

Who is my neighbour?

TUMC, Sunday, September 14, 2014

It's a beautiful day in the neighbourhood,

a beautiful day for a neighbour,

won't you be mine?

Won't you be mine?

It's a neighbourly day in this beautywood

A neighbourly day for a beauty

Won't you be mine?

Won't you be mine?

I have always wanted to have a neighbour just like you.

I've always wanted to live in a neighbourhood 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 be you be....my neighbour?

The song is from Mr. Roger's Neighbourhood, a television show from my childhood that made children everywhere feel safe and It's lovely, isn't it? Now

that's a neighbourhood that I want to live in – that I want my kids to live in. A neighbourhood that's safe and secure, where people love and care for each other, where children can play safely on the sidewalk, and if my child is getting a little out of hand, where I can rely on my good neighbour to be my eyes and ears, to place a guiding hand on her shoulder and kindly instruct her in more seemly behaviour.

Today we're celebrating our own neighbourhood in the village that is TUMC. Surely we aspire to be such a community of mutual love and support, where we build each other up with care and concern, where we create safe spaces for one another, and are gracious to each other. Where all that we do – from our potlucks to our work with refugees, from the ways in which we use our money, to our worship together – creates a nurturing space for our children and young people to grow in stature, and in wisdom, and in truth.

We are also a Christian community, a community that aspires to form ourselves and our children into the aspect of Christ, to take on his character. And...that's where things get sticky. That's where our rosy, safe, self-contained and self-sustaining community gets more complicated. It turns out that Jesus has talked a lot about neighbours. Problem is, whenever he talked about neighbours he started talking about enemies...in the same breath.

In Matthew's recounting of the sermon on the mount, Jesus says, "You have heard it said, love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you...for if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (Matthew 5:43-44, 46a)

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, things get even stickier. Not only are we to love neighbours and enemies alike...in this parable, the enemy and the neighbour are *one and the same*. A Jewish man lies bloody and beaten in a ditch, dying. Two men, Jewish religious leaders, see him lying there, and for very good reasons having to do with the preservation of their religious office, step carefully around him and continue on their way. Along comes a hated Samaritan – a man, who, by virtue of his own ethnic and religious affiliation, is despised and rejected by the Jewish establishment. Nothing good can come from Samaria.

Jesus asks the lawyer who had questioned him, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The lawyer could only say, "the one who showed mercy."

Yes! The one who showed mercy. The one who had no reason to do so, no family ties, no bonds of friendship; the one who, were the tables turned, would have had no reason to believe that the gesture would be reciprocated! The one who, at

considerable personal cost, gently tended the man's wounds, and paid out of his pocket for a room at an inn.

This is Jesus' neighbourhood, and it seems no place for children. Robbers, danger, dusty roads, injury, enemies, Samaritans. This neighbourhood seems all wrong, where the good guys were the bad guys and the bad guy is the trustworthy one. This neighbourhood is all upside down, and seems to have nothing to do with our safe circle of friends and family that we call our own village. It doesn't make any sense.

That's right, it doesn't make any sense, according to conventional wisdom. It's not how the world works. Who will take care of us if we don't take care of ourselves? We live in a world in which you get what's coming to you. Where you help yourself, and those within our circle of friends and family, and if you're not within that circle, too bad! This is a gospel that is enshrined in our culture – even in children's books!

Our son Mathias has a favourite book called, "The little blue truck." I could call it, a more reasonable Good Samaritan story. The little blue truck is a friendly truck, who is on excellent terms with all the neighbourhood animals. Along comes a big yellow dump truck, who is rude and unpleasant and promptly gets stuck in the

mud. The animals, having been snubbed, turn away. “HONK!” cried the Dump, and he sounded scared, but nobody heard (or nobody cared).” The little blue truck, being a kind soul, came to help out his fellow truck, but soon they were both stuck in the mud. When the animals see that their friend is stuck, they rush to his aid, and with everyone’s cooperation both trucks get free. “Thanks, little brother,” said the Dump to Blue. “You helped me and they helped you. Now I see a lot depends on a helping hand from a few good friends.”

See? Now that’s a story that makes some good sense. If you’re mean to people, they’re not going to help you when you need it, nor should they. (We don’t read the story anymore...we just look at the pictures).

I came across another story this week that turns that one on its head. A modern day Good Samaritan Story, as Jesus might have told it.

Keshia Thomas, as an 18 year old African American woman, attended a protest of a KKK rally in her hometown of Ann Arbor, Michigan. The KKK has historically advocated for white supremacy and has been unapologetically responsible for countless and untold hate crimes against the African American community for a century and more, particularly in the United States. For the safety of everyone,

protesters and KKK members were divided by a barrier, defended by police in riot gear. At one point in the rally, the protesters noticed a man among them – on the wrong side of the barrier - whose clothing and tattoos identified him as one of the KKK. A woman with a megaphone shouted, “there’s a Klansman in the crowd!” The crowd became animated, and began chasing the man. Soon a cry rang out, “Kill the Nazi!” He went down, pummeled by blows, beaten with sticks and clubs.

Sixteen years after the fact, Keshia recalls the moment, saying it was like angels had lifted her. Finding herself on the front line, this teenager threw her own body on top of the body of the white man, protecting her enemy from the righteous anger of the crowd. The photographer who captured the moment was amazed at her selflessness. “She put herself at physical risk to protect someone who would not have done the same for her. Who does that in this world?”

Indeed. Who does that in this world? Well, Jesus did.

In the September 1 online edition of the Mennonite Brethren Herald, Kathy McCamis recounts the story of Jesus healing the leper who, with arm outstretched, begged to be healed. “Without hesitating,” she writes, “(Jesus) touches the man, who for the duration of his illness has had to carefully avoid even accidental contact with others lest they too become unclean.”

“With Jesus, I find his seeming lack of concern over the consequences of his actions unsettling. His disregard over the fact that touching this man will make Jesus unclean too. His absence of thought as to whether this skin disease might be contagious. His willingness to make this man clean despite any personal cost.

“Love your neighbour as yourself,” Jesus said. I’d like to say I do. But the reality is that when I encounter a neighbour who has bedbugs in his apartment, I’m more willing to offer my prayers than my presence, words of condolence than willing hands to help. If I take a hard look at it, what I want done for me and what I’m willing to do for my neighbour are two different things. I’ll help, but only after I’ve carefully examined the potential personal cost. Jesus loved and served first. I’m not even sure he got around to counting the cost. It turns out that Jesus practiced what he preached.

Today, in this village, we have dedicated a child to the love and service of God. Today we take special note of how we as a community work together to form and nurture our children and young people into people of faith. Yet what does that formation look like, when we are looking to be conformed to the mind and heart of Christ? What will our neighbourhood look like if our neighbours are Jesus’ neighbours.

What does it look like to become a community in which reaching across difference - and even antagonism and hurt - becomes second nature, even when it costs us something. What does it mean to be a church that is willing to stick our necks out for something we know is right? What would it look like for us to recklessly put our own reputation on the line, our standing in our conference, our comfortable place on this side of the law, to stand with those who \need our advocacy, our ample resources, our touch. What would it mean for us to say, “YES” first and ask questions later? To set aside our carefully assessed cost benefit ratio and throw caution to the wind for the sake of our neighbour?

Like it or not, Jesus sets an uncomfortable standard when it comes to being a good neighbour. And it's this neighbourhood that we're building together, today.

Won't you please, won't you please, please won't you be...my neighbour.