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## Won't You Be My Neighbor: Neighbor Luke 10:25-37

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*Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* first aired in the United States in 1966. As a young man, Fred Rogers saw the potential of television to teach positive values to children, and his passion for children gave birth to one of the most iconic television shows in history. One of the things that made *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* unique was Rogers' insistence that they not shy away from difficult topics, including the death of a family pet, difficult emotions, sibling rivalry, and even racism.

Officer Clemmons was the first recurring black character to appear on a children's television show. In an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in 1969, Mr. Rogers invited his good friend, Officer Clemmons, to come sit with him on a hot day. I'd like you to listen to Francois Clemmons, who played Officer Clemmons, as he reflects on this powerful scene: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=70&v=UD7Z-O7U33c&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=70&v=UD7Z-O7U33c&feature=emb_logo)

As a Presbyterian pastor, Fred Rogers knew exactly what he was doing when he dried Officer Clemmons feet with a towel. He was imitating Jesus. He was responding to Jesus' call to love and serve his neighbor for all to see.

In response to the unfolding events of the past few weeks, we are continuing to explore the intersection of this conversation about race and our faith as followers of Jesus. I believe that it is vitally important for us to root this conversation and our response in our faith, so that when the news cameras move on to the next disaster, our commitment to action will not move with them, but will remain as constant as the biblical call to do justice.

We're calling this series "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" and we want you to hear that invitation as the cry of communities of color to be a neighbor,

and ally, to them. Let's root that question in our Scripture reading today from Luke 10:25-37 [NLT].

<sup>25</sup> One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup> Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?" <sup>27</sup> The man answered, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" <sup>28</sup> "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!" <sup>29</sup> The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road. <sup>31</sup> "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. <sup>32</sup> A temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. <sup>34</sup> Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.' <sup>36</sup> "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked. <sup>37</sup> The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

I want us to notice three things from this profound story.

First, it's a story about racism. We've often watered this story down to say little more than "be nice to strangers," but at the core of it, this is a story about racism. The Jews despised Samaritans as a race and a culture. The animosity went back centuries. The Jews marginalized and oppressed Samaritans whenever they could and even slaughtered entire Samaritan villages. When a Jew saw a Samaritan, he or she didn't see another human being; they saw a sub-human enemy. By making a Samaritan the hero of his story, Jesus was confronting racism in the Jewish community in a very direct way.

Second, notice how Jesus defines who our neighbor is. It isn't the person next door. It isn't merely the people in our neighborhood. According to Jesus, our neighbor is the person before us in need.

Third, notice how Jesus turns the legal expert's question around. The legal expert wants to know who his neighbor is. Actually, he really wants to know who his neighbor isn't. He wants to know who he doesn't have to love. But Jesus doesn't tell him who his neighbor is or isn't. He asks, "To whom will you be a neighbor?"

It's so easy to read the story of the Good Samaritan and think to ourselves, "I would never be like the priest or the temple assistant and simply walk by someone who was beaten and bleeding on the side of the road!" I would certainly love to say that. But the more I've come to understand the nature of racism and the lived experience of communities of color, the more I've come to see that I have done exactly that. Millions in America are metaphorically and literally beaten and bleeding on the side of the road, victims of racial injustice, unwarranted brutality, and inequity.

Consider this...

- The median income for a black household in Minnesota is \$30,306 while the same figure for a white household is \$66,979.
- Poverty among whites in Minnesota is about 7%, while the rate is more than four times higher at 32% for blacks, the third biggest gap in our country.
- In Minnesota 76% of whites own their own home, as opposed to 24% of blacks.
- Our high school graduation rate is 85%, but only 67% for blacks and 51% for Native Americans.
- In Minnesota, whites make up 83% of the population, but only 47% of those who are incarcerated.

You can come to the conclusion that these inequities are due to some deficiency in people of color. That's racism on an individual level. Or you can conclude that there's something wrong with the system that favors some and disadvantages others. That's systemic racism.

But here's the hard truth that I'm wrestling with: these statistics tell me that thousands of my fellow human beings right here in Minnesota are bleeding

and beaten on the side of life's road, and more often than I care to admit I, like the priest and the temple assistant, have simply crossed the street and walked on by.

Communities of color are, and have been for centuries, crying out to us in the white community. And they are asking a simple but challenging question: Won't you listen to my story? Won't you work alongside me for justice? For equity? For peace? Won't you be my neighbor?

Jesus once told a story about the Kingdom of God. He said, "I was hungry and you did not feed me. Thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. Naked and you did not clothe me. Sick and you did not visit me." And the people responded, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick?" And Jesus responded, "Whatever you failed to do for the least of these, for those in need, you failed to for me."

Friends, this isn't just a racial issue. It isn't just an economic issue or a political issue...though it is all of those things. It is a faith issue. Perhaps when we see Jesus in the faces of those who are beaten and bleeding from the bandit called racism...perhaps then we'll be ready to say, "Yes, I will be your neighbor."