

June 23, 2019  
Rev. Kerry Smith

Romans 15:1-6 Won't You Be My Neighbor?  
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Romans 15:1-6 The Message

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?" That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out. "I took on the troubles of the troubled," is the way Scripture puts it. Even if it was written in Scripture long ago, you can be sure it's written for us. God wants the combination of God's steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize us, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we'll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God of our Master Jesus!

I lived in the same house from 5 years of age to when I graduated high school. We had the best neighbors, the Uhlins, the Wolframs, and the Stroebels. The Stroebels were our next door neighbors and if you knocked on their backdoor, Mr. Stroebel would bring out a bowl of candy. He was so nice. I have been thinking about Mr. Stroebel this week as we are looking at the spiritual lessons from Mister Rogers Neighborhood. Mister Rogers said, "Listening is where love begins: listening to ourselves and then to our neighbors."

We live in a world where we have so much in common with one another. We are all created by a God who made us, called us good, and loves us. We start there and we have common ground with everyone. But, we do have so much that separates us. I want to share with you a concept that sociologists talk about called the Moral Circle.<sup>1</sup> It is about how we are in relationship with one another.

Imagine that you have a very dear friend who is taking a new job as a waiter for the first time. A brand new waiter at a very busy restaurant. Anyone here ever worked as a waiter? It looks hard. You have to take care of this table, look them in the eye, engage with them as if they are the only table in the room, you have to see out of the corner of your eye that the food has been delivered to this table, and you need to start a mental clock so you give them three minutes and then check that everything is as it should be. You have to notice that a new table has been seated. You either have to provide them with water, because we expect that in America, or make sure that they have received water. All of these things are necessary for you to keep up with on a busy night. Say it is Father's Day, and you are a new waiter. That would be very hard.

Say that your very best friend, or your son or your daughter, that is, someone very near and dear to you, has taken this new job as a waiter. You go. You want to be supportive. You arrive with four other people. You tell the person at the host stand in front that you want this waiter. You are seated at a table. Your waters are placed in front of you. Here comes your loved one. They are visibly sweating and stressed. The pas in their hand is literally shaking. They look at you with that deer in the headlights look. You reassure them. You are doing great. You look great. You look like you have been doing this your whole life. Don't worry!

You place your order and your loved one leaves. Twenty minutes passes, and you have no food. But you know it will be coming and you chat with your friends and you think well, he's new. It is her first day. I'm sure it will come soon. Your loved one comes by and looks with horror at your table. They say, "I forgot to put your order in." You say, "That's okay. We're

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<sup>1</sup> [https://groupleaders.org/leader-training-feed/2017/1/30/the-moral-circle?fbclid=IwAR1q\\_9mwuLKpVJiXghr3vNoTSK\\_FvQxBstxifQVJDb27w135ddUru6v0](https://groupleaders.org/leader-training-feed/2017/1/30/the-moral-circle?fbclid=IwAR1q_9mwuLKpVJiXghr3vNoTSK_FvQxBstxifQVJDb27w135ddUru6v0)

good. We have water. If we could get a little more water that would be great. You are doing great.” And off they go. Your food arrives. You ordered steak, you receive cod. You eat that cod. When your loved one comes to ask you how everything is, you say this is the best cod that I have ever had. Thank you. You get the idea.

At the end of your meal, when it is time to go, you give a big tip. Your friends and family chip in. You are so proud of your loved one. You know it was a really hard thing that they did. You want to be supportive. Now let’s say that it is Mother’s Day and you go to Pappasitos with your family and you don’t know this waiter. You sit down and no one brings you water. No one acknowledges your presence. The waiter finally comes by kind of flustered and says, “I’m sorry, they weren’t supposed to sit anyone here. I’m supposed to leave on my break, but Angela will come help you.” Poor Angela shows up. You aren’t in a good place. Angela doesn’t do any better than your loved one in the previous scenario.

How are you feeling in that situation? Are you mentally doing the math as the tip goes down and down and down for every transgression that you endure in this restaurant? Two similar situations as far as your meal is concerned, but two very different outlooks. Two very different ways in which you treat the waitstaff and in the way that you empathize with the waitstaff. In the one case, they are your friend. They are your mother. They are your grandchild. In the other case, they are somebody’s friend. They are somebody’s mother. They are someone’s grandchild. They just aren’t yours. The way that we look at them is very different.

To summarize the Moral Circle, we could say that we show kindness to our kind. We show kindness to our kin. We show kindness to those we already feel sympathetic towards. Or we already have a bond with or we know someone who has a bond with. Sometimes we don’t show kindness when all of those things are lacking. There is this judgement that humans make. We don’t do it consciously, usually. But we do it. This person is nothing to us. They are a means to an end. They are the one who provides our meal at this restaurant, rather than the one that we love.

We don’t always see others as our kind and it affects the way that we live our lives. It affects our witness as Christians. As Christians our moral circle isn’t limited to those that we know and love. As Christians our moral circle is limited only to those who are beloved by God. That is a very wide circle. No one is excluded. Our moral circle includes everyone. I love how the Message translation puts it in our scripture today, “Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, “How can I help?” That’s exactly what Jesus did. He didn’t make it easy for himself by avoiding people’s troubles, but waded right in and helped out.” I want the world to sing like a choir, with our “lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God of our Master Jesus!”

It reminds me of Jesus’ words, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...for if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matthew 5:43-48). Mister Rogers said, “Imagine what our real neighborhoods would be like if each of us offered just one kind word to another person. Sometimes, all it takes is one kind word to nourish another person. Think of the ripple effect that can be created when we nourish someone.”<sup>2</sup>

For me what it ultimately comes down to is that I cannot love God without loving my neighbor. I understand my neighbor to be everyone. Every single person on this planet. My mom raised me in a United Methodist Church where I learned that Christianity is grounded in loving the stranger. Jesus commands, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no exemption, for

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<sup>2</sup>Rogers, Fred. *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*. Hachette Books: New York, Boston. 2014. P. 185.

migrants, for people you don't like, for people who are different than you, for the homeless, for the mean. May God show me how I can love others better today. Amen.