

Could We Be Neighbors?

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood; a beautiful day for a neighbor;
would you be mine; could you be mine; please, won't you be my neighbor.

From 1968 to 2001 a Presbyterian minister named Fred Rogers began his regular television program for children by singing this song. Softly presenting the words while wearing a warm smile and a cardigan sweater, Mr. Rogers drew huge audiences. His "neighborhood of make-believe" told stories using various puppet characters and other human actors. Mr. Rogers himself performed many parts.

Mr. Rogers did not avoid difficult topics. He discussed the death of gold fish, for example. He also offered advice on dealing with anger or conflict in families. We must become neighbors, he emphasized. All of us want to live in a neighborhood where we can be neighbors. All of us want to be accepted for who we are in a place where we are welcome. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor?

It is easy to romanticize about being neighbors. So let's be honest: often we don't understand, and don't even like, our neighbors. A friend stared longingly at his neighbor's swimming pool and asked sarcastically: "How often do you think we get invited over to use that pool?" All of us can describe neighbors who are too loud and give too many parties, whose dogs leave souvenirs on our lawns, whose

grass needs attention. Just being in the same neighborhood does not mean that we have become neighbors. Not the kind of neighbors Mr. Rogers described.

Still, once upon a time, we could speak warmly of our neighbors, even with their odd habits. The music may have blared from their windows and the paint may have peeled from their walls, but we were neighbors and it was a neighborhood. The late Saul Bellow pulled no punches in describing his gritty, childhood Chicago neighborhood, Humboldt Park. It was loud, edgy, with crowded streets. You knew who drank too much, who had lost a job, who was eccentric and who was reliable. For all its strange aspects, Humboldt Park was home.

Bellow knew the people and the people knew him. He didn't like all the neighbors, and never understood them. But their lives were linked and they knew it. They shared a commitment to the place where they lived. They were neighbors.

Of course, it was a long time ago. A time when people were less likely to move, when living near one another meant knowing each other's lives, and maybe caring as well. We were connected, and such connections mattered, as strange as they might be. What happened to you affected me, and vice versa. But such connections have weakened. A journalist named Peter Lovenheim was alarmed when a murder-suicide took place in his quiet neighborhood in Rochester, New York. But he was more alarmed when the incident and the family that was left

behind disappeared. It was as if the tragedy that befell this family, and their family itself, had never been there.

Lovenheim reached a troubling conclusion: we may live near each other, but we pass like ships in the night. We may live in the same neighborhood, but we do not live as neighbors. Electronically we may be linked to all sorts of people. But in the vicinity of where we live, many of us are alone. We are becoming strangers to one another. Not knowing or understanding each other's joys or struggles. Less accepting of differences. Not caring about each other's hopes or fears. We are apt to live in private bubbles, preoccupied and missing much around us, especially each other. It rarely dawns on us that we could be so much more to one another. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor?

It turns out that the lawyer in Luke 10 is not asking an obvious or insensitive question. The greatest teaching Jesus offers us requires this question. In fact, we will never understand what it means to be Christian until we ask this question, and ask it over and over. Who is my neighbor? Not who lives nearby and annoys me. Not who am I going to avoid. Not who is different and so I am suspicious of them. Not who dresses differently or prays differently. None of that. Those questions point us to suspicion and prejudice, and there is far too much of that. Instead, as Christians, we must ask this question: who is my neighbor?

This question opens up the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus describes how a man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho was assaulted by robbers who left him for dead. A priest and a Levite, religious leaders, walked past, ignoring the man in his agony. But a Samaritan, a member of a race of people who faced severe discrimination, stopped to help. He took the man to an inn and paid for the man's care. So Jesus asks: who was a neighbor, and why was he a neighbor?

The question and the parable, turn our notion of neighbors upside down. We can assume from the parable that the man who was assaulted was Jewish; yet Jewish leaders did not assist him. Assistance came from one whom Jews generally rejected, a Samaritan. So what we learn is that neighbors are not necessarily people who are like us, in the obvious ways. Neighbors are not given to exclusion of those who are different, or to prejudice against another race. Neighbors don't ignore need. Neighbors are prone to pitch in. In short, neighbors care, without restrictions.

And what is the neighborhood? It has become global. What happens thousands of miles away affects how we feel and act here. Often, sadly, our immediate instincts are not ideal. When there is an incident, especially, a violent one, we are prone to avoid it, to look the other way. Not unlike the priest and the Levite who passed by the injured man. Surely they had important business and urgent appointments. Surely someone would attend to that poor man. And if they

had stopped, the robbers might have assaulted them. So it's too complicated; better to keep walking. And so we do.

Worse, these days, we would blame the injured man. He must have done something to bring it on himself. This might not have happened if the man had been at work. Maybe he was lazy and wanted a government handout. So we not only pass him by, we condemn the man lying in the road. We want simple solutions; we want people to blame. So let's blame the victim. There is no compassion. There is only blame. We don't think of him as our neighbor.

The growth of hatred is alarming. And the symptom of hatred is that the word "person" has slipped away. Whether in Orlando or Baton Rouge or St. Paul or Dallas, or any number of other places. Far too often, there are no people; there are only categories. Black or white. Liberal or conservative. Police. Government. There are no longer human beings. Only categories, and the anger they elicit. We are in a zero-sum game, where we assume that we lose if someone else wins. And where people who are different are obstacles and objects of scorn. Not neighbors, objects. Even when they are lying in the road.

How do we defuse this situation? We have become skilled at tearing each other down; now, how do we build each other up? We get a clue from Peter Lovenheim who despaired that there were no neighbors in the neighborhood. He set out to know the people who lived around him. He heard their stories, took time

to learn about their lives. In the process he learned a great lesson. The people who knew how to be neighbors were involved in local faith communities. They had learned about love of God and love of neighbor. They thought in terms of people, not in terms of categories. They were ready to aid people in need, and to address civic issues thoughtfully. By faith people can become neighbors. Because all of us, black and white, liberal and conservative, Muslim and Christian – all of us are God’s people. Now we must live it.

It only happens in the midst of faith community. Because only here do we ask how we can love God and love our neighbor. As we take this journey we come together. And when we come together, we all benefit. There is no zero sum; we can all be winners together. Your healing promotes my healing. Your joy surfaces my joy. Your dreams encourage me to dream. We rise, or fall, together.

A few years ago, at a dinner in the Middle East, a Muslim leader smiled and said: “Muslims say there is one God, what do Christians say?” I said: “Christians often recite a creed with the words, ‘We believe in one God.’” Then my friend asked: “If the Quran says that believers must be merciful as God is merciful, what do Christians say?” I answered: “In Luke 10, Jesus says that we must love God and love our neighbor.” Then my friend smiled and we shook hands.

Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Please won’t you be my neighbor?

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