8-19/20-17 Rev Amy Haines

1 Cor 12:12-27, Jn 13:34-35 Won’t You Be My Neighbor? Series

Connecting with Our Congregation

*{Mr Rogers Neighborhood theme song video clip}*

Hi, neighbors!

How many of us here today have fond memories of watching Mr. Rogers Neighborhood on public television after school? If you were a child or had a child growing up in the 70s, 80s, or 90s, most likely you have seen the show. Fred Rogers has taught many preschoolers over the years with his winsome smile, broad range of topics, guests and the Neighborhood of Make Believe.

Today he welcomes us to our new series, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” Over the next six weeks we will reflect on who are our neighbors, in ever widening circles, and we will also reflect on what kind of neighbors are we. How do we live out Jesus’ mandate to love God and love our neighbor? Are we being Christ-like neighbors to one another, to our Bright Beginnings Christian Preschool families, to our community and to our world?

I don’t believe Jesus ever allows us to pick and choose to whom we can be neighborly. As our circles widen in the weeks to come, Jesus calls us to expand to whom we will be Christ-like neighbors. So this is a both/and kind of call, not an either/or.

Earlier this week as I was praying for this series with the staff, I found myself praying for God’s guidance and grace as I heard myself say the words, “this series may make us squirm” even as it “moves us deeper into discipleship.” I was surprised when I prayed those words, yet I want to be honest today as I begin.

There will be times when this series will be hard to hear. It sure will not be easy for me to preach. God’s word has a way of exposing our weaknesses before equipping us for the journey ahead. It is true for us as a congregation as well as true for us personally.

I know this series will challenge me, for I admit I am not the best neighbor in the world to others. I become too task-oriented rather than relationship-driven. I have been here a year and have only met two of my literal neighbors. I am friendly to my neighbors, I smile and wave, but I am not overly neighborly. So God is working on me as much as anyone in the weeks to come.

Thank God for his grace.

As we begin this series today, imagine a pebble dropped into a still pond, and the ever widening ripples in the water. As those ripples expand out, so too will our concept of who is our neighbor.

Today, however, we are starting with a small ripple, with those closest to us. How do we connect in Christ-like love to the neighbors who are part of this congregation?

Today is Rally Day. The kids are here to play the games. All of us can enjoy food and fellowship later around the lunch table. Rally Day is a day of celebration. The summer ministries have drawn to a close. Now it is time to get back into our monthly rhythms and routines, from youth ministry to Wonderful Wednesday to Women in Faith.

This is the time of year that summer vacations are over and the snowbirds have not yet left. So it is a time to worship and study and serve and fellowship together.

Yet look around you—the makeup of our congregation changes week to week. Sometimes we have newcomers; sometimes family members who have moved away are back for a visit.

Some of you are here faithfully every week; some of you are here only when health or schedules allow.

Look around you. Go ahead, pay attention to who is sitting in front of and behind you, beside you and across the aisle. Do you know them? Can you name them? What else do you know about them?

If I were to ask you this same question next week, would you know any more than you know today? I would hope many of us could answer yes to that, if we take seriously the call to know our neighbors within our congregation.

Yes, I recognize that next week there may be different people sitting near you, or you may be in a different place. Some of you have a specific service you attend each week. Some of you adjust what service you attend to your family’s schedule. And some of you are new enough to not even realize we have three services of worship every weekend.

Yes, learning new names takes time, and repetition. I admit I am still working on knowing all of your names, having now been here a year. So please offer me grace if I look at you and say, “would you remind me again of your name?” Also please don’t quiz my husband Ken on your name. Without your name tags he may never learn all of your names. That is not his gift.

Two weeks ago we visited my home congregation, First UMC of Middletown, which is always a joy for me. I have so many fond memories of how my faith was shaped and formed through that congregation. As I looked around before and during worship, there were many familiar faces, and thankfully many more that were not familiar.

As my mom sang in the choir, I tried to name as many choir members as I could. At first I was pleasantly surprised at how many I could not name, then I realized a few of those I did recognize, only now they are a few years older.

Rev. Wagner welcomed me to worship as a clergy colleague as well as a daughter of that congregation—only to call me by my maiden name! Which is ironic, seeing as he knew my married name first, having served together on the Board of Ministry. Yet because of my family connections with that congregation, my maiden name is what came to mind.

Names can be hard to remember. Yet there is unexpected joy when someone we don’t expect calls us by name. Maybe when you were a child it was an older member of the congregation calling you by name. Maybe it was a boss or coworker who had only met you a time or two.

Maybe it was a hotel clerk after only a few night’s stay.

One year we stayed at the Middletown Drury Inn 3 or 4 times in less than a year. I was shocked when on the third visit the manager called us by name before we had even checked in. I can remember my first year at seminary, in the first week or two of class. I was walking down the hall between classes and the president of the seminary called me by name. I didn’t know then whether to be flattered or scared.

We have a tradition here at Wonderful Wednesday, which we will continue still this fall, of beginning our time together by going around the circle and saying our names, then closing the circle with prayer. The more opportunities for adults to learn the names of children and youth and vice versa, the stronger we will be as the body of Christ, the family of God.

The more interactions we have with one another, the more we will remember each other’s names, and the more we will learn of one another’s stories. The more we know of one another’s stories, the more we can encourage one another’s gifts. And the more we share our gifts and skills for ministry, the more we live into being the body of Christ, aka the church, in this world.

How many of you like to watch football?

.. Think of the members of a particular team. There are differences in the way they prepare for a game: the quarterbacks practice passing, the receivers practice receiving, the kickers practice kicking, the linemen practice blocking. But ALL have gotten their instructions from the same coaching staff which is perfectly happy to have them practicing different skills with an eye to performing different functions in the game. Still, there is an essential unity among them: the same game plan, the same playbook and, to be sure, the same head coach.

-- David Leininger 1-25-04 The Body of Christ leininger.com

Look around you here this morning. Do we all have the same spiritual gifts? Do we all have the same passions for ministry? Do we all serve the church in the same way? Of course not. God has designed each one of us as unique individuals, with various skills and passions and energies for ministry. We are each like individual members of a football team.

But because we are each baptized into Christ and Christ’s body, the church, we are united to the same game plan under the same coach and following the same playbook—the Bible is our playbook, God is our coach through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and our game plan is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We are diverse in our individual talents, passions and faith stories in the church, the body of Christ, but we are to be united in our common goals of making disciples and nurturing disciples and sharing the love of Christ with others. We are not to see certain spiritual gifts as greater than or lower than others but recognize that no matter how we serve and what gifts we have to share that each gift is God given and important to building up, maintaining, and growing as the body of Christ, the church in this world.

Easier said than done, is it not? And that has been true since the beginning of the church.

Think back to the church in Corinth, for whom this letter is written. Corinth was a busy port city, a crossroads of its time, a prime location from which to spread the gospel of Jesus. So naturally the church in Corinth reflected the city around it—former Jews and Gentiles, slaves and noblemen, rich and poor, men and women, from a variety of cultural and national backgrounds.

The Christians in Corinth united out of their common love for Jesus and belief in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. But as often happens when diverse people get together, from the time of the early church the questions arose, time and again, who does what? Who has the more significant spiritual gifts? Who is more important, and who is less, in the church and in our world?

I love how Eugene Peterson translates Paul’s words about being the body of Christ:

“God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it. … No matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. … What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own.”

“The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don’t,

the parts we see and the parts we don’t. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.”

“You are Christ’s body—that’s who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of the body does your ‘part’ mean anything.” (MSG)

Like any family, like any household, our congregation will not always agree on politics or programming or picking out paint colors. If my husband and I have areas where we agree to disagree, when 200 or more of us gather in this congregation on any given weekend we also must be in respectful dialogue and even disagreement.

That is when we are to remind ourselves that our various gifts are for a single purpose—

to witness to Jesus in our world, sharing God’s love with our neighbors near and far.

Whether we find ourselves in mutual agreement or respectful disagreement, as followers of Jesus we are called to hear Jesus’ call as expressed in the Gospel of John, to the first disciples during their last night together before his death. Keep in mind this commandment of Jesus comes between Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial, yet still Jesus says to his disciples then, and to us today, “Love one another. Just as I have loved you. Love one another. This is how others will know you are my disciples. When they see you love one another.”

Before we ever reach out to the person who lives beside us, the person who works beside us, or the person yearning to hear the Gospel halfway around the world, we must start being neighborly to one another within the body of Christ. Within our congregation. Within our denomination. With other churches within our city’s boundaries. With Christians anywhere.

We are called to love one another, beginning right here and right now.

What kind of witness do we have in our community, based on our relationships with one another? Do we love one another, or do we tolerate each other, or are we openly hostile to our fellow Christians within this congregation?

I have known congregations where key members allowed their conflicts not only to split the congregation but also spill out into the community. And they wondered why they rarely had any visitors.

I have also known congregations who on the surface appear to care for each other, yet below the surface there was much fear that being real with their struggles and dreams would cause them to be rejected by others.

I have also known congregations who are authentically real with each other, open to one another’s struggles and setbacks and successes, and they open themselves to the Holy Spirit to guide them to love one another through their differences.

I have never been in a perfect congregation, and never will. They don’t exist. For we are all real human beings each with our own struggles and sorrows. We all have our issues.

Yet Jesus calls us into authentic relationships with one another, which invites us to be real about our faith and our doubts, our messy lives and our moments of grace. I am not asking you today to tell your whole messy life story to the person sitting next to you. But what I am asking is that as we grow in our relationships, as we share our stories from person to person, that we accept those stories as gifts, even if they are not our personal experience, and learn from them, by humbled by grace.

Loving one another as Jesus loves us is not easy. It means loving those who are like us, and those who are not.It means loving those who agree with us, and those who never will. It means loving those whose lifestyles we understand, and loving those whose choices we will never understand.

Yet as disciples of Jesus, we are called to love one another. Starting with one another within our congregation. Then moving out to our community. Then moving out to our nation. Then moving out to our world.

Today we start here, with us, with our own hearts and our own relationships.

Do you want to be a congregation that heeds Jesus’ call to love one another? Are you ready to live in authentic respectful relationships with each other, even when you disagree, or do you want a congregation that at least on the surface acts and thinks the same way you act and think?

Like it or not, we are a diverse congregation, at least in thought and politics. We are not of one mind on many things. At times I have seen where we struggle to respectfully disagree, and at times I have seen where we respect one another’s difference even when we will never agree. However we move forward from here, continue to do so while heeding Jesus’ call to love one another.

Do you want to be a congregation that is friendly or that is welcoming? There is a difference.

A friendly church may greet you warmly at the door, yet not really embrace you into its life, ministries and relationships. A welcoming church may greet you warmly at the door, then also make ways to welcome you into its life and ministry and relationships.

I have heard stories from some of you of times when we have been friendly, times when we have been welcoming, and times when we have been neither. Over the next year we need to work on our intentional hospitality, which right now is either hit and miss or a one man mission.

Do you have the gift of hospitality? Are you one who likes to greet new people, and are willing to do so in intentional ways? If so, please let me know!

As we strive to better connect with our neighbors found within this congregation, I want to invite you to practice a few things over the next month until they become a habit for you. Consider this your homework of connecting with our congregation.

1.Don’t be afraid to introduce yourself to someone you don’t know. You might say, “Hi, I’m Amy, and I don’t think we’ve met before.” They will remind you if you have met. Spend even 60 seconds learning their name and a little of their story. It is amazing what one can learn in even that short of time. Help others know your name by wearing your name tag, if you have one.

2.Make a habit out of the “Rule of 10”- greet anyone, of any age, who comes within ten feet of you. Say hi to the children. Sit with the widow. Smile at the harried mother. Greet those you know and those you don’t know.

3.Practice the “Rule of 3”- in the three minutes following the service, talk only to those you do not know. Three minutes is typically the time it takes a visitor to slide out our side door. This will help you to intentionally see those around you whom you may not know.

So introduce yourself, greet anyone within 10 feet of you, and intentionally talk with those you don’t know following worship.

**(Sunday only)**

Do you realize that coffee hour is often the loneliest time in our morning routine? We naturally talk with those we know. We are focused on catching up on the past week or month or ministry. So we miss seeing the men and women who are sitting by themselves, or standing awkwardly along the wall, or families who want to get cookies yet find no place for this kids to sit.

Today, if you are attending the church picnic, learn more about your neighbors at your table.

Ask each other what brought you to first UMC and what keeps you here. Ask each other what you like to do for fun and relaxation and what was the highlight of the summer. Ask each other if Pastor Amy is a bit crazy starting a series on being Christ-like neighbors, and admit how this series makes you uncomfortable or gives you hope.

**(All)**

Christ calls us to love one another, to share our gifts, and to be neighbors beginning here in this congregation. May God guide us as we grow into Christ-like neighbors to all.

**(sung)**

*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?*

May it be so.

Let us pray.