

# McCabe United Methodist Church

"Won't You Be My Neighbor?" Series

## ***Greater Love Has Nothing on This***

Sermon on John 15:5-14 & Mark 12:28-31 (9.10 & 9.11.16)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

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*Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.*

I imagine the song we just heard is familiar to many of us: it's the theme song from the children's television show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. Many of us grew-up learning from Mr. Rogers about what it means to be a neighbor... learning about all the different kinds of neighbors we have in this life.

Mr. Rogers was Fred Rogers, who was educated as a Presbyterian minister. Christian faith was vitally important to him and, in the 1950's, he went into a career in television because he wanted to see change in how TV shows communicated with children and youth.

His show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* aired from 1968-2001 and each episode began with Mr. Rogers singing the theme song we just heard. As the theme song was performed, Mr. Rogers walked through the door of his home and sang while changing into sneakers and a cardigan sweater.

(Incidentally, I just learned that all of the cardigan sweaters Mr. Rogers wore on the show were knitted by his mother.<sup>1</sup> How sweet is that?!)

The title and theme of our fall kick-off series is taken straight from *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*: "Won't You Be My Neighbor?"

Pastor Mark and I settled on this theme about a month ago and, of course, while its actual wording is taken straight from the theme song for *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, the theme itself is straight from the Holy Bible. We just heard about this theme in the reading from Mark chapter 12 – Jesus' reminder to us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind,

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1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred\\_Rogers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred_Rogers)

and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus barely distinguishes these as being separate commandments: more like two sides of the same coin. Love God, love neighbor. Simple, right?

Well, friends, just as Mr. Rogers so often sang, it truly *is* a beautiful day in this neighborhood...it truly *is* a beautiful day for a neighbor. In fact, *every day* is a beautiful day in this neighborhood – and every day provides abundant opportunities to be a neighbor.

Now, even though Pastor Mark and I settled on this “Won't You Be My Neighbor” series theme about a month ago, God started working on it long before that.

Our fall kick-off weekend here at McCabe traditionally happens the weekend after Labor Day Weekend. Well, sometime this past spring, I was looking ahead on the calendar, and I realized that this year's fall kick-off weekend would include Sunday, September 11<sup>th</sup>.

As a nation, we can't think of the date “September 11<sup>th</sup>” without remembering the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. And this year marks exactly 15 years since those horrific attacks.

So we wanted to honor the anniversary during worship in a faithful way... and when an idea emerged to honor the anniversary of 9/11 by making a special point to thank the First Responders in our midst, the idea seemed Spirit-inspired.

Because we were planning to recognize the First Responders in our midst, it seemed appropriate to read and reflect on the words we heard from John chapter 15 – words from Jesus to his first disciples about how love is never greater than when someone lays down their life for their friends.

In John 15, Jesus was preparing his disciples for his death – he was preparing them for the time when *he* would lay down his life, not only for his friends, but for his enemies... and for hundreds of millions and billions of people yet to be born in this world... people like you and me.

You and I are here today, worshiping the God we know in Jesus Christ, because, 2,000 years ago, he chose to show love for this world in the greatest way possible: by laying down his life for all of us.

There is a reflection of that great love every time a first responder answers the call to dispatch an emergency service vehicle. There is a reflection of that great love every time a first responder knocks on a door with no real knowledge of what's going on behind it. There is a reflection of Jesus' great, sacrificial love every time a first responder runs into a burning building.

When others run *away* from crisis events, first responders run *toward* them. Some of you are called in this way, to this kind of work, and we are so very grateful. Many of us are too fearful to do it ourselves, so we offer abundant and sincere thanks to those of you who push *through* fear to respond in the midst of dangerous crisis events.

The first responders of 9/11 are national heroes... and the first responders in our midst are local heroes. Thank you.

In thinking about 9/11, about worship, and about first responders, I thought of a story I'd read in one of Rev. Adam Hamilton's books.

Adam Hamilton is the lead pastor of the largest United Methodist church in The United States – Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. Approximately 11,000 people worship at Church of the Resurrection each weekend in one of its many campuses.

The story I thought of is from the last chapter of his book *Leading Beyond the Walls*. In this chapter, Rev. Hamilton talks about flukey things that have happened at his church right before (or in the midst of) a worship service.

He has a section on what to do if the fire alarm goes off in the middle of your sermon and what to do if there is a medical emergency during the worship service. He also has a section about bomb threats. In that part of the chapter, he tells a powerful story from the weekend following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

On the Sunday following the attacks 15 years ago, someone called 9-1-1 saying that there was a bomb in Church of the Resurrection's main building. This call was made about 90 minutes before their Sunday evening worship service – a service for which they were expecting upwards of 2,000 people in attendance.

The police came, searched the building, and gave them the all-clear – as much as they could, anyway. They said the bomb threat was likely a hoax. They also said they would stay in the building during the worship service, but that they could not guarantee anyone's safety.

Adam Hamilton writes this about how worship went for them that Sunday evening:

“We had 2,200 people show up for worship, and I began the service by telling the congregation exactly what had happened. I said, 'The police and fire department believe this was a hoax but cannot guarantee that. If you would feel more comfortable going home tonight, please know I understand. You can pick up a copy of the sermon later this week...

“About a dozen of the people there that night slipped out, the rest stayed and felt a resolve and determination not to allow threats to keep them from worshipping the Lord. It ended up being the most powerful of the worship services that day.

Adam Hamilton closes this section by saying, “Was this the right thing to do? ... I can honestly say I was uncertain what the right course of action was that evening. I feel a great responsibility for the safety of our congregation. At the same time I did not want someone who irresponsibly called in a hoax to keep this congregation from finding the healing and hope it so desperately needed in the wake of the terrorist attack on America.”<sup>2</sup>

I happened to be in New York City ten months *before* and then seven months *after* 9/11. In November of 2000, I was there with my family as my sister's high school marching band performed in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

We had a fun, albeit exhausting, trip exploring the city – seeing the main tourist hot spots, including a trip up to the very top of the World Trade Center and a walk around the Wall Street area in lower Manhattan.

I had just been there 10 months before, so I could imagine the neighborhood as the people ran in terror on 9/11. I had been to the top of one of the twin

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2 Hamilton, Adam. *Unleashing the Word*. 142-143.

towers just 10 months before, so I could picture just how far down it was when the massive buildings crashed to the ground.

I could imagine and I could picture in my mind... but I have no idea the kind of terror those folks in New York, in DC, and on Flight 93 actually experienced. I don't know how those directly impacted felt on that day, but I *do* know – most of us know – the kind of fear that swept across our entire nation in the aftermath of those attacks.

I remember how it felt like nowhere was safe: certainly not New York or DC, but that it wasn't even safe in small towns in the Midwest. The game of global violence had been taken to a level no one had expected and so we had no idea what might be coming next.

Everyone was scared. No one felt safe.

When I went back to New York with my family in April of 2002, we had new sights to see: a skyline forever changed... Ground Zero... hundreds of thousands of memorials tacked up throughout the neighborhood. It all felt very sacred.

As we looked at Ground Zero in April of 2002, we knew it was still serving as a burial ground for many who had not yet been pulled from the rubble... even though seven months had passed.

But, despite the overwhelming nature of Ground Zero, something else in that neighborhood – that was far more powerful – took my breath away that day:

As my family and I walked around the financial district, we stopped dead in our tracks when we saw a 45-foot high billboard featuring a set of hands closed in prayer.

There were words printed in the middle of the praying hands that said, “Fear is not the only force at work in the world today.”

That sentiment in and of itself struck me with amazing force... but it was what was at the bottom of the billboard that really hit home, because, at the bottom, I saw our denomination's Cross & Flame logo next to the words, “[from] The People of The United Methodist Church.”

I love being a United Methodist Christian for so very many reasons, but I am not sure I have ever felt more proud to be United Methodist than I was when I saw that billboard near Ground Zero back in April of 2002.

Praying hands speaking the words, “Fear is not the only force at work in the world today.” From the people of The United Methodist Church. From *us*.

That was true 15 years ago and it is still true now...because it has always been true.

Fear has never been the only force at work in the world.

Even though Jesus made it clear that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbors, the command uttered most frequently in the Bible is the command, “Fear not.”

Depending on the translation, and depending on exactly how it's phrased, some argue that “fear not” appears in varying ways over 350 times in the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, despite the number of times God tells us in Scripture not to be afraid, “fear not” does not qualify as the greatest of all commandments: *that* honor goes to the command that we are to love God and neighbor... even though it's only mentioned specifically a handful of times. Kind of a bizarre discrepancy, don't you think?

But God knows us so well. God knows how fearful we are sometimes. God knows we struggle daily to fully love our neighbors because we get scared. We get scared to say “hello” to someone we don't know.

We get scared to make a connection with someone who is different than we are.

I am a shy person in recovery: as a child and as a younger person, it terrified me to take the first step in connecting with people I didn't know. *What if they think I look funny? What if we don't get along? What if they start to get to know me and decide they don't like me?*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reference.com/world-view/many-times-bible-say-fear-7bca141376d0ed13>

This is the inner turmoil of a shy person and it all translates to the fear surrounding one, essential question...the question: *What if I get hurt?*

The first responders in our midst dive headfirst into their work despite any fear they have of getting hurt. This amazes me and I am so grateful for them.

Several days ago, Pastor Mark and I were talking about worship this weekend, and about honoring the first responders in our midst. As we talked, Pastor Mark said, "You know, it's just now occurring to me that every disciple of Jesus is a 'first responder' in the faith." This thought blew me away. Days later, it's *still* blowing me away.

*Every disciple of Jesus is a "first responder" in the faith.*

We are the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in this world. Our lives are the gospel others see preached, whether or not we're using words. Everything we do and say is an opportunity to share Christ's love – an opportunity to *respond* to God's love for us by sharing love with our neighbors.

Loving God and loving our neighbors can be a scary thing sometimes. To love our neighbors means we are sometimes called to do things we're afraid of. For example, I have yet to give one of those block party cards to someone as a way of inviting them to join us here at McCabe one of these weeks.

Part of the reason I haven't yet given one of those cards away is that I went on vacation for over a week right after we made the cards. If I'm being completely honest, however, the main reason I haven't yet given one of them away is that doing so scares me. It brings out the shy little girl who remains in my mind and heart.

Does it scare me to think about using one of those block party cards to invite someone to church? You bet! Will I eventually still do it? You better believe I will. But I promise you it will take a lot of prayer and a lot of Holy Spirit strength for me to get it done.

Some of you share this fear of mine. Others of you do not. Yet we all get afraid from time to time when it comes to extending love to our neighbors. So thank God the Holy Spirit gives us strength when we are afraid.

Thank God we are forgiven when we fail in our call to love God and neighbor. And thank God every day offers us new opportunities. Because every single day of life on this earth is a beautiful day to be a neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

*Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into our hearts and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.*