

Mr Rogers Sermon: "Won't you be my neighbour"
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I'm here to preach about a few of the things I think about the most these days. About housing, and climate change, and also, oddly enough, about the theology of Mr Rogers Neighbourhood.

Who here grew up watching Mr Rogers Neighbourhood, as a child yourself, or with your children? You might remember folksy Fred Rogers stepping onto a simple public television set, putting on his cardigan, and welcoming you into a world of feelings, friendships and make believe? Singing gently "it's a beautiful day in this neighbourhood, a beautiful day for a neighbour, would you be mine, could you be mine?"

If you're familiar with Mr Rogers, maybe you know that he was in fact trained as a Presbyterian minister. He was the most influential theologian of my childhood. And he embedded in a generation of people like me, a lesson that is one of the central teachings of nearly every religious and spiritual tradition: **to love our neighbour.**

I've been thinking and reading a lot about Fred Rogers lately. In part because he's back in the zeitgeist - there was a great documentary about him that came out last year, and a biopic starring Tom Hanks out this month. And in part because I've spent the last year shifting from being a religious leader to being part of governing a city, making real decisions that shape who is welcome here. And I am, all of the time, working to translate religious and spiritual values into on the ground decisions. While raising two kids, and navigating a lot of collective fear about the state of the world.

Along the way I've sought out wisdom and advice in every likely and unlikely place. The theology of Mr Rogers is one of them.

Here's what I can tell you: Mr Rogers believed in the spiritual and religious importance of little things, and about friendship across difference. This informed his passion as an early childhood entertainer, and his calling as a minister to children.

A born and raised Presbyterian, Rogers also studied [Catholic mysticism](#), [Judaism](#), [Buddhism](#), and more. He was a "unique television star with a real spiritual life", ^[78] emphasizing the values of patience, compassion, and "silence in a noisy world". ^[76]

Rabbi and author Danya Ruttenberg describes the entirety of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood as profound theology, which she summarizes as: "Cultivate empathy. Be curious. It's ok to have hard feelings. And most of all, love your neighbor as yourself." All of it, Ruttenberg says, "a theological stance. About who we are, and who God is." I agree.

I grew up not far from here, on the unceded territory we call Vancouver, in a pretty idyllic neighbourhood - a Mr Rogers type of neighbourhood. We knew our neighbours, we cooked and

cared for one another, and the many, many kids played outside on the quiet streets together into the evenings.

In my neighbourhood I witnessed the compassion and collaboration that people are capable of. We were part of each other's lives in meaningful ways. I was lucky to know, from an early age, the joy of neighbours.

And I've known the work of neighbours, too. It wasn't all picket fences and people delivering pies. Sometimes someone throws loud parties. Or someone's child becomes ill and violent in ways that create uncertainty in the neighbourhood. These things too were part of my experience. But still, our lives were better for having one another nearby.

So while I, raised in the church and theologically trained at two seminaries, have sometimes struggled intellectually with the first commandment, to love "God". I have always found the second commandment, to love your neighbour, very clear. (Not always easy, but at least theologically straightforward.)

Now, in our day to day lives we think of our neighbours in terms of proximity and geography. But I'm going to go ahead and say that the second commandment, the spiritual teaching that connects the great religious traditions of the world, isn't just saying "love the person whose property line comes up against your own". Which naturally leads to the question, **who is our neighbour?**

As someone raised in the Christian tradition, the Good Samaritan is the story I go back to.

In the book of Luke, the story is told because a lawyer asks Jesus how he can have eternal life, and Jesus says: to love God, and to love your neighbour. And the lawyer, either being curious or just really wanting to hammer down the specifics, then responded by asking, "Well, who is my neighbour?" And Jesus tells him a story - probably not what any lawyer wants to hear.

I'm sure you know the parable of the good Samaritan, but here's my summary:

There's a traveller on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, who is stripped of clothing, beaten, and left half dead. First a priest and then a Levite comes by, but both avoid the man. Finally, a Samaritan comes by. The Samaritans and Jews despised each other, but the Samaritan helps the injured man.

It's pretty clear that this story isn't at all about proximity or similarity. But it is very specific in answering the question of who our neighbour is. Jesus challenges his followers to recognize all people, even those we despise or fear, even those least prestigious, even those least like us, as our neighbours.

It's a simple teaching. But it's something we all need to be reminded of, because the more prominent structures and stories that we live within - including our geographically bound

neighbourhoods - suggest otherwise. They suggest that our neighbours are those who live near us. But our neighbourhoods frequently function to separate people - historically by race (and class), and more recently, functionally, by wealth.

This is our story in Vancouver too. In fact, Vancouver's earliest city planning was heavily influenced by a fellow named Harland Bartholomew. Local housing expert Stephanie Allen has researched and written articulately about Bartholomew, and his efforts to see continued racial segregation in cities. Here's some of what I've learned from her:

Bartholomew was one of the earliest professional city planners in the US. It used to be that zoning ordinances - the rules that outline what can be built where - could explicitly say "this is a white neighbourhood and black residents aren't allowed". In 1916 the US Supreme Court struck those ordinances down.

And so Bartholomew figured out a work-around. He started zoning "first residential neighborhood" status to existing white-majority neighbourhoods, allowing only high-end single family homes (sometimes with light commercial use on the outskirts). And "second residential" status to Black-majority neighbourhoods, allowing dense, multi-family housing as well as commercial, and often heavy or polluting industrial uses.

AND in white neighbourhoods, many individual home deeds still legally prohibited sale to Black people through restrictive covenants, which was still allowed because the covenants were private, not public.

Restrictive zoning was a proxy for other types of exclusion. And while racial segregation like this was more explicit in large US cities - but this pattern of land use is the same here. We have apartments and multi-family housing clumped together, closer to industrial lands, or lining major arterial streets. And then swaths of quiet, car-dependent, neighbourhoods of single detached homes. That's the city I grew up in. And as a city councillor who makes current zoning decisions, this history is always in my mind.

We've become accustomed to thinking of our neighbours as those who live near us, but those who live near us are - because of some mix of intentional and unintentional policy decisions - tend to be relatively similar to us. I mean, maybe they have an annoying dog, or a large tree that blocks the light, or they park in the space in front of our house and it makes us mad - they aren't exactly like us. But most of our large cities are, because of some combination of intention and consequence, similarly segregated.

And, of course, our whole city here has been built on unceded land, of the Musqueam, the Squamish, and the Tsleil-Waututh Nations. And yet they too were segregated to specific plots of land.

ALSO our history of protecting low-density neighbourhoods from mixed housing has led to a reliance on private vehicles, and massive urban sprawl. Which is part of why I care so much

about housing policy, not just as a justice issue, but also as a climate issue. Our infatuation with this dream of a large house, with a large private yard, and an abundance of space to fill with belongings, has led to long commutes, loss of vital farmland, unending consumerism, and huge environmental footprints.

And now even back in those protected, private urban neighbourhoods, the intentional design of exclusivity is resulting in communities hollowing out - too expensive for young families, while houses sit as investments, and small businesses struggle without enough people to support them.

Which is why, when I'm faced with zoning questions, I'm thinking about what the climate emergency means with respect to complete communities that welcome all income levels. That we need it to be a little more Sesame Street, and a little less Mr Rogers Neighbourhood.

As I've said, I grew up in a Mr Rogers neighbourhood. I hold these tensions in my own story. Many of us do. I had an idyllic upbringing in a warm and vibrant neighbourhood. Full of kids and families who knew and looked out for one another.

And also my neighbourhood was pretty white. The history and design of that neighbourhood intentionally excluded many people, based on race and class. And also the legacy of protecting the character of the buildings in that neighbourhood from changing, has led to significant urban sprawl, while the character of life in the neighbourhood has changed anyways.

These things are all real. They are the story of our city, and many, many others like it. They are the uncomfortable reality of my life here, and they influence how I envision the future.

The thing is, I like having neighbours. I like being a neighbour. I want - like most of us, I think, to be a good neighbour, even to those quite unlike me. And I want my kids to grow up around people who are different than them. Our sense of the world is shaped by what we see of it. And I want them to embrace, not fear, difference.

In her most recent book, *Braving the Wilderness*, author and researcher Brene Brown writes: "People are hard to hate close-up. Move in."

Fred Rogers provided a good example of that.

Mr Rogers Neighbourhood began airing in 1968, following an intense decade of political assassinations, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War. Mr Rogers showed a world of kindness, where neighbours love and support each other through all sorts of challenges. But he didn't coddle them. He helped his audience, young and old, face their own fears and prejudices. And of all his 865 episodes, one in particular still stands out.

One of the frequent visiting characters in the neighbourhood was Francois Clemmons, a talented Opera singer, and the descendant of slaves, who played a police officer on the show.

In 1989, a year after the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King, at a time when black Americans were still prevented from swimming alongside whites in pools across the country, the 'Neighbourhood' featured an episode where Mr Rogers, who was white, invited Officer Clemmons, who was black, to join him in soaking his bare feet in a backyard baby pool on a hot summer's day. And as they sat there together, the camera paused with intention on Rogers' very white feet soaking right next to Clemmons' very black feet.

Many Americans at the time rarely interacted with those of another race - most neighbourhoods were still functionally segregated. And Mr Rogers demonstrated how his viewer's lives could be richer if they saw each other up close. As neighbours.

And - theologian that he was - he did so with imagery that connected his audience to the humble and spiritual act of foot washing, of serving another as an act of connection and of faith. Mr Rogers the minister, was doing his bit in guiding a country fearful about desegregation.

We too are living in fearful times. We face our own enormous set of challenges - emboldened hatred and and growing division, a widening wealth gap, and a planet on fire. The stakes are high, and everywhere we see people reverting to their own safe corner.

Our neighbourhoods were designed to keep us apart. But now, as much as ever, we desperately need to see each other up close. To bear witness to the difficulty others face, and to be broken open to one another's humanity.

We are capable of it. In fact, we are hardwired for it. My husband is writing a book about the climate emergency, and sent me a quote from Author Rebecca Solnit, who has detailed how consistently expressions of human caring and solidarity arise during crisis. Solnit writes:

"In the wake of an earthquake, a bombing, or a major storm, most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbours as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky, human being in times of disaster has little truth to it. Decades of meticulous sociological research on behaviour in disasters, from the bombings of World War II to floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, and storms across the continent and around the world, have demonstrated this. . . . Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes the door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are our sister's and brother's keeper."

What does that mean for us, in this moment? Most of us are, for now, slightly shielded from the most devastating impacts of the housing crisis, and the climate emergency. But we are informed enough to know that for a great many of our neighbours in this city and around the globe, largely poor and racialized folks, the human toll is already being felt.

And we should recognize that it is only going to intensify, according to the UN. With between 200 million and 1 billion migrants on the move because of climate change by 2050, around the globe and in our neighbouring municipalities. Where will these people live?

In his famous Riverside Sermon, "A Time to Break Silence", Martin Luther King preached that, "On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed."

How will we respond, to emboldened racism and xenophobia, to the instability of housing more and more people face, to climate change and climate migrants. Are we ready to dismantle the barriers that divide us? To see one another up close?

This will be the test of who we are in the coming years, and decades. Will we love our neighbours - particularly those very unlike us? Will we welcome them, and make space for them, not just abstractly, but in tangible ways?

At the end of the telling of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus answers the question of 'Who is my neighbour' by saying: He who showed mercy (love, kindness and justice)." Then Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

May it be so.