answer to my question would hit me 42 years later, yes, just this week. The answer that came to mind, perhaps Mr. Rogers changed his shoes on the

show to remind us to walk in “other shoes,” to show us that walking in another’s shoes is how we become neighbors.

Defining neighbor and neighborhood is what the lawyer questioning Jesus ended up doing. First, he attempted to test Jesus regarding the Mosaic Law. He asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers his question with a question, “What is written in the Law?” The lawyer answers correctly with what every good Jew would know, the Shema with a bit of Leviticus thrown in. “Thou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus affirms his answer and is willing to let it go, but not the lawyer. Wanting to justify himself, scripture tells us, the lawyer asks a follow up question, “And who is my neighbor?” The word that the lawyer used in the Greek is *plēsiōn* which literally means, “The one who is near.” So in essence, the lawyer is asking, “what is near...how far should my circle of love go, how big is my neighborhood?” Then Jesus gives the lawyer, and us, a lesson in the form of a story.

This story is familiar to most people, even people who aren’t necessarily people of faith; the story is of The Good Samaritan that we just read. Briefly summarizing it, a man is robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Characters enter the story. First, a priest, a person of high honor, a descendant of Aaron, Moses’ brother, comes by, and passes by, the half-dead man. Another person comes by, again a person of honor, a Levite, from the tribe of Levi as Aaron was, but not a descendant of Aaron. A Levite would be an assistant in the Temple, he too, passes by. Finally, a Samaritan, a person who is part Jewish, and therefore despised by the Jewish community; the Samaritan comes by, shows compassion, by attending to the beaten man and providing help in the future through the innkeeper. After Jesus tells the story, Jesus asks the lawyer another question, “so who was the neighbor?” “The one who showed mercy,” the lawyer responds. Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.”

In our actions and attitudes, we ask the same the questions the lawyer asked; “how far should my circle of love go, just how big is my neighborhood?”

TOM: Changing Neighborhoods

Maybe the lawyer has it right? Maybe the question we should be asking God and each other is the profound one of “who is my neighbor” and then dare to tell the story. Or maybe we should dare to allow the story to ask us the question “who was the neighbor of the injured one”?

Maybe as congregations and as individuals we don't ask those questions often enough. Maybe we don't listen to God's call to respond to the question often enough? We live in a world where the concept of neighbor has been redefined by our ability to travel and technology. We know that much of our food, clothing, and other products which we enjoy come not from a neighborhood factory, farm, or business but from places far away. Who our neighbor might be can be oversimplified and easily transformed from one whose life is known and directly involved with ours to one who is never seen or known except through a product.

We all know that being a neighbor means different things in different situations. Being a neighbor to those who live on our block or in our building is different from being a neighbor to those who live on a different side of Madison or Wisconsin or the world! And it is easy to be everybody's neighbor but never ask what does it mean to be a particular person's neighbor and seek to listen to or empathize with their situation. The Samaritan wasn't just the injured person's neighbor in the sense of proximity or rhetoric but sought to involve himself in the injured one's historical situation. Note that the priest and the Levite, both renowned religious figures, ignored the other's needs. That is they feared a response to the situation which interfered with their needs and their desires. They chose to ignore the injured one and go on with their lives unaffected by him. Neighborliness opens one to the needs of others. And the Samaritan overcame or redefined the idea of being a neighbor by daring to aid the injured one.

The parable into which we enter is a parable which challenges notions and expectations but none more startling than the idea of redefining neighbor. The character of the lawyer is set up to ask the seemingly simple question and, considering the original audience of the Lucan scripture were probably Jews seeking to understand what it meant to confess Jesus as the messiah, we have a parable which shows how Jesus challenged the religious establishment of his day and how that establishment didn't meet the needs of the everyday Palestinian. The parable universalizes the notion of neighbor and challenges religious expectations and/or legalisms.

As we read the story and delve into it for meaning, we ought to remember that the main characters are representatives of the religious establishment and a person of a tribe who were viewed by the Jewish religious establishments as neither Jew nor Gentile. They were a rejected people who ought to be avoided by devout Jews. The surprise of the story is its turning upside

down the world view which would see the Samaritan as a stranger and one to be avoided. In the parable, the Samaritan becomes the main protagonist, the hero who ignores expectations and/or social niceties to reach out to and aid the stranger. The Samaritan provides the everyday aid needed while those who represent at least symbolically the religious establishment, ignore the one in such need. One can interpret this several ways but today how I would view this is that the story really makes clear that a person's needs may be addressed by even those whom society says is not a neighbor. Looked at in this way, the story isn't about how we are neighbors but how others are neighbors to us!! It is a story which opens the hearers, we assume 1st Century Jewish residents of Palestine, to the notion that the neighbor may be anyone! And if they can love in such a manner as the Samaritan, they ought to be loved! The story really reverses, turns on its head the question! So what does all that theological meandering mean to us? Well, I think first that to take our faith seriously we need recognize that our neighbor might be anyone even those whom we might find repugnant or see as not clearly involved with our lives.

LIN: Changing Churches

Recognizing that our neighbor may be anyone and that our neighborhoods have and are changing, we also recognize, so are our churches. We don't have "neighborhood churches" necessarily any more. Covenant was established as a neighborhood church more than fifty-five years ago. And certainly, we have members and friends from the neighborhood, but people come from other neighborhoods as well and some people in the Hill Farm neighborhood go to other churches. Greater mobility has opened up choice. Churches are no longer neighborhood churches, but neighborhoods' church. Each church faithful to God's call seeks to share and serve in the neighborhoods of their members and friends. This is challenging and complicated, filled with risks and rewards.

Challenging because it's tempting just to look for people from the neighborhood the church is in, and overlook the neighborhoods that God has brought in. Complicated because more neighborhoods bring diversity, may be not as obvious as black or white, but its there. The diversity is seen in there being in a single church, male and female, young and older, gay and straight, Democrats and Republicans, well educated and not formally educated, economically secure and economically struggling, all coming together to worship and work in sharing our love for God and neighbor. The risks may include not "tending the tensions" of the diversity and

thereby impacting the church in ways that either create a church where everyone thinks similarly or a church that loses its way and becomes all things to all people, thereby being nothing to no one. And the rewards are too many to name! If a church embraces the neighborhoods God is bringing together, then the questions on how far should my circle go, just how big is my neighborhood will be answered with prayerful discernment from local and global perspectives.

TOM: How Churches Change

Here at Covenant, as we walk ahead in our faith journey together, we will be participating in a discernment process in which we will be asked to play many of the roles we find in this parable. The discernment process as defined by the session is a process in which all will be asked to at times be the Samaritan and the injured one and I fear others may want to play the role of the priest, and the Levite. This process will offer each of us the opportunity to recognize how many different neighborhoods are represented here. And it will offer us a chance to think about and develop a plan for responding to the needs of the many neighborhoods of which we are a part.

First, meeting in small groups, each of us will be asked to be the Samaritan. We will be asked to offer aid in the form of ideas regarding what and how this congregation ought respond to its neighbors needs. What is it this church ought be in 2010 and following in Madison Wisconsin? And I can't emphasize this enough we need remember that to be a Samaritan is to do what we can and to know that God calls us to do only what we can and not that of which we are incapable. Dare to respond. Dare to speak out and offer with courage and with faith each of our visions for this congregation. Be a neighbor of faith.

Second, we will be asked to be the injured one and listen to and reflect upon the aid, the ideas, the vision of others. (I don't really think there will be much pain in this but I am trying to stay with the parable!) And that listening is important also for it is an act of being a neighbor that we offer the other our respect and our love by listening even to visions we may find to be absurd, ridiculous. There are a number of places in the process for the culling of the vision and the assuring that what we will hold up is a vision which is reasonable and viable. Remember we are Presbyterians and along the way the process celebrates and involves decision makers including a congregational meeting when you will have a final say on this. BUT along the way

let us listen and respect each other always trusting in God's presence and continuing call which in the end will enable our vision to be one which is both reasonable and viable as well as faith filled!!

Now I know it's Bring a Friend to Church Sunday and some of you may be wondering why we are talking about something that's so seemingly insular, internal to the life of this congregation. What I want to say to you is that like the Samaritan we ask that you tear down the barriers of expectations and social niceties and be our neighbor by offering your ideas, visions for what we ought be. Join us in this journey. If you're here you are probably considering how a worshiping community, a congregation might fit into your life. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you helped shape that congregation and its vision of ministry? Walk with us and be our neighbor.

Some may be tempted to play the role of Levite or priest and walk by; and I say to you please stop, please join us and enable this process to be one which truly reflects the faith and vision of all. At the session meeting the other night, the concern was raised that we may not have enough room for all who want to participate and my only reply is what a wonderful thought and problem to confront!

We live in a world where many of our neighbors are confronted with hatred, violence, poverty, and war and we are called by a God of justice and of peace to be their neighbor. Let us walk together and speak to and listen to each other that we may always be known as a congregation of faith-filled Samaritans who dare to love without regard and do justice without fear and that our faith is reflected in the ministries of this congregation of many different neighbors from many different neighborhoods.

LIN: Conclusion

So, as members and friends of this faith community from our different neighborhoods, we will continue to ask these questions, who is my neighbor? How far should my circle of love go and just how big is my neighborhood? It's not as simple as changing shoes, its changing our attitudes and actions, our hearts and minds. As challenging and complicated, risky and rewarding as it is to walk in another's shoes, our compassion for neighbor and neighborhoods will grow when we do. This is what Jesus taught the lawyer in the story of The Good Samaritan and the

story continues to teach us. In the story, we look down on the behavior of the priest and Levite. I've heard preachers in the past, and I've done it myself, define who the priests and Levites are today to be the examples of "how not to be." But this year in hearing the story of the Good Samaritan, in addition to all the other questions and answers we've already explored, I had a new question come to mind for us to consider, "how are we to be neighbor to the priests and Levites of our day, or more broadly stated, **who isn't our neighbor?** How do we welcome all? Yes, our call to love and be neighborly goes that far...