

Living in Jesus' Neighborhood

Matt 9:9-13

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In 1969 this nation was still coming to grips with the changes associated with the Civil Rights Movement and the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister with a televised children's program on television, called Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, was doing his part when he decided that his neighborhood was going to be multi-ethnic.

One day he heard the beautiful voice of François Clemmons at his church and approached him and told him about his idea of Francois being a police officer on his program. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arSiv9PRo04>)

No African-American had ever been a regular on a nationally televised children's program. (Ibid)

Francois grew up in the ghetto and his opinion of police officers were those men who turned police dogs and water hoses on black people. (Ibid)

He had a difficult time picturing himself playing the role of a cop. He wasn't excited about Fred's idea. Nevertheless, he agreed and the character was born, one that he played for 25 years. (Ibid)

One of the early episodes involved Mr. Rogers resting his feet in a plastic pool on a hot day. Officer Clemmons showed up in the neighborhood and he invited Officer Clemons to join him. (Ibid)

Now think about this scene. It's the late 1960's, a time when it was still taboo for blacks and whites to swim in the same pool. Here's a white man and a black man with their feet in the pool. But there's more symbolism to come. When they are finished cooling their feet, Mr. Rogers gets a towel. He dries his feet and then he dries Officer Clemmons' feet. (Ibid)

It's a direct reference to Jesus drying the feet of the disciples with his commandant to "wash one another's feet."

Recalling that day, Francois said, "The icon Fred Rogers, not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub he was helping me dry my feet. And so, that scene touched me in a way that I was not prepared." (Ibid)

This is the way Jesus would have us reach out the those around us in our neighborhood, not in judgment, but instead we are to extend an invitation of hospitality and service.

Some people think we should be nice but we should not befriend those who do not share our Christian values.

Sure, there are dangers and pitfalls to every encounter and relationship, but Jesus modeled a life where he reached out to all kinds of people.

It's one thing to flee temptation. It's another thing to shun all who are not like us.

The ways of the world were not Jesus' ways. In this way, he was separate.

But Jesus befriended the people of the world – all kinds of people – not just the religious people of his day. In fact, he didn't have a lot in common with the most religious people of his day.

Today's text gives us three snapshots of the kinds of people Jesus often befriended in his neighborhood: Matthew a tax collector, a woman who was an outcast of society, and a ruler whose daughter had just died.

Let's start with Matthew.

If we had one person who embodied the IRS, then we might be getting close to the hostility and anger people of Jesus' day felt toward Matthew.

Matthew was considered a vile man because he took the hard-earned money from the Jewish citizens. The company he kept added to his bad reputation, people of ill repute.

But I ask you, what other company could he keep if God-fearing people wouldn't have anything to do with him?

I can best illustrate this through the eyes of Veronese's crowded painting called, "Feast in the House of Levi."

In this 16th century painting, Jesus is sharing a meal with Matthew at his home. There are buffoons, drunkards, dwarfs, and other offensive types.

This painting created and landed Veronese before the Inquisition to answer how he could have filled a sacred painting with these types of people with Jesus in the midst of them?

Look at the painting. It is full of life. To be sure, there is a party going on at Matthew's house. And what a house it is!

They are all assembled there. There's a party going on for sure.

They are all well-dressed. The dwarf is perhaps there hired for entertainment.

And there is Jesus, right in the middle of them all, with Matthew seated beside him.

Matthew is leaning back, as if Jesus has just asked him to be one of his disciples. It's as if Matthew is saying, "Surely not me. Can you believe this day? Me, a tax collector. The Good Master has asked a sinner like me to become one of his disciples.

It was scandalous enough in the eyes of most that Jesus was in Matthew's neighborhood, especially among the most religious people.

But not only did Jesus go to Matthew's house, he invited him to be one of his disciples! Matthew is shocked! This emotion is clear in Veronese's painting.

I wonder how many Matthews in this world never follow Jesus because we are not willing to go into their neighborhoods, into their worlds, and share the love and grace of Jesus with them. Not everyone is coming to ours.

The next person in Jesus neighborhood is a sick woman. She has a problem with menstrual bleeding that had lasted for twelve years.

Her condition was more than an embarrassment. She was alienated from her from people. She was considered spiritually unclean because of her condition.

She was not set outside the city gates like lepers, but people who knew her would not touch her because of her condition.

Can you imagine not being touched by your family or friends for twelve years?

Emotionally, this woman was starving for attention. She knew it was not possible to be hugged, to hold a child, to hold hands in prayer, to be held by a man. Her only hope was to be healed physically.

As Jesus passed through the crowded streets of the city, he stopped in his tracks to inquire who touched him.

It was a strange question because the crowds were pressing up against him.

This woman must have been stunned. A crowd of strangers would have been the only place this woman could feel normal. In a crowd, people would not have known her. They would not have recognized her or avoided her.

But there is no intimacy in a crowd, either. You can be with a crowd of people and still be very much alone.

In desperation to fill her loneliness, this woman touched the cloak of Jesus because she believed just by doing that should could be healed.

She must have been stunned when Jesus stopped, turned, and looked at her. Would he humiliate her in front of all those people?

No, he simply said, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has healed you."

In recognizing this woman's healing publicly, he took away her shame and restored her to the community.

Isn't that what Fred Rogers was doing with Francois Clemmons? He was identifying himself with an African-American. He was saying, "I'd swim in a pool with this man. Not only that, but I'll serve this man. I'll wash his feet. I will be Jesus to him because I love him."

That's what Jesus wants Christians to be doing in our neighborhoods.

The last story is about a ruler who came and knelt before Jesus and told him his daughter had just died. "But come and put your hand on her and she will live," he said. (verse 18)

Jesus followed this man to his neighborhood.

The funeral music had started and people were already gathering at the home. Even so, people kept their distance from the dead child as contact with the dead was considered the vilest form of pollution for a Jew.

Even today, we keep our distance from the dead. We remove the dead from the hospital and from the home very soon after death. The longer the dead remain with the living, the more anxiety and uncomfortableness it causes us.

Generally, we do not see the dead again until they have been made to look like they are headed to church. Even then, as we view them in the casket, we are afraid to touch them and we grow a little squeamish when we see others touching the lifeless body.

The ruler came and asked Jesus to come touch his dead child. In doing so, this father was asking Jesus, a Rabbi, to compromise his ritual purity by touching a corpse.

No other Rabbi would have even considered such a request. But did you notice Jesus did not hesitate to go?

Where do you hesitate to go? To whom do you hesitate to go and touch with acts of love and kindness?

There are people in your circles of concern who are dead to Christ and need some Christian brother or sister to go and touch them with the love of Jesus.

Is he the owner of the liquor store? Is she the single mother who's been twice divorced and is now living with a man who's not her husband?

Could this person be a very wealthy, respectable member of the community who has always been hostile to the church or at the least uninvolved and uninterested in our work?

Could this person be a member of a minority race? Do they live in poor housing? Could it be someone who once attended church but has been wounded? Are their ideas about politics, sexual orientation, or religion very different from yours?

What these people need is the same thing Jesus gave them 2000 years ago, his presence and his unconditional love.

Francois Clemmons discovered a friend for life there in Mr. Roger's Neighborhood. He said, "I'll never forget one day I was watching him film a session. And you know how at the end of the program he takes his sneakers off, hangs up his sweater and he says, "You make every day a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are?"

I was looking at him when he was saying that, and he walks over to where I was standing. And I said, "Fred were you talking to me?"

And he said, "Yes, I have been talking to you for years. But you heard me today."

It was like telling me I'm OK as a human being. That was one of the most meaningful experiences I'd ever had.

Sometimes it takes a while before people hear that message from God, that God loves them the way they are and that he wants people to come to him to way they are.

Is that a message you need to hear today? That God loves you, just the way you are. He wants us to come to Him just as we are.

Once we do, He will work with us and mold and shape, and little by little, we become those people who are willing to go out into the neighborhood with water and a towel and say to people, "Come soak your feet in the water with me. Here, let me dry your feet for you."

When we do those things, we have a chance to touch people in the name of Jesus in ways they were not prepared.

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