

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Text: Luke 10: 25-37

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*It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood,
a beautiful day for a neighbor,
would you be mine, could you be mine?
It's a neighborly day in the beauty wood,
a neighborly day for a beauty,
would you be mine, could you be mine,
please won't you be my neighbor?*

Those verses are written on the hearts of countless people across this sweet land of ours. They ask a small but important pocketful of questions: "Would you be mine, could you be mine, won't you be my neighbor?" And quite honestly the spare truth of that melody and those words keep playing in my mind these recent days and weeks.

Here's why. Sometimes in life we loose our way as persons and as a people. And sometimes that leaves us bereft in knowing what to do, or reluctant to speak, or at a loss for words. Sometimes we do not know what we do not know except that something seems terribly wrong.

I think you know what I mean. But there does come a time in our heart of hearts when we have to acknowledge what is so – especially as the dissonance deepens and gets louder; a time when Dietrich Bonhoeffer's timeless guidance and voice, as well as that of Dr. King, has to rise up: "Silence in the face of evil, is evil too."

So let's take a collective breath. And in our breathing let's also be clear. I'm not speaking as one with answers to the complexity we are facing as a country, nor do I dare to speak for you. But I do want to reclaim one of our core values that this is the land of liberty, and sometimes we need to pause and remind ourselves how to get back home.

Last Saturday Pam and I went to see the acclaimed documentary on Mr. Roger's and the neighborhood he created for millions upon millions of kids. Our son Tim got so excited every time the show came on. He'd get his child-rocker and place it right in front of the TV and declare to us, "Rono's here!" (That's what he called Mr. Rogers.)

The movie bears extraordinary witness as this tall, skinny, somewhat geeky Presbyterian Pastor communicated gospel values without ever mentioning the words God or church. He spoke in large and universal ways: the hunger in all people to be loved; the importance of home; and the virtues of inclusivity, tolerance and goodness. He taught about hard stuff like bullying, hatred, racism, forgiveness and making

mistakes. There was even an episode, I kid you not, in which King Friday the thirteenth in his make-believe kingdom talked of constructing a wall to keep his kingdom safe – all the while Mr. Rogers was really talking to America’s children about building bridges instead of walls.

Stay with me but shift gears as we do. Jesus was once in a conversation about loving one’s neighbor and a question was posed by one steeped in the laws of the day - mostly to distract and even trap Jesus in his own words. “But, who is my neighbor?”

And so Jesus told about a man who was traveling the road from Jericho to Jerusalem and was robbed and beaten and left for dead. Others were traveling that same way. The first one, who came along, by happenstance a priest, saw in safe advance what lay ahead and so he crossed the road to pass by on the other side. (Sometimes we distance ourselves like that.) Then a second traveler came along, this time a Levite, a master in Levitical law. He did not cross the road to avoid the injured one, but neither did he stop to help the one in need. But then a Samaritan came near – an outsider if ever there was one. Despised, distrusted, suspicious, and untrustworthy. The worst of the worst in his day. And what did he do? He stopped and bound up the wounds of the man, and took him to get help as his own expense.

So Jesus took the lawyer’s question and turned it right back on him. “Now you tell me. Who do you think was the neighbor?” And the reply came back, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said: “Go and do likewise.”

Please: may we bundle the varied strands of these thoughts together today. May we do so knowing that we want mercy and liberty and justice for all. We are American and we stand for these things. May we hold in balance the essential values of our land along side the critical guidance of our faith. We each know the best in ourselves and something far less than that, too; and we live somewhere between the lesser and better angels of our ways.

And as we began with a song, let’s end with one, too. This one, according to its author, Irving Berlin, was written as a prayer for blessing and guidance in a time that was filled with darkness.

*God bless America, land that I love.
Stand beside her, and guide her,
through the night with a light from above.
From the mountains, to the prairies, to the ocean, white with foam.
God bless America, my home sweet home.
God bless America, my home sweet home.
Amen.*

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