
“This is Not an Episode of Mister Rogers”

A SERMON on Luke 10:25-37 for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Preached 13 July 2025 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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It was just a few weeks into my second semester of theological school when the Reverend Fred McFeely Rogers—known to most of us simply as “Mister Rogers”—died. A 1963 graduate of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and ordained a Presbyterian minister that same year, Mister Rogers never served as a congregation’s pastor. Nevertheless, Mister Rogers’ faithful witness of grace and nurture and love—a Christ-bearing ministry of proclamation in its own right—sounded forth in the homes and hearts of millions of people in the United States and beyond, through the nearly 900 episodes of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* that were made in the show’s more-than-30 year run. For those of you who are not familiar, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was a television program for children that aired on PBS, the United States’ Public Broadcasting Service, which has some similarities to the CBC, but also to the educational television networks like Knowledge Network here in BC or TVO over in Ontario. The program had some similarities to Canada’s beloved *Mr. Dressup*, and that’s not entirely surprising. Ernie Coombs, who played Mr. Dressup, had worked together with Fred Rogers on *misterogers*, a CBC-produced show airing here in Canada in the mid-1960s that helped shape the concept and style of the program Fred Rogers would develop after returning to the US. When I was a child, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* aired every weekday—in fact often twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon just after school got out—usually right before or right after that other touchstone children’s show for my generation, *Sesame Street*. Day in and day out, Mr. Rogers was the gentle, singing friend in his cardigan sweaters and canvas sneakers who spoke genuinely to us, without pretence or gimmick, and touched the lives of so many of us.

The Sunday immediately after Mister Rogers’ death, I found myself in one of my usual seats at the church I attended in Chicago—St. Pauls United Church of Christ. St. Pauls was (and is) a pretty sizeable and vital congregation that worships in a big cathedral-like building with radiant stained-glass windows and a big intricate carved-wood high altar standing at the front between the divided choir stalls. As I took my seat shortly before worship was to begin, the choir was gathering itself together in those choir stalls at the front, which was somewhat unusual. Worship at St. Pauls UCC usually began with a choral introit, a short sung piece from the choir, but the choir usually sang it from the rear balcony, where there was an antiphonal section of the pipe organ to accompany them, and then they’d be a part of the big entrance processional during the opening hymn. But here they were in the front... and after the pastor finished with the welcome and announcements, it was neither the organ nor the first notes of the introit listed in the bulletin that started. Rather, a gentle little slightly jazzy riff from the piano landed into the choir’s proclamation that “ ♪ It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Would you be mine? ♪ ”

Such an introit seemed, on one hand, a little out of place under those high stone arches... a little odd coming from the choir stalls that usually resounded with the majestic sounds of Ralph Vaughn Williams or Johann Sebastian Bach. And yet somehow it was so *right*, too. After all, there were few in the room that morning whose lives had not intersected with Mister Rogers and his work in some way, whether as the children to whom he spoke so honestly and directly, or as the parents who felt able to trust their young ones to his care for a half-hour each day. In fact, in that congregation, there were probably a good number who did both—the children of the ‘70s and

'80s who Mister Rogers liked for "just them being them", who now hoped their own children in the '90s and 2000's might inhabit a world shaped by Mister Rogers' virtues and values. It was right to remember him that morning, even if only for that brief moment, because his witness was so touching and his message was so universal.

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The parable we have just heard Jesus tell in our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning, it too has come to be seen as one of those universal cultural and moral touchpoints for us in human society. The parable of the "Good Samaritan" we call it—even though nowhere in the story itself is the word "good" ever used to describe the Samaritan. That term, the "Good Samaritan," has become something we hear pretty commonly.

For us today, as we hear the story Jesus tells, most of us figure the Samaritan is the hero of the story. A man—we know nothing about him... simply a somebody... or perhaps a nobody... A man is beaten up and left to die on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. That fact, in and of itself, wouldn't have surprised many people in Jesus' time. That road, after all, was very treacherous—descending nearly 1,000 meters in only 25 to 30 kilometers, which is basically the drop from the Coquihalla summit down to Hope, but in a slightly shorter distance. And it was very crime-ridden, too. With all the twists and turns and hiding places along the route, it was a favourite place for robbers to strike an easy hit.

As our victim lies beside the road, first a priest and then, in turn, a Levite happen upon him, and pass by on the other side. They do, in fact, see the man, Jesus tells us. But they pass on by, offering no help. We may find this a bit shocking. Or, at least, I think many of us have been conditioned to find it shocking.

Regardless of what we today have been conditioned to expect, the fact that the priest and the Levite did not help the injured man was not very surprising to most audiences in Jesus' day. Much in the same way that trust in religious professionals has been coloured in our own time by everything from clergy sex abuse scandals and unscrupulous televangelists, to lacklustre leadership and personal idiosyncrasies that make us wonder whether some people chose to go to seminary rather than therapy... by Jesus' time, the average layperson—especially those who were neither rich nor powerful—didn't trust either the priests or the Levites a whole lot either. To such an audience, the revelation that neither stopped to help would have probably been met with a resounding "Ha! Of course they didn't! So what else is new...!"

'The third time's a charm' as the old saying goes, and so we and the original hearers of this story alike know to expect something different to happen next. And of course, it does. As we have heard, the Samaritan comes along and rescues the roadside victim.

That term, the so-called "Good" Samaritan, as I've said, has become something we hear pretty commonly. It has essentially become synonymous with stopping to help someone in need. People speak of being "good Samaritans" when they lend a hand to someone they don't know, and in most provinces and many other nations, we even have "Good Samaritan" laws to protect people from undue liability when they're just trying to be helpful. The "Good Samaritan" has become such an image for a helpful, healing presence that the name has been attached to many institutions dedicated to caring for others, like the Good Samaritan Society network of long-term care homes here in BC and Alberta, or the hospitals named for the "good Samaritan" in more than a dozen major metro areas around North America.

For us today, this *idea* of the Good Samaritan has become a lot like what we love and trust in the values and virtues that Mister Rogers worked to instill in children and adults alike. In a world that we worry is becoming too callous and uncaring, some people tell Jesus' story about the

Samaritan and hope that a few more people will decide they should be nice to other people—even to strangers—because of it... because that *must* have been what Jesus was getting at, right? Be nice, be helpful, be “good”... right?

Well... except the reality is that Jesus never calls the Samaritan good. And even if he did, the people probably wouldn't have heard it, anyway. Following the priest and the Levite, the very first word of the very next sentence in Jesus' story was simply “Samaritan”. And once the people heard Samaritan, their whole world of expectation was thrown on its head. Samaritans... the dirty, the despicable, the distasteful and disliked. It was a long family feud between the Jews and the Samaritans: kindred in faith and ethnicity that had long ago been separated by different forced exiles at the hands of foreign empires. The Samaritans had inbred with the local pagans, the Jews thought. The Jews had been tainted by their time in Babylon, the Samaritans claimed. The Jews and the Samaritans, for all they shared in faith in the one true God, the Holy One of Israel, they were rivals to the end and revilers of each other to the core.

And so, just wrap your mind around that... that the man left by the roadside to die had to face being rescued by one of “*them*”. If Jesus had been telling the story in late 19th-century Toronto or early 20th-century New England, he might have told of a man bypassed by a Methodist preacher and an Anglican churchwarden only to be rescued by one of those Catholics, a ‘swarthy’ Italian one or maybe a ‘drunk’ Irish one. Setting the story in the 1950s American South, Clarence Jordan *Cotton Patch Gospels* retells this parable as a white man left behind by a white preacher and a white gospel musician to be rescued by a black man. What would it be for us today? A fundamentalist Christian preacher being rescued by a transgender woman? Would it be a Liberal cabinet minister being rescued by a Freedom Convoy driver? A GreenPeace activist rescued by an exec from ExxonMobil? A Trump administration leader being rescued by an undocumented Latino immigrant?

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The last time I preached on this story was 9 years ago, in the summer of 2013. The night before, the verdict came down in the George Zimmerman – Trayvon Martin trial in Florida. It was very hard that morning to hear the story of the Good Samaritan, and that question of “who is my neighbour?”, without seeing the deep shadow that was cast by that verdict. Regardless of the legal analysis of whether the prosecution had pursued the right tactics, or whether there is sometimes a disjuncture between what is legally correct and what is truly just, the reality was still that a young life had been taken through the violence of a gun at the hands of someone who admitted to the killing.

Under that shadow, the Samaritan in Jesus's story highlighted all the more the legacy and still-persisting reality of racism in our world. One of my colleagues at the time wrote, “The U.S. has a long history of murdering young black men out of fear and prejudice and a perceived threat. Emmett Till comes first to mind. Or the fictional version in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which shows that the story was common enough to be recognized immediately as a cultural reality—a young black man who was perceived as a threat, taken down by mob justice and never given fair hearing in a court of law.”¹ This colleague of mine went on to say that we'd like to think that things have gotten better, that we don't live in the Jim Crow lynch mob days of the first half of the 20th century. We here in Canada like to think that things were, and are, better here than they are

¹ Jennifer Mills-Knutsen, “George and Trayvon: At the Intersection of Guns, Race, Heroes and Justice”, *For the Someday Book* (blog), 14 July 2013, at <https://forthesomedaybook.wordpress.com/2013/07/14/george-and-trayvon-at-the-intersection-of-guns-race-heroes-and-justice/>

among our neighbours to the south. But for those of us in the room who are white, we have the privilege of living most days under the illusion that race doesn't matter, when in fact the wrong colour skin and a certain way of dressing still can get you followed by a vigilante in the suburbs of a major North American city. Be noticed following someone down the sidewalk at night while wearing the wrong colour skin, and you can still create nervousness and even fear. Present with an Indian Status card as your form of identification and carry "too much" money in your bank account, and you can still be handcuffed and arrested while opening an account for your granddaughter at BMO. Be dressed in a certain style of religious headdress and speak with an accent that betrays your family's history on the Indian subcontinent, and you can still get a fountain drink thrown in your face by a belligerent white woman while you're working the checkout at the Seven Eleven just two blocks from here, right here in Cloverdale.

And the truth, my friends, is that we don't get anywhere by pretending that's not still the case... No, we're not talking the sort of hatred or animosity that a Samaritan would have created among the Judeans of Jesus' day. But let us not kid ourselves that our society as a whole has resolved the question of who our neighbour is, and just what truly being neighbours in God's holy city should mean.

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In as much as I loved Mister Rogers, his show, his ministry and message, what is abundantly clear to me is that the message... the point... the truth that lies behind the parable Jesus tells is *not* simply an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. You see, when Mister Rogers' sings "♪ I have always wanted to have a neighbour just like you; I've always wanted to live in a neighbourhood with you, soooo.... ♪" that is precisely *the opposite* of what's happening in Jesus' parable. Nobody *wanted* to have the Samaritan as their neighbour. Nobody would have wanted the Samaritan to end up the hero of the story. In fact, it is possible that the roadside victim would not have even *wanted* the Samaritan to rescue him, if he'd had the choice... he quite possibly would have rather died than to be rescued by a Samaritan.

As much as Jesus' parable about the roadside victim and the rescuing Samaritan is a reminder about who we are called to help—even when they are different from ourselves—it also asks us a different question. What and from whom are we ready to *receive*? As a church, can we welcome newcomers not with the expectation that they are looking for what we already have or that they'll become *like us*, but rather that they—the newcomer—might in fact help *us*, teach *us*, shape *us* anew? As an individual, are you ready to leave behind that too-often unhealthy image of the person who can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," so that you might actually be able to *receive* the help of others? Is any of us ready to receive the one we've been taught is the last one we should want?

After all, God comes to us as the ultimate "other", no? God comes as the one we humans too often feel we should not need, and fear we do not want. And yet, when the wisdom and the power of the world have passed you by, it is God—in all God's Holy Otherness—that comes, reaching out a hand and wiping your wounds. It is God who leads you to the place where you will find life again... God who has already put in the down payment... God who promises that the rest of the bill is already taken care of.

And it is God who even now, today, asks you but one question: "Won't you be my neighbour?"

Blessing and honour, glory and power be unto God, now and forever. Amen.