

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

*Rev. Victoria Ingram
April 3, 2011*

March 20th was a special day – it was “Won’t you be my neighbor?” Day, developed to honor the legacy of Fred Rogers, creator of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*. People wear sweaters, and participate in activities to promote kindness and acts of neighborliness. For over three decades, on his Public Broadcasting program, Fred Rogers entered his door, traded his jacket for a cardigan sweater, and then sang about the joy of being neighbors:

It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?

It’s a neighborly day in this beautywood, a neighborly day for a beauty. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?

I’ve always wanted to have a neighbor just like you.

I’ve always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

So, let’s make the most of this beautiful day. Since we’re together, we might as well say: Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor? Won’t you please, won’t you please? Please, won’t you be my neighbor?

Mr. Rogers’ captured the heart of many a child and of many adults, as well. He may even have been a fixture in your home, and you may recognize his familiar theme song. Mr. Rogers was always thinking about his neighbors – the people who filled his life and animated his world.

With his gentle, quiet way, Fred Rogers made neighborhoods, and other people, seem safe, approachable, and a part of the joy of life. He once said, “Everybody longs to be loved and longs to know that she or he is capable of loving.” He modeled that loving presence with his neighbors – saying “hello,” asking about their lives, and inviting us to join with him in learning about their world. Mr. Rogers made us believe it was a special day, just because we were here with him in the world.

Despite the effort Mr. Rogers put into making the world seem to be a safe and lovely place, his neighborhood wasn’t all sweetness and light. No, he dealt with real-life hurts and fears as well – death, divorce, separation. He just did it in a way that made it easier for children – for all of us – to understand and relate.

As the half-hour program ended, and Mr. Rogers wished everyone a farewell until next time, you wished you, too, lived in his neighborhood, no matter what your real-life neighborhood was like. And, especially, if your real-life neighborhood was nothing like the one Fred Rogers seemed to live in.

Anymore, very few of us do live in neighborhoods like that. How many of you know your neighbors really well? Know their history and their stories and their children and their parents? I know some of us still do, but it’s becoming more and more common to live in neighborhoods where we are virtual strangers to one another. Oh, we may have a nodding acquaintance, a few friendly words while working in the yard or shoveling snow, but we don’t really know too much about the triumphs and tragedies of each other’s lives, of what is happening to the souls within the walls of the house, or condo, or apartment that is only a few feet away.

In a bit of a paradox, our world is getting smaller and bigger at the same time. Locally, we find our world shrinking to inhabit the walls of our own abode. Our connections within our neighborhoods are more superficial and tenuous that they have been at almost any time in our history.

On the other hand, we have access and connections to a world larger than we have ever known in the past – we are now able to be citizens of the world with 24 hour a day access to news, information, people, and places that we might never have even heard of in generations past. Social networking, the Internet, increased mobility, and other media access have expanded our awareness of life beyond our immediate neighborhood in ways unimaginable only a few short years ago.

In this modern milieu, with so many ways to interact with others, people are actually personally experiencing more and more of a sense of being disconnected from one another, of not having a community, network, or a neighborhood that they can call their own.

For those of us in this faith community, this church is one of our neighborhoods. Here we have found a group of like-minded and like-valued people with whom we can share our lives, our hopes, our challenges, our dreams. Here we have sympathetic hearts and empathetic souls who love us enough to gently encourage us to change when we need to. Who are generous enough to share our joy when we triumph. Who are hopeful enough to encourage us when we need a lift up.

In the Christian Gospel of Mark, one of the scribes in the Temple asks Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answers that loving your God ‘with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength’ is the first. The second, he says, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There are no commandments greater than these.

The Golden Rule – to love others as you love yourself, to not do unto others anything you would not want done to you – makes its first appearance in the Bible in the book of Leviticus, in the Hebrew scriptures. This ethical concept is found in the sacred texts and thinking of all the world’s great religions. We are called to think of others as our neighbor, and to treat them respectfully, lovingly, and with dignity.

The Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism ring with this commandment, and reflect our concern about the “other” in our lives. We affirm and promote: the worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another; the right of conscience; a world community of peace, liberty, and justice for all, and respect for the interdependent web. Six of our seven principles offer us guidance in living together in the world with our neighbors and outline our commitment to making these relationships work effectively for everyone.

The kind of love we have for our neighbor isn’t blind or ignorant or a cozy sense of emotionalism. It is a love where we are willing to work for our neighbors’ well-being because it is the right thing to do, even if it means we may have to sacrifice some of our own well-being to make it happen.

It is loving people even when you may not like them very much. It’s a love that does the right thing, and sometimes the right thing is to hold up a mirror to error or bad behavior and say, “no more.” It is love to want justice in the face of tyranny – as people in Egypt, Libya, and the Middle East have demanded. It is love to ask to be treated with worth and dignity – as the aboriginal people of Canada demand. It is love to say no to

violence and hurt – as those who seek an end to children abuse and domestic violence call for. It is love to have enough to eat and a place to live – as those living in poverty know. It is love to be free to live and love in an authentic life – as our brothers and sisters who are gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, queer, and questioning deserve.

Jesus taught love, not fear and not hate. Yet, many of us have been trained to fear “the other,” the stranger, someone unknown or different than us. Not without some warrant, I’ll admit – there are people out there who are dangerous. But, by and large, our neighbors are not to be feared, simply because they are not us. Listen to these words from Peter Gabel, who writes for **Tikkun** magazine: “I have been involved in social and political activism for my entire adult life, and not once have I been involved with a progressive movement that didn’t undermine itself by succumbing to its own internalized humiliation, the legacy that we suffer as a result of being shaped within a social world where we have been trained to doubt that the other is a reciprocating carrier of love, acceptance, and recognition.” (Adapted)

Difference isn’t reason enough to close our doors and windows, and refuse to engage with those around us. This response doesn’t make our lives fuller, happier, richer, or less fearful. Rather, it further limits us, makes our sphere of life smaller and more constrained, inhibiting our thinking, feeling, experiencing, and knowing. We must learn to overcome our fear and uncertainty, to face our distrust of the other, and learn to extend ourselves in love to the world around us.

Marilyn Ferguson writes, “Ultimately, we know deeply that the other side of every fear is freedom.” As Unitarians, our faith commitment asks us to face our fears and move beyond them in love, to reach out and be a friend to our neighbor. That way lies our true freedom. Our Principles ask us, in the words Unitarian Universalist Glenda Parsons, “to recognize and encourage the humanity common to all of humankind. We reach for what is common...we treat others by how we would wish to be treated, with justice and compassion.”

Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” He tells his questioner the story of The Good Samaritan, who helps a man robbed, beaten and left to die by the side of the road. Before the Samaritan takes pity on this poor victim, others (including a priest and a person who works in the church) pass him by and offer no help. The Samaritan stops, helps the man, lifts him onto his donkey, and carries him to an inn, where he pays for his board and care. Jesus asks ‘who of the three is a neighbor to this man’ and charges those listening to the story to go and do the same themselves.

Who is our neighbor? Who are we called to serve – individually and as a faith community? As we travel the road of life together, seeking to ever deepen our understanding and commitment to our Principles, to live as people of faith and action, who do we stop for? Whose wounds do we bind up? Who do we carry to safety? Whose care do we undertake? How do we extend our love into the community outside of our doors? How do we invite people into our community of love and hope?

Mr. Rogers says that the underlying message of his neighborhood is that “if somebody cares about you, it’s possible that you’ll care about others. You are special, and so is your neighbor.” Within this community, we have found people who care for us. The love of this community supports each of us to care for others, to extend ourselves to others in the world in need of our friendship, our help, our witness, our action.

We demonstrate our understanding of the need to love our neighbor as ourselves when we engage in social action, when we perform personal acts of conscience, when we stand up for what is right, and when we model our Principles in action. We remember that it is important to see and acknowledge our neighbor, because there, but for the grace of chance, luck, circumstance, birth, accident, or God, go I.

So let it be.