

Defining Neighbor¹

What's it like

to hear something your whole life
and then have it challenged
and changed in one moment?

*You shall love the Lord your God
with all your heart, your mind and your strength.
And love your neighbor as yourself.*

Well alright then Jesus, define for me
who is my neighbor?



At our last WNS,
a group of us met to talk,
watch a few clips and talk about the documentary,
Won't You Be My Neighbor,
about the ministry of Fred Rogers.

I watched Mister Roger's Neighborhood as a child
and can remember distinct shows
and episodes from over 30 years ago.

The show created an atmosphere
that encouraged curiosity, was welcoming and accepting.
Early on, one of Fred Rogers' mentors told him
that children who watched the show
felt a real relationship with him
even though it was through a TV screen.

Fred often remarked
that the space between the screen
and children's hearts and minds
was sacred ground.

¹ Sermon title is borrowed from the subtitle of Luke 10:25-37 in Eugene Peterson's, The Message

The neighborhood Mister Rogers created
was a place of safety and security,
one journalist in the documentary points out.

Neighborhoods, all neighborhoods
ought to be this.

Most of us, though I won't assume all,
but most of us grew up
in safe and secure neighborhoods.

Streets where we rode bicycles
with no helmets too fast down the hill;
neighborhoods where we knew
everyone's name in the apartment building;
places where a neighbor always had a popsicle
just waiting to share on a July afternoon.

Most of us grew up in neighborhoods
that were safe and secure.

And most of us still do,
though not all of us.

If we ask the question to someone here,
who is your neighbor,
what we want to know
is who lives on either side of ***your house***.

Most often we don't mean this
as a theological question,
of course, until we do.



I really like an aisle seat
when it comes to neighbors
on an airplane.
I'm like so particular about airplane etiquette

that I'm annoying.
I want everyone to think just like I do
when it comes to a shared arm rest
and reclining seats.

I will obsess over someone
who thinks they don't need
to follow the rules of air travel, four rows away.

Those eager beaver neighbors
who jump up and unbuckle
as soon as the plane's cabin air pressure changes
so, they can be the first ones off the plane
—don't even get me started.

Who is my neighbor on an airplane?



I am not a Black Friday shopper.
Now I do like a good deal
and I will hunt all over
the world wide web for one,
but I cannot bring myself
to engage the crowds of neighbors
in that space of hysteria at 2am.

When you're both reaching
for the last box of Lego Marvel Superheroes,
for your precious angel;
when you are arm wrestling
for the last insta-pot
Who is my neighbor?

Most of us have heard the story
of the Good Samaritan,
but let's hear it again.
I've taken a little liberty

and combined some of Eugene Peterson's The Message
and Clarence Jordan's the Cotton Patch Gospel
and a little of my own personal flair
to tell this story of answering *defining neighbor*.

So hear now Luke 10:25-37,
a word from the Lord.

STORY—this is the word of the Lord.

The reason we wanted to gather
intentional, intergenerational groups on Wednesday night
to watch the Fred Rogers story
was because there are burning issues right now
that involve how we treat our neighbor.

At the conference Carol Anne and I attended,
one speaker remarked,
the problem with our politicians
is that most of them
have let their politics inform their faith
rather than their faith informs their politics.²

Amen, church?
Amen.

This neighborhood right here,
right now, with all of us
who love the Lord and love each other
—this is the place of safety and security
where I think it is so important to say,
we must let our faith inform our politics,
our checkbooks,
our choices about where and how we live,
every decision we make
—not the other way around.

² Nish Weiseth, on her presentation on Saturday October 27, 2018; Evolving Faith Conference: Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, NC



The topic of immigration
has brought to light the struggle
with how to treat our neighbor
equal to that of how rampant racism is in this country.
We can agree that racism is wrong,
but the topic of immigration doesn't get included
in our conversations on how
we white people are treating people
of other races.

And though I will not stand up
and tell you how to vote
or more importantly I will not tell you
what to think
—I will challenge—
challenge myself,
challenge our family, our church
—to let our faith inform
our conversations about immigration.

When the religious leader in the community
asks Jesus who then is my neighbor
—there is an undertone of sneering.
An undertone of provocation,
I dare you to answer that Jesus—
just exactly who I am supposed to love
as much as I love myself?

The answer friends,
is the person you think is lazy
and should get a job
instead of depending on welfare.
Just exactly who am I supposed to love
as much as I love myself

—the answer is that person
who speaks a different language than you do.

The answer is that person
in a hoodie and baggie pants.

The answer is that person
who drives that BMW.

The answer is everyone.

Gavin Rogers is an associate pastor
at Travis Park United Methodist Church
in San Antonio.

Saying he is interested in people
and not politics,
he is traveling with a migrant caravan
in Mexico.³



On November 11, the pastor posted on Facebook,
“It is a long road.

But life is good when you are with people
filled with love and hospitality.”

A Mexican truck driver
who volunteered to drive some refugees
to their next shelter site
said he acted “because I’m human.”

Rogers writes about long days of traveling
with 6,000 refugees via a wide variety of methods.
Reaching Guadalajara, for example,
involved covering 400 kilometers in

³ <https://churchleaders.com/news/337415-caravan-in-mexico-pastor-wanted-know-truth-about-migrant-caravan-so-he-joined-it.html>

“23 hours of walking, hitchhiking and police escorts.

Walking. Car, semi-trailer,
truck, police truck,
dump truck, bus, shelter.”



The group Rogers is traveling with
is heading toward the border town of Tijuana, Mexico,
and likely won’t arrive for several weeks.

Many of the migrants have family members
who are already in the United States,
while others want to get legal help
in applying for refugee status.

News interview (>2 mins)

<https://news4sanantonio.com/news/local/san-antonio-pastor-travels-with-migrant-caravan-in-mexico>

Refugees sharing their stories
with the pastor tell
of having their children kidnapped
and other relatives killed in Central America.

Their journey, Rogers says,
is “not about a better life in American terms,
it’s just about living.”

Rogers admits that claim may sound “extreme,”
but says he has firsthand knowledge,
obtained by being “willing to talk and learn,”
that it’s “exactly what is going on here.”⁴

As U.S. government officials
talk of amassing troops
to protect the southern border,

⁴ ibid

church groups are rallying resources
to offer refugees assistance.

"It says in our Old Testament texts
to treat refugees like your blood,
and so, I am not interested in politics," Rogers says.
"I'm interested that we as people
can learn to embrace the immigrant."⁵



Now I am not saying
there shouldn't be laws
about coming into any country,
ours included.
And I am ***not saying***
everyone gets a free ride.
If you come,
be willing to work and pay taxes.

If you break the law,
except consequences.
We have to stop hiring folks
who come illegally
because you don't have to pay them well.
Make the process of immigrating fair,
understandable, and efficient.
Stop blaming anyone who doesn't look white
for the economic failure,
for violent crime and drug use.

I live in a safe neighborhood
and so, I don't have to worry
about the electricity being cut off

⁵ ibid

by an unstable, moody government
that just up and decides to do it.

I am self aware enough to know
that I don't like taking my kids to Target
and so, can't imagine
traversing through countries with them
unless I had more hope than fear
that they would have a better chance of survival
in another place.

I know enough to know
that not everyone in this country
has the same opportunity
to learn and thrive like my
white, educated family does.

I know that ***real success***
takes a whole community
no matter how strong
your boot straps are.

Reforming a broken immigration system
is letting faith inform your politics.

Demanding that people be treated
like they have inherent worth
and not like they are animals
is letting your faith inform
how you make decisions.

20 minutes worth of me talking
isn't likely to change your heart and mind.
You may think I am stepping into waters
I shouldn't.

But I see Jesus pushing his religious community
to think about neighbor differently;
and if Jesus can push to define neighbor
in a way that makes us
take a hard look at prejudice and judgment,
preconceived notions of the other, the immigrant,

if Jesus is the one bringing the challenge,
then I think it is fair
that we comfortable, privileged, white Christians
get taken to task.

And if you don't want to listen to me say it,
then hear the plea from our tradition,
to let your faith influence your politics.

Hear the gospel ring out to us and say

This is your neighbor.

When you do something
for the ones left behind,
left out, forgotten, poor, wounded, suffering,
when you do something for them
my brothers and sisters,
you have done it to me."

Jesus, define who is my neighbor.

Your neighbor is me,
says the Lord,
thanks be to God.