

July 11th, 2010
Pentecost 7C
Luke 10:25-37

Pastor Tim Koester

Making **Mercy** with Mr. Rogers

(open with a clip from *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*) <http://pbskids.org/rogers/>

I'll have to admit that I didn't grow up with Mr. Rogers. I did however, go to high school with him.

Let me explain just a bit more. Before the days of cable or satellite, my dad built a 40 ft. tower so our TV antenna could receive the major networks but public television remained out of reach. So even though *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* came along about when I did, no PBS signal meant my childhood was deprived of not only Mr. Rogers but Big Bird and Burt & Ernie as well. Yes... I was a deprived child!

But luckily there was another Mr. Rogers in my life. He was my high school principal and he is quite easy to **picture** even if you have never met him. Simply put the image of Fred Rogers in your mind ... mild mannered, calm, small-statured, unassuming... and then... think about the complete OPPOSITE.

Mr. Rogers, the principal, could evoke fear in many a student. He was broad and had a head of thick, black hair with a mustache to match. He spoke with a commanding voice, which rarely repeated what was said the first time around, and although he wasn't quick to anger if he ever got to that point, you did not want to be the cause of the angst. It was rumored the board of education brought him in to bring back some good ol' fashioned discipline, to lay down the law, and to give the school some much needed structure. In that task, he was successful, although I don't suppose it made him a lot of friends.

It certainly didn't make him a lot of friends among students. Many, in fact, **saw** him as the *enemy* and even the so-called "good" kids often joined in the propaganda campaign against him -if only to look cool in front of their friends. I know. Regrettably... I was one of them.

But two things happened that changed how I **saw** Mr. Rogers. The first was comedy skit for the annual "Variety Show" at school. Of course it was a spoof of *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* featuring our own Mr. Rogers who happened to be played by me. Needless to say it was a bit "edgier" than the PBS series but thankfully the principal took the satire in stride. However, I remember having a funny feeling inside my gut that made me wonder what it was like to **actually** be him – to be the person everyone else **saw** as the *enemy*.

The second thing was a meal. We went to a school event and our sponsor couldn't go along so Mr. Rogers took us, which sort of took the fun out of missing school! I don't remember the details of the day but I do

remember eating together before we left for home. As we sat at the table together, it was like a different person showed up. Mr. Rogers let down his guard. He told jokes, laughed, and seemed every bit like any other adult, even perhaps a “cool” adult! For a time we **saw** him outside of the role that usually defined him and we were never quite able to **see** him the same way again.

The story of the merciful Samaritan is a story about **seeing**... seeing not only *who* neighbors *are* but also seeing *what* neighbors *do*... and in the process, discovering *the way* that leads to life without end.

It's a story without ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’. We may want to put those labels on various characters but Jesus never does. So if we **see** this only as a moral story that teaches it is *bad* to ignore hurting people and *good* to help them, we have **missed the point**. Jesus did not need to teach people how to be good neighbors. He lived in a society where hospitality and neighborliness were assumed. Even today, a community like Bloomfield takes great pride that “neighbor helps neighbor” when difficulties arise. And that is a good thing! It is what makes living together in a community so much better than living all on your own.

Both Jesus and the lawyer agree that loving the neighbor is essential to receiving the good life God intends for us (and *how to have life* predicates this entire parable). The lawyer's question is not whether we should love, but rather *who* we should love. “Who is my neighbor” is a question I think any of us would ask. We all want to believe we are doing the right thing. We all want to be justified in our thinking about neighbors.

But Jesus does not provide a legal definition of “neighbor” to the lawyer. Instead he tells a story that uses the lawyer's question to open minds and hearts even today. A man is lying by the side of the road wounded. We have no idea who he is, only that he needs help. Two people pass him by but a third stops and then goes to extraordinary lengths to make sure he is taken care of. Now if this were a story only about how to be a good neighbor, it wouldn't matter who the characters are. But the characters are essential because Jesus shatters our attempts to limit who we **see** as neighbors which in turn expands our vision of *eternal life*.

The priest and Levite are expected characters. They are identifiable as being “one of us”. If their actions are less than ideal, there is likely a good reason, a justifiable reason. We all make decisions like this everyday. There are people we help and people we don't and we feel justified in our actions. Before we condemn the priest and Levite, we should **see** ourselves in them. We should even see the actions of our church in them.

Then along comes a Samaritan, a person who lives across the border to the north of Jerusalem. Today we associate *Samaritan* with ‘good’ connotations but in Jesus' day, Samaritans were the *enemy*. They were the

unpatriotic, disloyal, outcasts of Jewish society. They were aliens in the Jewish citizenry who were not above acting as poorly as they were treated. Just a bit earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus travels through a Samaritan town and the people there shun him simply because he is a "Judean" on his way to Jerusalem. James and John know the drill. You have to retaliate to this kind of un-neighborly action with violent retribution. It's the only thing *these people* understand you know. So they ask Jesus if they can call down fire from heaven! That might give you a sense of the animosity that exists between these "neighbors".

But Jesus tells the story so that the Samaritan (the unwanted, distrusted alien) is **seen** as the one who acts like neighbors should act. The Samaritan **sees** the same man in the ditch as the others and yet instead of moving to the other side of the street, he comes near and **sees** the man up close. The **sight** of the man moves the Samaritan to compassion. He feels the man's pain and acts accordingly. The actions in themselves are not all that extraordinary. Anyone would care for a beloved friend, family member or good neighbor in a similar way. But these men are not neighbors in any conventional sense. **There must be something more than geography, nationality, ethnicity, religiosity or moral solidarity that makes mercy possible between two people.** Jesus urges us to **see** one another in a different light, to break down the walls of division that we use to label people as unworthy of neighborliness.

"Go and do likewise" is not simply a call to give aid to wounded people along the road. It is a call to **make mercy -to do justice- with people we see as the alien enemy in our midst.** I can't identify who that is for you in your life. Perhaps it is a principal or a boss who you can only see as an overbearing burden. Perhaps it is another ethnic group or nationality. Perhaps it is the person who has wronged you, or mistreated you, the person who does not deserve mercy. But Jesus says the way to receive life is to *love with mercy*. It is to show kindness not to those who deserve it, but to those who don't. That's not necessarily a difficult task for us -IT IS AN IMPOSSIBLE ONE- if we attempt it on our own.

Our only hope is that we are in the ditch. We are the half-dead ones who need to be rescued and healed of our wounds. **It is God**, who with every reason to pass us by, instead **sees** and cares for us at great cost. God takes a personal stake in our recovery though we do not deserve or earn it. This is the **good news** Jesus proclaims in his very life...and death. God is not our enemy. God declares us to be beloved children who are loved even though we cannot **see** ourselves as worthy. "Jesu"... as our neighbors in Ghana say, has come to open our eyes to **see him** in us and in all people so that just as Jesu loved us we might also... "Go and do likewise". Amen. (Sing ELW# 708 *Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us With Your Love*)