

Up until a few years ago, UM clergy retiring from active duty would share stories from their ministry ‘careers’ during a special retirement service at our annual gatherings in Redlands. These clergy would often share funny or embarrassing moments from their ministry in an effort to elicit the most laughter from those gathered. That tradition has changed, so I’ll go ahead and tell a story I’d once thought might invite a few laughs in that setting... About the time the sheriff’s officers came to arrest me as I was burglarizing a parishioner’s home...

Actually, I was still in seminary, and so I wasn’t yet ordained. The family had mentioned they’d be out of town and invited me to stay at their home while they were away. The family apparently forgot to alert the neighbors that they’d invited the youth pastor to use their home over the weekend. I was soon to learn that their Neighborhood Watch program was fully operational.

There I was, about 9:30 at night; upstairs, alone, taking a nice hot – very relaxing -- shower, when all of the sudden I heard pounding on the bathroom door! “Sheriff’s Department. Open the door.” Dripping from head to toe, with just a towel wrapped around my waist, I opened the door and was greeted by 4 large sheriff’s officers and 2 ginormous Rottweilers who were ready for action! Because the dogs were fearsome enough, I honestly do not recall if the officers had drawn their guns, but I think they had...

Once we clarified how I came to be in the house, and because I’d been as a probation officer, I asked the officers how they’d entered the house. They explained that they’d found a window to the downstairs family room that was ‘ajar’ and so they came in that way, figuring that was how the ‘burglar’ had entered. [The window was not ajar... but I wasn’t going to argue with them.] They did share that when they heard the shower running, they realized I’d be a pretty strange sort of burglar.

I’ve wondered, both then and since, how differently things might have turned out had the officers been a bit twitchy, if I’d been of a different race, or if the Rottweilers had been a little less ‘under control’!

Welcome to our 2nd week in a 3-week series on the theme: “Would You Be a Neighbor?” Last Sunday we explored Luke 10:25-28, which is very similar

to this morning’s reading from Matthew 22:34-40. [Read Scripture] As I pointed out last week, there’s a notable difference between Luke and Matthew’s gospels because, according to Luke, it’s the Lawyer -- not Jesus -- who recited the words of what we now call: “The Great Commandment.”

But Matthew’s version of the exchange between Jesus and the Lawyer is very close to what we find in the Gospel of Mark 12:28-31. In both Matthew and Mark, when the Lawyer asks Jesus which commandment is ‘first’ or ‘the greatest’, Jesus responds by quoting Deut. 6.5, words from the foremost prayer in the Hebrew tradition, called ‘the Shema’: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

Jesus then continues, saying: “This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Now this phrasing of Jesus’ words is different from what we read in Mark (and certainly different from the Lawyer’s phrasing of the Great Commandment in Luke’s gospel).

What’s unique is v. 39, “And the second is *like* it...” The word we translate as ‘like’ is the Greek word *homoia*. The use of this particular Greek word indicates that the second commandment, to love your neighbor, is NOT merely similar to the command to love God, but that loving our neighbor it is of equal importance and inseparable from the first commandment.

I don’t think I can overstate how remarkable this is.... When Jesus recites the Shema from Deut. 6.5, about loving God with everything we’ve got, this answer would be totally expected by anyone who was listening. And it would not have been terribly odd for Jesus to add the second piece from Lev. 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor yourself.”

What would have been unexpected, and totally surprising, is to hear Jesus put the commandment to love ‘your neighbor as yourself’ on an equal footing as the Shema! According to what Jesus says in Matthew, one does not first love God and then, as a second, subordinate task, love one’s neighbor. Rather, Jesus is saying that to love God *IS* to love one’s neighbor, and vice versa. And then Jesus adds that everything in the Law (the first 5

books of the Bible) and the Prophets is summed up in these two commandments.

At least a decade before any of the gospels were written, the apostle Paul made exactly this point in Romans 12: “[All] the commandments... are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the Law.”

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All of this points out how the quality and depth of our Christianity – how our true alignment to being followers of Jesus – can be verified (or not) based upon loving our neighbors in the same way we want to be loved.

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Of course, none of this makes it any easier to carry out the Great Commandment, especially with our closest neighbors. I began with the story I shared because I think it points out how even our best efforts to be hospitable and neighborly can result in awkwardness. The family who invited me to stay at their house was being gracious, and the neighbors who called law enforcement were seeking to be good and helpful neighbors. So, as we seek to be better neighbors, we need to admit that it may be awkward and difficult from time to time.

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One major difficulty we have to overcome as we strive to love our neighbors is the “Time Barrier”. To be a good neighbor takes time! In *The Art of Neighboring*, the authors write, “most of us aren’t walking around with extra time, wondering what to do with it. We feel overwhelmed by the amount of stuff that is jammed into our schedules. [Amen?] Our lives are packed already, [and so] it’s vital to take a step back and ask ourselves if we live at a pace that allows us to be available to those who live around us.”

Let me reiterate: If we are going to carry out Jesus’ commandment to love our neighbors, we are going to have to take a step back and strive to live at a pace that allows us to be available to those who are our neighbors.

One way I’d like overcome the time barrier challenge myself, is by adopting the practice of being interruptible. “Being interruptible means being willing to be inconvenienced; developing a mindset that accepts and even welcomes the interruptions of others” so that I can be less

focused on my to-do list and more focused on being in relationship with people whenever those opportunities present themselves.

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I recently read a sweet essay about Fred Rogers, from the PBS series *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. As many of us did, the essayist had grown up watching Mr. Rogers on television, but by 1996 the author was a college student at the University of Pittsburgh. Going through a very difficult time in their life, the author was waiting for an elevator when the doors opened and none other than the Mr. Rogers was standing in the elevator. They rode the elevator in silence (like you do) but just when they were about to part ways, the author blurted out, “Mr. Rogers. I don’t mean to bother you. But I just wanted to say thanks.” In reply, Mr. Rogers asked, “Did you grow up as one my television neighbors?” And then, lifting his arms to invite a hug, Mr. Rogers said, ‘It’s good to see you again, neighbor.’”

As they were again about to part ways, the essayist started to say a bit more when Mr. Rogers undid his own scarf, motioned to a window ledge and invited the author of this essay to sit down. Rogers asked, “Do you want to tell me what is upsetting you?”

The essayist observes, “This is what set Mr. Rogers apart. No one else would’ve done this. No one.” After sharing his struggles as Mr. Rogers listened patiently, the author writes: “I then apologized that I had made him late for wherever he was headed. Mr. Rogers just smiled, and said in a slow, gentle voice: ‘Sometimes you’re right where you need to be.’”

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Being ‘interruptible’ means trusting exactly that! That God has placed us right where we need to be, especially in our own neighborhoods! You may not know that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian pastor. I suspect Mr. Rogers learned how to be available to those right in front of him because he based his life on following Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, we can’t read the gospel’s without seeing that Jesus was ‘interruptible’; available to anyone and everyone who came seeking his teaching, comfort, and healing.