

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Discipleship Defined: Compassionate Neighbors”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Deuteronomy 17:7-11

Matthew 22:34-40

For 895 episodes, over thirty-three years he taught us what it meant to be a compassionate neighbor. Mr. Rogers made children feel loved and safe. Mr. Rogers offered a tranquil oasis of acceptance and compassion. Mr. Rogers taught us about being the kind of people we know we were supposed to be. And if you are wondering what he taught us about being compassionate neighbors, here are a few of them. “To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.” “We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say "It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem." Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes.” “Mutual caring relationships require kindness and patience, tolerance, optimism, joy in the other's achievements, confidence in oneself, and the ability to give without undue thought of gain.” “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers--so many caring people in this world.” These are the lessons we were taught about being compassionate neighbors in Mr. Roger’s neighborhood. But the question is, where did he learn them?

The answer to that question is that he learned them from Jesus. I’m not sure how many of you are aware that Mr. Rogers was not only a Christian but that he was a Presbyterian minister? And as such he understood that Jesus called us to be compassionate neighbors. We see this in our morning’s story. Jesus is under attack by his opponents who want to trip him up so that they can get rid of him. One of the questions is which is the greatest commandment? His response is that we are to love God and love neighbor. When then asked who is my neighbor, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan; a story which says that anyone in need is our neighbor and that in being a compassionate neighbor we are to care for them. And not only does Jesus teach about being a compassionate neighbor he demonstrates it through caring for those for whom no one else will care. He shows that everyone is his neighbor. But the question is, where did Jesus learn this? I know that many of us think that Jesus just kind of made this stuff up, but he didn’t. He learned it, I would argue, from the rabbinic school of Hillel.

OK, so I know that this is something completely new to most of you here. But in the time of Jesus there were two distinct schools of thought about how Judaism ought to understand the Bible. One was the school of Shammai. This school believed in a very strict, legalistic interpretation of the Law of God that lifted up the ideal of what a follower of God should be, even if no one could attain it. The school of Rabbi Hillel was more compassionate and cared about the welfare of neighbors. Here are two statements from Rabbi Hillel. “Whosoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And

whosoever that saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.” “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: this is the entire Law of God.” This is the kind of compassion that Hillel taught to his followers and even today is basis for much of Judaism across the globe. But the question again, is where did Hillel learn it? The answer is from the Bible.

In our Old Testament lesson we read part of the Torah or the Law of God. In it we read that “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be....since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” In other words we are to show compassion and care to those around us who are in need and do not have what we have. And this is not the only time that the Law of God told us this. There are in fact almost one hundred references to caring for and being compassionate to those who are our neighbors. So once again, the question is, where did the writers of the Old Testament get these ideas? The answer is, from God.

In the end, being a compassionate neighbor is defined by God’s love for God’s creation. God desires the best for every human being. God doesn’t see us through the lens of the language we speak. God doesn’t see us through the color of our skin. God doesn’t see us through the lens of our nationality. God doesn’t see us through the lens of our abilities. God sees us through the lens of the love of one neighbor for another. And in so doing God reaches out in love, grace, compassion and tender caring providing us with everything that we need to not only survive but to thrive. God is the Good Samaritan. God is the father waiting for the Prodigal son to return. God is the king who invited everyone to the banquet. God is the one who cares for the orphan, the widow, the alien, the stranger, the poor...and the rich. God is one who is the ultimate compassionate neighbor.

The problem however is that with all of that having been said we are living in a moment when we are told that we are to be compassionate neighbors to everyone except...except to certain people. We are to be compassionate neighbors to everyone except refugees from the Syria, the Middle East and Northern Africa. We are to be compassionate neighbors to everyone except Muslims. We are to be compassionate neighbors to everyone except the more than nine-thousand homeless persons in Oakland County. We are to be compassionate neighbors to everyone except those who don’t look like us, act like us or live where we live. In fact not only do we not have to be compassionate neighbors but we can demonize them all. My question to all of us this morning is this, where do we see Mr. Rogers, Jesus, Hillel, the Torah or God making those kinds of exceptions? For my part I don’t see any. Now, I realize that there is evil in the world, and ISIS is one of its current incarnations. Yet even in the face of such terrorism, I do not see God or Jesus making any exceptions that let us off the hook for being compassionate neighbors.

With that being said I want to offer one more quote from Mr. Rogers. “At the center of the Universe is a loving heart that continues to beat and that wants the best for every person. Anything that we can do to help foster the intellect and spirit and emotional growth of our fellow human beings. That is our job. Those of us who have this particular vision must continue against all odds. Life is for service.” My challenge to you then is this. To ask ourselves, even in the face of fear, how am I being a compassionate neighbor to all?