

McCabe United Methodist Church

Fall Kick-Off Series: “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

“Because We Belong to the Day...”

Sermon Romans 13 (9.24 & 9.25.16)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

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.

Hello, neighbor!

Let's try that again: Hello, neighbor!

Well, just as we heard Mr. Rogers sing about a moment ago in that famous theme song from *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, it is, indeed, a beautiful day in this neighborhood.

It doesn't matter if it's sunny, warm, and cloudless or if it's dreary, chilly, and cloudy... it's always a beautiful day in this neighborhood – always a beautiful day for a neighbor. The same held true every day on Fred Rogers' TV show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

It was always a beautiful day to be a neighbor. Every episode was dedicated to helping children feel good about themselves and to teaching them how to be the best neighbor they could be to all the different neighbors we have in this life.

This weekend, we're rounding the final curve of our “Won't You Be My Neighbor?” sermon and worship series here at McCabe. It's been so great these past couple of weeks to think about Jesus' command that we love God and neighbor...and to then think about some of the different kinds of neighbors we have in this life.

The first week of this series – two weeks ago, the weekend of September 11th – we recognized and gave thanks to God for the first responders in our midst. We thanked them for being the kind of neighbors who *run toward* crisis events to help keep us safe and protected.

Two weeks ago, we also reflected on how each of us who calls ourselves “Christian” is a *first responder in the faith*. Our lives – our words and our actions – may be the only Gospel message someone else experiences in this life. So we are challenged to do *everything* in response to the great love and mercy of our great, big God.

Last weekend we recognized and gave thanks to God for the teachers and other school personnel in our midst.

One of the prominent features of McCabe's particular neighborhood is Will-Moore Elementary School, so it seemed fitting to thank God for the ways in which others help us learn in this life... the ways in which others inspire us to become the men and women God calls us to be.

Last weekend in his sermon, Pastor Mark reminded us that, whether we realize it or not, each of us is a teacher in the faith: as followers of Jesus, each of us has the power to inspire and to support others in their Christian walk. What a powerful calling that is!

So, the first weekend of this series, we thought about first responders – and, really, first responders are *everybody's* neighbors, no matter where you or they live. Then, last weekend we got more specific to McCabe's particular neighborhood by thinking about *school personnel* and how we are all teachers in the faith.

Well... when thinking about prominent features of McCabe's particular neighborhood, it's nearly impossible to ignore the prairie skyscraper across the street to the north. In fact, depending on where you sit in our main sanctuary, the North Dakota Capitol building is framed beautifully within the large, picture windows behind our altar.

So, as the home to our state Capitol – and with city and county governments seated here as well – we thought it would be fitting to recognize and give thanks to God for the public servants in our midst.

By definition, a “servant” is someone who performs duties or tasks for others. A *public* servant performs the tasks of their work for the good of the public – for the good of *all* of us. Here at McCabe, because of where we sit in proximity to the state Capitol building, we are quite surrounded by public servants!

Every weekday, around 3:00, our sidewalks are a little busy with Capitol employees getting some exercise and taking in a bit of fresh air during their afternoon break: our McCabe neighbors, who work each day to support the people of North Dakota in many and varied ways. They are our neighbors and we are truly grateful for them.

Now, in thinking about what we learn from *Scripture* regarding public servants, I must admit there is not a wealth of passages from which to draw. In fact, in many places throughout the Bible, public servants are featured behaving badly or are somehow set in opposition to people of faith.

Yet, there is much wisdom and challenge for public servants – really, for *all* of us – in Romans chapter 13.

I'm going to read much of Romans 13 again but, before I do, I want you to keep something in mind: these words of St. Paul were written to members of the early church in Rome.

At the time, the Roman Empire governed and occupied large portions of the Middle East... including the areas where the church was beginning to be established after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. At the time, the Roman Empire was not particularly hospitable to Christianity.

See, one of the basic tenets of life in the Roman Empire was that the Roman Emperor was Lord; he was, essentially, *God*...and was to be revered, worshiped even, above all others. This did not mesh well with Christian faith because Christians believe *Jesus Christ* is Lord – that Jesus Christ is to be revered and worshiped above all others.

For early Christians, there was a real struggle with what it meant to be a citizen of the Roman Empire – where the Emperor was Lord – while understanding yourself to be a child of God who claimed *Jesus* as Lord.

St. Paul's words in Romans chapter 13 offered guidance to the early Christians... and his guidance to them is just as important to *us* today as it was nearly 2,000 years ago. Of course, our circumstances here in The United States are different than they were for the early Christians in the Roman Empire. We live in a representative democracy – not a totalitarian empire.

However, St. Paul's words continue to ring true because they speak to the heart of Christian life – no matter your surrounding government. With that in mind, hear, again, selected verses from Romans 13. St. Paul writes this:

“Everyone must submit to governing authorities. For all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God ...

“Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Do what is right, and they will honor you. The authorities are God’s servants, sent for your good. But if you are doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you ...

“Pay your taxes, too, for these same reasons. For government workers need to be paid. They are serving God in what they do. “Give to everyone what you owe them: Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority.

“Owe nothing to anyone — except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God’s law. For the commandments say, ‘You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet.’

“These — and other such commandments — are summed up in this one commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God’s law.

“This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living.

Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see.

“Don’t participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

2,000 years ago, Paul and the early Christians believed time as we know it was coming quickly to an end. They believed Jesus would be returning – sooner rather than later – to judge the people of the earth and to set things right for all eternity.

That's why Paul wrote about “time running out” and about “waking up for the night is almost gone.” They believed Jesus could be back at any moment and that, because he could be back at any moment, they should live as people in the light, rather than as people in the dark.

Though unfaithful deeds can happen at any time of the day or night, the cover of darkness or secrecy is helpful: in polite society, people tend not to get drunk, engage in sexual promiscuity or immoral living, or engage in quarreling and jealousy... at least not out in the open, in the harsh light of day. We tend to save those behaviors for more private moments – under the cover of darkness or behind closed doors.

Yet Christians are called to live differently: “Remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes,” St. Paul wrote, “and put on the shining armor of right living. Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see ... [so] clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Whether we work as a public servant, in a school, as a first responder... whether we work in the private sector, as a business person, in the medical field, in retail, or in a religious institution... regardless of where we work, those of us who call ourselves “Christian” are to wear the love of Jesus Christ as our daily uniform.

Sometimes that uniform of holy love feels like it fits just right, while other times it feels a bit snug or a bit awkward. Learning how to live by the love of Christ is a life-long journey, taken one day at a time.

On the Public Broadcasting System website that's dedicated to *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, there's a little section called “Everything I Ever Needed to Know, I Learned from Mr. Rogers.” On that section of the website is this list of things Mr. Rogers taught over the years:

“Wonder about things ... Accept people as they are ... Look and listen carefully ... We all have feelings ... Ask a lot of questions ... Haircuts don't hurt ... Teach by example ... Feed the fish ... Share ... Play ... Love.”¹

Back in 2002, after *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* finished its 33-year run, Fred Rogers was one of 12 people to whom President George W. Bush awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

In his speech during which he presented these awards, President Bush said this: “The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the highest civil honor our nation can bestow and we award it today to 12 outstanding individuals.

“The men and women we honor span the spectrum of achievement. Some are fighters, others are healers. All have left an enduring legacy of hope, and courage, and achievement.

“Fred Rogers has proven that television can soothe the soul and nurture the spirit and teach the very young. 'The whole idea,' says the beloved host of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, 'is to look at the television camera and present as much love as you possibly could to a person who needs it.’”

President Bush closed his remarks about Mr. Rogers by saying, “This message of unconditional love has won Fred Rogers a very special place in the heart of a lot of moms and dads all across America.”² As he said those particular words, President Bush had a gleam in his eye and a smile on his face that could only have meant *he* was one of the many American dads who has a special place in his heart for *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*.

“Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see ... [so] clothe yourself with ... the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Because we belong to the day...

Because, as followers of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our lives are always on display for the world to see...

Because, in work or in play...because, in serving or in Sabbath...

1 From <http://pbskids.org/rogers/iLearnedFromMrRogers.html>

2 Ibid.

Because we belong to the one God whom we know in Jesus Christ – because we belong to the *day*, may our lives reflect the God we love.

Because we belong to the day, may our lives reflect the fact that God loves *us*. And may we wear that holy love among *all* our neighbors. For every day truly *is* a beautiful day for a neighbor. 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.