

### Week 4 (Sept. 3): Lesson 4 - Who is My Neighbor?

- Francois Clemmons grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, and was raised in Youngston, Ohio, in the 40's and 50's - two very deeply segregated regions of the country at the time.
- In 1968, Clemmons started his opera career with the Metropolitan Opera House and always thought of himself as an opera singer.
- It was then that Fred Rogers heard Clemmons singing in a church and decided to ask him to be on his show - something that was pretty unorthodox at the time.
- Let's allow Clemmons to tell the story about it himself:
- [Being Black in 'Mister Rogers' Neighborhood' - YouTube](#)
- As Clemmons, himself, says, black actors on children's television shows - or any television shows, for that matter, was not the norm.
- In fact, Clemmons was the first African American to have a recurring role on television of any kind in 1968.<sup>1</sup>
- As we conclude our four-week "Compassion and Cardigans" sermon series about Mister Rogers this morning, we ask the ultimate question that any philosopher may ask of him: "Who is My Neighbor?"
- Although it is not asked in this morning's gospel text - but done in others, the same question is asked by the scribes and pharisees, leading to one of Jesus' more famous responses when he says:
- *"The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;'<sup>30</sup> you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'<sup>31</sup> The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."*<sup>2</sup>
- Love your neighbor as yourself.
- Without sounding like an Abbott and Costello routine, asking "who is my neighbor" (again) is really a good question, isn't it?
- In the clip we just watched, Clemmons notes that Mister Rogers "really knew what he was doing" when it came to having certain people on his television show, most likely as a way by which to show

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<sup>1</sup> [Walking The Beat In Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, Where A New Day Began Together : NPR](#)

<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:29-31

people how to have positive “experiences” of people who looked different than them.

- But it’s not easier said than done.
- A dear friend and pastoral colleague of mine, Rev. Natalia Terfa,
- Back in 2018, found herself earning 15 minutes of fame.
- Not because of the amazing things that her congregation at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Brooklyn Park is doing.
- Not because of the great book she wrote to help bring deep thought and reflection to the readers’ day.
- But because of what she added to the church’s electronic sign.
- At her church, on a sign not unlike the one that you passed on your way into the parking lot this morning, she added six simple words.
- “Blessed Ramadan to our Muslim Neighbors.”
- This Lutheran Church took a page out of the book from the Minnesota Council of Churches who, at the time, led a campaign to counteract Islamophobia, particularly in the Twin Cities, where there is a large Muslim population.
- After adding the slide to the electronic sign in the morning, the office had a total of 14 phone calls from angry Christians to complain about the posting.
- She posted about her experience on Facebook and, at the time, Minnesota Public Radio gave the whole experience some airtime.
- On that Facebook post in 2018, she wrote, “Listen, y’all. When Jesus asked us to love our neighbors, I happen to think he meant it.”
- Loving your neighbor means loving them - even when you might not know a lot about them.
- That’s agape love.
- Agape love - probably something you’ve heard about before, right?
- But maybe not able to quite define?
- Theologian Paul Ramsey explains, about this gospel text, that *“Christ commands his disciples to love their neighbors and, in so doing, enjoins upon them a way of life wholly determined by an unwavering commitment to the well being of others.”*

- “As such”, Ramsey continues, *“the love that Jesus talks about - agape love - as one of the three theological virtues. This agape love is the kind of love that allows us to love all we encounter, even when we find ourselves disagreeing with them.”*
- This agape love, Ramsey argues, is what remains open to the possibility of self-sacrifice for the sake of the neighbor.
- This same self-sacrificing love is the type of love that Ruth shows Naomi in the first passage from this morning.
- In it, we find Ruth refusing to leave her mother-in-law, Naomi, telling her, “where you go, I will go. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”
- They have been through a lot - Naomi losing her two sons - one of whom happens to be Ruth’s husband.
- Through their relationship, the women forge a new bond because of shared tragedy.
- The various struggles in their relationship focuses on how these women will be with one another.
- They struggle to give to each other, to act in each other’s best interest.
- And what if we did that for all of our interactions - looking out, and acting in, each other’s best interests?
- To love our neighbors in this agape-love way means that we recognize our neighbor as one who is irreducibly valued.
- Loving your neighbor means loving them - even when you might not know a lot about them.
- That’s agape love.
- Love without conditions and boundaries because that is how God loves us. And when we love like that there is no room for hate.
- That’s the type of love that my friend’s church was expressing on their outdoor sign.
- If we are to abide by this commandment of Jesus’ instruction, then we are to love our neighbor. No exceptions.

- In this sense, God's own love for humankind is a fitting parallel to the kind of love implied in the second greatest command included in this gospel passage.
- And so, as we love our neighbors, we need to include ourselves, right?
- Author Brene Brown notes that we should talk to ourselves like we would talk to someone we love.
- Because we aren't always kind with ourselves.
- Mister Rogers has something to say about that: [Mister Rogers' Neighborhood Complete : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#) (25:14-26:14)
- Who is my neighbor, Mister Rogers?
- Anyone you happen to be with.
- (Pause)
- Let us pray:

*Lord, give us the eyes of Jesus*

*to see our neighbors and the strangers we meet.*

*Teach us what it means to love the stranger as we love ourselves.*

*Forgive us for our selfishness,*

*for our silence,*

*for not caring enough for the strangers who come to our communities.*

*Teach us to love and care for the stranger the way you do. Amen<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> written by Rebeca Jiménez Yoder Posted on the website of the **Toronto Catholic District School Board**. <https://www.tcdsb.org/Pages/default.aspx>