

**“Serve Our Neighbor”**  
**Sermon Series on *First Pres at the Core***  
**October 11, 2015**  
**(Luke 10:25-37)**

**Introduction.**

One of our favorite TV shows to watch as a family when our kids were growing up was “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Do you remember it? There was just something about Fred Rogers’ approach in that children’s program that slowed the pace of your life down and invited you come in.

Let’s go back in time and relive the opening of his TV show once again. The theme song of the program set the tone for what Fred Rogers believed should be the foundation for human relationships – being neighbors to one another.

You might fault Fred Rogers’ for his seeming naiveté and the slow-moving action of his television program. But kids loved it, and so did parents. There was just something about the way he believed we all need a little more neighborliness in the world, and I always hoped a little of would rub off on me.

This morning we consider the fourth of our core values of the new vision of First Pres, and it is this: Serve Our Neighbors.

**I. The Breakdown of Community in our World Today.**

When Lorie and I moved with our kids to Boulder, CO, many years ago, ours was one of the first houses in the subdivision to be completed. And we got to see the rest of the neighborhood fill in as the other homes were constructed. I remember the day our youngest son David was disappointed at Christmastime because the carpenters had framed up the house next door to our west and put the roof on it. David, who was 5 at the time, no longer could look outside his bedroom window and see the Christmas Star on Flagstaff Mountain to our west. He was pretty bummed out by it all.

Later, as we got to know the couple who moved into that house, we learned more about them, which kind of set the tone for the rules of engagement for our relationship. The first time we went over to meet them, we went to their front door and noticed they had a ceramic tile mounted next to the doorbell. It read: “No Solicitors! Religious or otherwise! We like the way we are!” Woody and Cathy turned out to be great neighbors, but their little sign speaks of the way in which community has broken down in our world today.

Increasingly, people live resistant, isolated lives. We keep people at arm’s length. We stick to ourselves, and we don’t really know the people around us much. Sociologists have developed a term to describe the average American family’s relational lifestyle these days; they call it “cocooning.” We hole ourselves up in our homes and don’t interact that much with our neighbors. Or we form virtual communities on the internet but never really have physical interaction with people. We live isolated and lonely lives far too often.

Be honest, how many of you know the first and last names of the people who live within five houses of you on both sides of the street? I’m ashamed to admit I don’t either. We don’t take the time to get to know the people right around us, and as a result we experience very

little community in our neighborhoods. We're too busy living our lives to take time and really know the people near us, even in the smallest of ways.

Occasionally, disasters come into our world (like what happened last week down in South Carolina), and for a moment we catch a glimpse of what it means to be a neighbor in a time of crisis. Lorie and I lived in Boston when the historic Blizzard of '78 hit. Twenty-eight inches fell in 24 hours as a Nor'easter dumped snow on New England. Lorie and I weren't married at the time, and she lived in the town of Magnolia on the north shore with three other women. The blizzard shut down that part of the world for the better part of five days, and a state of emergency was called by the governor.

During that week, everyone had to lean on their neighbors in new ways. The man who lived across the street from Lorie and her roommates on a huge estate stopped by to check on them. They'd never met the man before in all the time they'd lived there. It turns out he was the president of Parker Brothers Corp. He couldn't have been nicer. He took pity on these single women and shoveled the snow drift out of their doorway, and he and his wife also had them over for dinner. Others on the street got acquainted and helped out one another, too. However, when the streets got plowed and the temperatures warmed up, life got back to normal, and people returned to their secluded lives. Lorie never saw the president of Parker Brothers ever again. But for a brief moment, people experienced what it was like to serve their neighbors.

Jesus invites all of us to take Him into our neighborhoods, and not just during the times of disaster and crisis, but all the time every day.

## **II. The Call of Jesus to Serve Our Neighbors.**

Once Jesus was asked by a teacher of the Jewish law of all the commandments which was the most important? Jesus answered by saying, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments* (Lk. 10:30,31). Then the expert in the Jewish law who wanted to justify himself asked, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus went on to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I've traveled the highway between Jerusalem to Jericho, and it's a treacherous journey of about 17 miles which twists and turns making it easy for bandits to assault travelers. In Jesus' parable the thieves attacked the man who was traveling on this road. They beat him, took all his belongings, and they left him to die on the side of the road. Two religious people passed by the man in distress, but they crossed on the other side. First a priest, and then a Levite – holy men who knew the Word of God, and yet ignored the plight of this poor man. They didn't want to get involved; they didn't have time to care. Have you ever been like that?

Finally, a Samaritan saw the man in his distress and took pity on him. The shocking feature of Jesus' parable was that Samaritans and Jews hated each other for a number of reasons, and Christ's choice of a Samaritan as the hero of the story stood in stark contrast to the indifference toward the Jewish man by his own religious countrymen. The Samaritan bandaged the man's wounds, put him on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and cared for the injured man's needs. The next day the Samaritan paid the innkeeper and gave instructions to provide for the wounded Jew, and he promised to cover whatever expenses he incurred.

Jesus concluded his parable by asking, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” To his credit, the teacher of the law said, “The man who had pity on him.”

There are several things I want you to notice about serving our neighbors from this parable. **First, a neighbor is anyone who is in close proximity to you.** The word “neighbor” comes from two Old English words – “nigh” meaning “near” and “bur” meaning “dweller, especially a farmer.” Literally, the word means the one who dwells or lives near you. It came to mean anyone who is in proximity to a person, like the girl who sits next to you in class, or the person who works in the office next to yours. However, as we can see from this parable, a neighbor is also someone you may encounter along the way. Their *physical proximity* makes them a neighbor, whether you know them or not. We see in this passage that Jesus said your neighbor is anyone who comes across your path as you go about your daily life.

**Second, we learn from this passage that a neighbor is also anyone who needs you.** The Jewish man had been beaten and left for dead. Others came by, but they ignored the man in his distress. They couldn’t be bothered by his neediness. Only the Good Samaritan stopped to render aid, and he saw the man as a neighbor because of the man’s need.

**The final thing we learn from this parable is that a neighbor doesn’t have to be anything like you in order to show them the love of Christ.** The Jewish man and the Good Samaritan couldn’t have been more different. They were a different race, they didn’t come from the same town, and they worshipped God in a different way. But the Lord brought them together to be neighbors. In our love for Jesus Christ we need to reach across race, class, and convenience to be the kind of neighbors God wants us to be to other people. It is our calling before the Lord, and it’s a core value of our church.

Most of us today don’t have any significant relationships with people outside the faith. Unlike Jesus, we don’t spend much time with people who don’t already know Him. Take a personal inventory, and be honest. How many people do you know and spend time with people who aren’t already Christians? It’s pretty shocking, isn’t it? If we aren’t in relationship with the seekers of this community, in our neighborhoods, how do we expect to influence them for Christ and fulfill the incarnational calling of the Church? How does God want you to serve your neighbors in the coming week?

### **III. Serving Our Neighbors Makes a Difference.**

This afternoon at noon we’re going to have a Cookout for the neighborhood. We’ve closed off Marshall Street, and we’re going to have a block party! Scott Haynie and his team are grilling 1,200 hotdogs out there, and the Ice Cream Truck will also be on hand. There will be face painting, corn hole contests, and Mr. Mike the balloon sculptor will be there, too.

The whole design of this neighborhood cookout is to provide an opportunity for us to come together and get to know our downtown neighbors. Invitations have been sent to the residents in the Nissen Building next door, and to our friends in Crystal Towers and Cook Elementary School. We’ve even gotten some publicity through Smitty’s Notes! We’ve invited all the people who live and work around our church to come and join us for a picnic.

That’s one way we can serve our neighbors. But there are hundreds of other ways you can do it too. Leigh Smith has been working as an advocate for one of the guys who stayed at the overflow shelter in our fellowship hall last winter. She regularly takes him to appointments and

helps him stay organized. Students in our high school ministry baked cookies on Valentine's Day and took them to the residents who live at the Nissen Building next door.

A couple of years ago, Mike Hooten decided to become a Lunch Buddy with our ministry to Cook Elementary School, a school where most of the students are economically challenged and come from difficult life situations. Mike and his lunch buddy enjoyed their Friday lunches during the year, but Mike also had another idea. As the coach for his son, Jack's, flag football team, Mike thought that maybe his lunch buddy would enjoy playing on the team.

So he got in touch with the boy's mother and registered this athletic 5<sup>th</sup> grader who simply hadn't had the opportunity to play sports before. Realizing that a single mom raising 5 sons with no transportation would have a difficult time getting her son to practice, Mike also volunteered to pick the boy up before every practice and every game and bring him home when they were done. Sometimes they would eat dinner together on the way to games, and he also came over to their house a few times, too. The lunch buddy turned out to be one of the stars on the team!

Hawley House is a Chris-centered half-way house for women, and it's the only Christian facility of its type in the area. Aurelia Hill, Karen Schoulda and Anne Tambling of our church spend time each week with the women there studying God's Word. They also pray with the women there, talk to them, and even play games. One of the residents and Karen have become friends. She completed the program, got a job, and an apartment, and two of her children have come back to live with her. Women from First Pres have also helped her find an apartment, obtain furniture, negotiate affordable childcare, and even get a crock-pot!

Bert Lantz, Bill Colvin and Nancy Alexander, have led the way in providing an incarnational witness and expression of beauty in the design of and care for the landscaping of our church campus. Last year our church was given an award by the city for Community Appearance recognizing what a great blessing the gardens and landscaping around our buildings are to our community. This is a picture of them receiving the award on behalf of the church in 2014.

But Bert has also shared his gift of gardening with the students at Cook Elementary School. Everytime we have a First Serve event, he and Nancy lead the way in working on a project to improve the grounds. They've transformed the outdoor beauty of the school. Burt also goes over periodically on his own in order to make sure that the grounds are in good shape, and he's taught the children at the school how to plant and weed so they can do some of the ongoing work themselves.

For First Pres, serving our neighbors isn't just something we do here in Winston-Salem; we also do it around the world. In 2010 an earthquake devastated the island nation of Haiti. Many people in our church wanted to do something about it, so we organized a trip and sent our first team. For the past five years, Rick Wesley, Elms Allen, and David Rainey have been some of the champions who have provided leadership in this effort.

Every year groups go down there from our church to partner with Leon D'Orleans and Haiti Outreach Ministries. In 2012 we raised \$250,000 as part of our 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration to build a high school. That building was dedicated last month, and today 400 high schools students are attending a school that didn't exist before. In this global village in which we now live, you and I can serve our neighbors who live half-way around the world. It's pretty amazing, isn't it?

An all of it is done in the name of Jesus Christ

## **Conclusion.**

Eugene Peterson translates John 1:14 in his version of the Bible called *The Message* like this: “*And the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.*” I like that. If we want to follow the example of the incarnational witness of Christ, it means moving into our neighborhoods too. It starts with serving our neighbors.

Any day can be a beautiful day in the neighborhood when we serve the people around us. Mr. Rogers taught us that. So did Jesus. Many people don’t know that Fred Rogers was actually an ordained Presbyterian minister. He attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and he was ordained by the presbytery. Fred saw his ministry to children through public television as a way to reflect the love of Jesus Christ and help create an “alternative kingdom of neighborliness” in contrast to a society in which we’ve seen a dramatic breakdown of community. People today, and especially children, feel isolated, dislocated, and lonely. He wanted to change that. At First Pres we do too.

I once heard a talk given by Dr. Richard Swenson on the subject of margin. He wrote a book on the topic too. One of the things he said in his message had to do with this whole notion of serving our neighbors for Christ, and he suggested that as followers of Jesus we should be people who share and loan as part of our witness for the Lord.

Richard explained how one day he loaned his chainsaw to his neighbor, and the neighbor didn’t return it right away. Someone asked him about it, and he said, “I’m not worried. I know where it is if I need it.”

Then the chainsaw was broken, and he had to take it in to be repaired. When the guy at the hardware store found out that Richard had loaned his chainsaw to his neighbor, he said, “Oh, you should never loan your chainsaw out to anyone. That’s a cardinal rule.”

Richard thought to himself, “How sad to approach life like that, always hoarding and protecting our stuff.” And then he added, “I couldn’t help but think, ‘Jesus thought so much of my neighbor that He died for him, but I think so little of my neighbor that I won’t even lend him my chainsaw?’”

I was pulled up short by Richard’s insight, and it challenged the way I tend to approach life. It called me to push past the selfishness of my own heart to begin to see my neighbors and my neighborhood as the people and the place in which I’m called to live my witness for Christ. How is God calling you to take Jesus into your neighborhood. It might be someone right on your street or where you work, or a kid in your class. It might even be to a total stranger you meet on the road. And it might be a child who lives half-way around the globe.

Take the sticky note on the cover of the bulletin and write the name of a neighbor you’re going to reach out to in the coming week and seek to be a good neighbor to them. Pray for them, and look for God to show up in your encounter with that person. Look for Jesus to show up this week, and join Him on His mission of love as we Serve Our Neighbors! Amen.