“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” - Stephanie Sorge, 6/4/23

By a show of hands or comments online, how many of you have ever been stranded on the side of the road? I have been - multiple times. It’s never fun. One of the worst times, though, was when it wasn’t just me, but me, two other adults, and a group of middle schoolers en route to a mission trip from our church in Kentucky down to Chattanooga, TN.

We hadn’t even hit the state line when we blew a tire on the old church van. It was a miracle we didn’t crash. Another miracle that we were on a very small stretch of I-75 that wasn’t sandwiched between steep rocks going up on one side and down on the other. Once the van was safely on the shoulder, we quickly evacuated the youth and sent them to sit in the shade of a large tree, a safe distance from the road.

The jack was bad, the bolts rusty, and finally, after working in the full sun on a 100 degree day for over an hour to try to get the tire changed, one of the chaperones remembered she had roadside assistance. Thirty minutes later, we were back on the road, going much slower with three tires and a donut. Just north of Knoxville, we felt the van lurch once more, as one of the “good” tires shredded. At that point, we were really stranded. It was getting dark, we were hours from home and hours from our destination, and we had an old church van with two blown tires and one old donut.

The kids got to see the connectional church at work that day. After a few calls, we connected with a retired couple who lived close to where we had broken down. They quickly came to our rescue, loading up our whole crew and luggage and driving us over to their two bedroom retirement condo, where they proceeded to order us pizza and clear surfaces that could be used for sleeping. The next morning, the husband helped figure out getting the van towed and tires replaced, and the wife made us a pancake breakfast. We arrived at our destination later that afternoon, a day late and a few dollars shorter.

Here’s the thing. Just a couple of hours before that first tire blew, I had been preaching on - can you guess? The Good Samaritan. I challenged the congregation regarding the evergreen desire to “attract more young people.” Rather than seeing them as new blood or a fresh recruitment pool, they were the ministry field. As long as we were waiting for the young people to come to us, to fill the volunteer needs and pad the coffers, we were missing the need and opportunity right in front of us. It was a sermon that, as one member told me afterwards, didn’t step on their toes, but reminded them of where their feet were. I compared the youth and young people in the community to the man in need on the side of the road… Never before had a sermon come back to haunt me quite so quickly.

Back on the interstate, we couldn’t believe how many drivers passed the clearly marked church van and obvious signs that we needed assistance. Maybe they were busy and running late. On a Sunday afternoon… Maybe they were afraid of middle schoolers. Maybe they had skipped church and missed hearing a sermon that would have inspired them to do the right thing!

This is one of the most familiar parables Jesus tells. You’ve probably heard it before, along with plenty of reasons the priest and Levite might have crossed to the other side of the road. Jesus doesn’t condemn them. It’s not the parable of the Bad Priest and Levite. It’s the story of the Good Samaritan - a term that would have sounded like an oxymoron to Jesus’s audience.

The Jews and Samaritans were as different and at odds with each other as Jews and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip today. They were as opposed as Proud Boys and Antifa. As divided as the factions we see in so many areas of life today - over gun regulation, CRT, immigration, politics, and more. There was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans.

A Samaritan showing up in Jesus’s parable was a plot twist. The fact that he was also the one who did the right thing? The one who had the least obligation to help? When Jesus asks the rhetorical question at the end, the man who started this whole conversation can’t even answer plainly. Who was the neighbor? “The Samaritan” would have been the easy answer; he says instead, “the one who showed mercy.”

This summer as we enter the neighborhood, we start with the same question: who is my neighbor? Over the course of his decades on television, Mr. Rogers met countless neighbors on his show. Some he invited into his home, and others he went to visit in their homes or places of business. Like the Samaritan, Mr. Rogers crossed boundaries of social propriety, most famously when he invited Officer Clemmons to share his kiddie pool and cool his feet. In ways big and small, Mr. Rogers was always expanding the definition of a neighbor.

In the first episode of his new show, Mr. Rogers visited a neighbor who had quite the collection of lampshades - which she proudly wore as hats! Some might have scoffed at the eccentricity, but Mr. Rogers asked questions to learn more. Later that week, he invited some children and their music teacher into his home, including two young Black boys. This was in 1968, a few months before the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the first week in Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, we learned to be curious about our neighbors, to explore the things that make them different and unique - and to appreciate them.

That curiosity and openness was a hallmark of Mr. Rogers’ approach to others - both on the show and off. He was genuinely interested in getting to know people who were very different from him. One of the ways he did this was by slowing down.

On that first show when we meet Mr. McFeely, he’s barely able to stand still - he’s very busy, can’t stop to chat, and he keeps interrupting Mr. Rogers to cut to the chase. The message he has to deliver is from the lampshade hat wearing neighbor, Mrs. Russellite. She sends her regrets that she can’t come to see him as she had promised - she’s simply too busy. So he goes to see her instead.

Though summer is often busy with travel and other plans, we can also use it as an opportunity to slow down. I’m afraid that some of my least neighborly thoughts happen when I’m behind the wheel. Maybe you can relate. One of the reasons it’s a challenge for me is because I’m usually cutting time so close, either over scheduling, or trying to squeeze in one more thing before I get on the road. I’m in a hurry, and it makes me not a great neighbor.

It was easy to judge the many vehicles that flew past our van in distress that hot July afternoon, but it’s also likely that people were driving so fast that they didn’t register the need until they had passed us. At that point, maybe a few even sent a prayer our way, but figured it didn’t make sense to turn around. I’m not going to urge slow driving on the interstate, but maybe there are other ways we can slow down and live into being good neighbors.

When we slow down, we see more of what’s around us. That’s one of the reasons we’re walking on Wednesdays, to get to see and know our neighborhood a little better. Last week we walked down a cul-de-sac across High Street. While we were admiring a beautiful garden, a woman came out of her house, waving and smiling at us, while her grandson ventured out on his riding toy. We shared a conversation - as much as a group without a Spanish speaker and a woman who spoke no English could. It was a lovely interaction. Beautiful things can happen when you slow down.

Even if we can’t totally dial down the speed of life, we can be intentional in our interactions with others. When we ask questions, and start getting to know people better, we can be better neighbors. We learn more about ways that we can be a better neighborhood together.

From the story of the Good Samaritan, we could distill a simple moral - help those who need help, even when, or especially when, they are different from us. But the question asked was “who is my neighbor?” and the answer was “the Samaritan.” The one who stopped to help. Our neighbor is endowed with gifts to offer, and part of loving our neighbor is receiving those gifts.

True neighbors break down the barriers of us and them, helper and one in need. Both parties have something to give and needs to be met. In a neighborhood, these gifts and needs meet in a mutual web of support. Some neighborhoods still function like this. I think that’s less common than it used to be. We might build our “villages” beyond geographic bounds, to include others with similar interests, lifestyles or life stages. That kind of capital has great value, but not everyone has access to it.

A few months ago Chris Hoover Seidel was here to share with us about the work of Bridge of Hope. They work with single moms who are facing housing insecurity, and provide support and resources for a better and more secure future for the families. One of the cornerstones of Bridge of Hope is the neighboring group, made up of 6-8 or so volunteers, usually a group from a church, who receive training and then accompany the family through the Bridge of Hope program for up to 2 years. This isn’t just helping - it’s building relationships.

Trinity has done this in the past, and some of our members are still in touch with the neighbors from that time. Right now, there is an urgent need for a neighboring group to be trained and ready to start in July. Whether or not we have a full group from Trinity, if you might be interested in being part of this, you can let me know, or contact Chris directly. This request came to me last week, and it felt just a little bit relevant to our passage today. Just a bit.

That might not be the thing for you now, and the good news is that you don’t need to add to your plate to be a good neighbor. When we slow down, ask questions, and get to know our neighbors, we learn better how to love them. When it comes to being good neighbors, there is no one size fits all.

My hope and prayer for all of us this summer is that we can grow as neighbors - in this community of faith, in our church neighborhood, and beyond. May we slow down, practice curiosity, and build stronger webs of connection, even with those who are very different from us. Just please, don’t go getting stranded on any roadsides, ok?