

### **Be Neighbors: 3. Fear Factor**

**Luke 7:36-49**

**June 4, 2017**

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In the days following the bombing in Manchester, England, many looked for some words of comfort and hope. What I noticed being shared on Facebook were the words of Mr. Rogers: **“When I was a boy and I saw scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”** That’s being neighbors. And then there was a story about Anthony Breznican, a reporter for Entertainment Weekly, who shared that quote and told his own story of when he was in college and was having a very difficult time. He walked into the college student center where a television just happened to be playing an episode of Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. Inexplicably, he watched the entire episode and felt better. A few days later, to his surprise, he stepped onto an elevator and who should be on that elevator but Fred Rogers. And Mr Rogers asked, “Were you one of my television neighbors?” And Anthony told him that he had just watched the show and it made him feel better. And Mr. Rogers said, “Would you like to tell me what was upsetting you?” And he did. Mr. Rogers took the time even though he was there for other things – time to be a neighbor. And as they parted, Mr. Rogers said, “Sometimes you are in just the right place.”

If we are paying attention to the people around us. These past three weeks that’s been our focus. We began with the story of a conversation Jesus had with an attorney who asked, “What must I do to experience eternal life?” He was the expert in the Law of Moses. He already knew the answer: Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. What we learned was that the attorney had the right answer, but Jesus said having the right answer is not enough to experience the fullness of life. It’s not knowing what to do, but doing it. Do this – be neighbors, and you will live. So, we looked at how to live into this, because Christians should be the best neighbors. We should be known by our love, care and service – not just in here where it’s easy but out in the world – especially next door. And I’ve heard from some of you who live in the kind of neighborhoods where people know what’s happening in the lives of their neighbors and they are the first to respond. Last week, someone shared her neighbor experience. New neighbors had just moved into the house across the street. It was the very chatty 4 year old girl who now lives in that house who was introducing herself to the neighbors in an effort to find the kids in the neighborhood who could come outside and play. But we all don’t have chatty four year olds living with us to help us get acquainted with our neighbors. So we provided a map which invites us to focus on the eight people who live closest to us. What are their names? What do we know about them? What are their hopes and dreams? How are we doing? Are we acquainted with our neighbors?

Last week, we recognized that time is often our barrier to getting acquainted. We are willing, but we are also in a hurry. And in our hurriedness, we miss what God could do in us and through us if only we would slow down, look up from our phones, and pay attention to the people next to us.

But we also don’t pick our next door neighbors. We choose the location, and we hope the appearance of the neighborhood is an indication of the people who live next door. But it doesn’t always work out the way we think it will. Some of you shared stories with me about neighbors who were anything but neighborly. One of the houses next to us has had four different owners in the time we have lived there. There was only one time when it was on the market that a potential buyer stopped at our house and asked me a few questions about the neighborhood. It felt a little like I was being interviewed about the kind of neighbor that I would be. I don’t know if I passed the interview, but they didn’t buy the house. There is a certain vulnerability that can

keep us from getting acquainted. It can be easier to put up the wall – drive into the garage and put down the door before getting out of the car. I walk our dog through the neighborhood most days and in the years I've done this there are some homes where it appears someone lives there but I've never seen an actual person. Just because we live next door does not mean every neighbor wants to be our neighbor. To be a neighbor can be messy. To be a neighbor can take courage.

In Luke 7, Simon, the Pharisee invites Jesus into his home for dinner. Simon's motive is not that he's trying to be the good neighbor. He has his suspicions about Jesus. Jesus is messing with traditional practices and conventional ways of treating people. He's checking Jesus out. He may not be the person Simon wants to associate with. And sure enough, while Jesus is there a woman described by Luke as having "lived a sinful life" (that's code for being a prostitute) – she learns that Jesus is at Simon's house and she arrives without an invitation. Luke indicates the Pharisee is appalled not only by her intrusion but also that Jesus seems to know her. It just confirms the worst about Jesus. Jesus is no holy man. Look at the company he keeps! But if Simon were willing to pay attention, he would see something deeper going on – this will be a true love God, love your neighbor moment.

It can take boldness and courage to step into the unknown with an act of love and compassion and it can take courage to be on the receiving end. Luke does not mention this woman by name, and we are not given any information about a prior encounter, but clearly she knew about Jesus. She knew that he offered something no one else had ever offered. Mostly people avoided her unless they meant to use her. She was trying to survive the only way possible in her culture, and as a result she was a shell of a person – used, abused, broken. But she knew Jesus offered something that could make her whole again. Jesus offered a love that is unconditional. And that evening she enters Simon's home uninvited and unwelcomed because she is compelled to do something for Jesus. She brings a jar of perfume, pours it on Jesus' feet and wipes his feet with her hair. She takes the only thing she has of value and gives it to honor and worship Jesus. It was a courageous thing to do. Just being there put her at risk – and she had no guarantee that Jesus would even accept her gift. Would you? Imagine if Jesus rejects her gift – or says to her, "don't waste your most precious possession on me." "I can't accept this – not here, not now!" Jesus doesn't reject her, but actually defends her in front his worst critics and hers: **"I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown."** Did Jesus need a foot washing? Did he need perfume poured on his feet? This wasn't about what Jesus needed. A woman gives all she has and Jesus chooses to make himself vulnerable enough to graciously receive what everyone else in the room found inappropriate.

To be neighbor is not just trying to be the superhero of the neighborhood, but requires a boldness and a vulnerability that says "I need your help." In her book, *Gifts of Imperfection*, Brene Brown writes: **Until we can receive with an open heart, we're never really giving with an open heart. When we attach judgment to receiving help, we knowingly or unknowingly attach judgment to giving help.** If we feel undeserving in receiving, maybe we are also undeserving in giving. This receiving and giving help may not be easy for us. That's what Ginger Sprouse discovered recently [video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI1qeDtgbAk>]. Who received more Victor or Ginger? There is a vulnerability inherent in the act of being neighbors.

Amanda and I have experienced a challenging year. I entered ministry in large part because I wanted to come alongside people in their brokenness and pain and times of need. Doing this has led to some of the most fulfilling moments in my life. But this past year when cancer entered our family and then my Dad's declining health and death, it's been tough – and I think the toughest part was realizing I was suddenly on the receiving end of compassion and care. Last

fall, our lives were filled with medical appointments and trips to the Mayo Clinic, I received a call from a neighbor, asking if he could bring a group of people to our home on a Saturday and do yardwork. And I had to think about it. He was asking to do something that I was capable of doing – finding the time to do it was challenging but I could do it or hire someone to do it. But then Amanda helped me see that there is a gift to be given in the act of receiving. If we are not gracious receivers, we cannot be gracious givers. And so, I told him yes – and that Saturday, I was overwhelmed by the army that arrived and did in a couple of hours what would have taken me weeks to complete. And all I could do was say “Thank you.” The day after my dad died, I looked out the window and a neighbor was mowing our lawn. The old me would have run outside and said, “You don’t need to do this. I will do it.” The new me waited until he finished and went next door to say, “thank you.”

The way we live is how people will experience the present reality of Jesus Christ. Most people won’t enter the church until they’ve met Jesus Christ next door. Church is not a place we go to, it’s something we are called to do. Or as Mr. Roger’s once said, “It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor?”

### **Grow Pray, Study for Week of June 4, 2017**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord Jesus, amazingly, challengingly, wonderfully, we are a key part of your plan to reach individuals and the world. Grow us into the kind of people who joyfully live out your great commission. Amen.

### **Monday, June 5**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 7:1-5, 12**

“Don’t judge, so that you won’t be judged. You’ll receive the same judgment you give. Whatever you deal out will be dealt out to you. Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye? How can you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take the splinter out of your eye,’ when there’s a log in your eye? You deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you’ll see clearly to take the splinter out of your brother’s or sister’s eye.

Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets.

**Observation:** Matthew tells us that Jesus taught his followers “the Golden Rule”: “You should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you.” Several Hebrew, Greek and Roman thinkers wrote negative forms of the Rule (“Don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you”). John Wesley offered three general rules for those in the Methodist movement: 1) Do no harm; 2) Do good to all; 3) Stay in love with Jesus. It is the third rule that empowers us to keep the first two.

**Application:** In Matthew 7:14, Jesus added “The gate that leads to life is narrow and the road difficult, so few people find it.” Jesus did not say that this was simple and easy. What people or conditions make it hardest for you to treat others as you’d wish to be treated? When have you had a neighbor treat you in accordance with the Golden Rule?

**Prayer:** Lord, in your earthly life you never imposed yourself on others. Yet you always tried to attract even your enemies. Give me wisdom to know when to let go and not force, and when to keep reaching out. Amen.

## Tuesday, June 6

### **Scripture: Luke 14:15-24**

When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus' remarks, he said to Jesus, "Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom." Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.' One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.' The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

**Observation:** The idea of a "Great Banquet" the Messiah would host for God's people at the end of the age went back 700 years before Jesus (Isaiah 25:6-9). Most rabbis thought the Banquet would be for them, and for people a lot like them. Jesus saw the Banquet very differently. He knew, sadly, that many of the "invited" guests were refusing to attend—and that God wanted the invitation to reach everyone, even "the poor, crippled, blind, and lame" from the back alleys!

**Application:** In verse 22, we find the phrase: "Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room." Sometimes, we're tempted to think, "Okay—there are enough of us now. I don't even know everybody who is here." How can Jesus' call for us to be good neighbors remind us that "there is still room"? What makes it important for us to remember that God's invitation is for everyone?

**Prayer:** O God, I look forward to taking part in your great Banquet. Help me not to hold your invitation just for myself, but to have a heart like yours that wants to see everyone there. Amen.

## Wednesday, June 7

### **Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-2**

Keep loving each other like family. Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it.

**Observation:** The letter to the Hebrews, even more than many other New Testament documents, was steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures. Here the writer was surely thinking of experiences like Manoah welcoming a guest who told him he would have a son (Judges 13:3ff), and particularly of the story in Genesis 18 when Abraham and Sarah welcomed travelers who turned out to be divine messengers. God rejoices in and rewards human hospitality.

**Application:** The Greek word from which we get the word "angel" also means "messenger." In Genesis 18, for example, it was not glowing creatures with wings that dazzled Abraham. He simply saw travelers passing by his encampment, and invited them in. When has someone who

didn't look dazzling been a divine messenger in your life? How can you keep your mind and heart open to such messengers?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, help me to remain open to the people around me. Show me the best ways for me to extend your welcome to others. Amen.

### **Thursday, June 8**

#### **Scripture: John 15:12-17**

This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I don't call you servants any longer, because servants don't know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You didn't choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. I give you these commandments so that you can love each other.

**Observation:** "I chose you," Jesus told his disciples, "so that you could go and produce fruit." At first glance, that might sound to us like a command from a domineering boss. But Jesus prefaced that statement by telling his followers he didn't call them servants, but friends. And the first and foremost fruit he asked them to produce was to live in God's love and to love one another.

**Application:** Jesus also said, "You didn't choose me, but I chose you." Maybe you don't remember choosing Jesus, but we do – being present for worship, committing to membership, sign up for opportunities to serve. In a variety of ways, we respond. Are you thankful God chose you to be part of God's family?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, we're 2,000 years into your great human building project, and it's still going. Help my life to bear fruit, making your kingdom more real to people I care about. Amen.

### **Friday, June 9**

#### **Scripture: Philippians 2:1-4**

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.

**Observation:** Words like these, calling us to live in mutual love that begins in God's eternal love, can sound lyrical and idealistic—and not connected to real life. But Paul wasn't writing poetry. Philippians 4:2-3 showed that this church faced a real conflict, with two influential women strongly at odds. Paul invited them (and their supporters) to actually live out God's love.

**Application:** Paul said we need Christ's love and the Spirit's presence to grow the kind of love he called the Philippians to live out (verse 1). How can this God-given love turn "win/lose" conflicts toward the promise of "win/win" outcomes? What has to happen in us so that we see stronger relationships as a bigger "win" than always getting our way?

**Prayer:** Holy Spirit, I want to love as you love. Help me to make choices that make me receptive to your presence. Thank you that I can trust you to bear your fruit in my life. Amen.

**Saturday, June 10**

**Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20**

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

**Observation:** Once God finds us, he doesn't want us to just sit idly by and watch God search for others. The risen Jesus commissioned his followers to serve him by being his witnesses, making disciples, baptizing and teaching. His "marching orders" were that we take an active part in the work of calling all our neighbors back to God. And we never go alone—he promised to be with us always.

**Application:** A witness, of course, testifies to something that he or she has actually experienced. In Isaiah 43:10, the prophet quoted God as saying, "You are my witnesses, says the Lord, my servant, whom I chose, so that you would know and believe me and understand that I am the one. Before me no god was formed; after me there has been no other." Will you accept God's call, and be a living witness to what you have experienced?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, amazingly, challengingly, wonderfully, I am a key part of your plan to reach the world. Grow me into a person who joyfully lives out your great commission. Amen.