

Mr. Rogers used to ask kids on his television program on PBS, “*Won’t you be my neighbor?*” It was a kind word, a warm word, a hospitable word to refer to someone as “*my neighbor.*” But neighbors are not necessarily what they used to be.

There is a website now entitled [www.rottenneighbor.com](http://www.rottenneighbor.com). And on this website, there are blog posts where people can write in about their neighbors in order to warn others about potential problems . . . noisy neighbors, neighbors with strange habits, neighbors who do odd things. Then there is another website called, [www.findyourneighbor.com](http://www.findyourneighbor.com), where the things you can discover about your neighbors is unbelievable.

By signing up on this website and paying a fee, you can now investigate your neighbor by doing a background check on them. A comprehensive background check contains criminal information such as court records, DUIs, police records, incarcerations, sentencing files, mug shots and more. You can check a neighbor's financial information including bankruptcy and pension information too. You can find out vehicle records and driving records which may contain driver's traffic violations, license records, speeding tickets and suspended licenses. All you have to do is to look up your neighbor's license tag number to find ownership information, DMV records and more . . . not exactly the most hospitable perspective to take, but indicative of the sense of mistrust, suspicion, prejudice and bias that now accompanies our thoughts of being a “neighbor.”

People say, “*We live in a different world today.*” There is no question about it. The issues and the problems surrounding neighbors and neighborhoods today are different and sometimes overwhelming.

But today, our focus again is on FEARLESS LIVING, but today, we are focusing on FEARLESS LIVING WITH YOUR NEIGHBOR. And this topic may be one of the most important aspects of living out our Christian faith.

In today's scripture lessons, we have examples from the Old Testament and the New Testament, both showing daring experiences of neighborliness and hospitality in an unexpected moment. For both Rahab and the Good Samaritan, **the moment of sharing hospitality with others literally defined how they would live their lives.** It was risky business for both of them . . . they both faced danger as a result of deciding to show hospitality. But both of these individuals made the choice to live a life of daring hospitality and sincere generosity rather than sit on the sidelines and do nothing. They are examples of FEARLESS LIVING WITH OUR NEIGHBOR!

We live in an ever-changing world. We live in a world that is becoming increasingly international, while also becoming dangerously parochial. Unfortunately, we are talking more and more about building walls and fences as protection against others, rather than showing creative hospitality and selfless love.

On the economic scene, we are concerned about the accelerated economic growth of developing nations, but we still want to maintain our dominance and capital control of the world markets. On the political scene, we are concerned about illegal immigration, about terrorism and potential attacks from aggressive countries, and we have on-going issues with other nations who position themselves as threats to our lifestyle and to our political influence.

At the same time, we are also surrounded by people in tremendous need of true hospitality . . . people who are strangers to us, who are different from us, who speak and look and act differently from us. Increasingly “being a neighbor” becomes a very risky enterprise. Showing genuine hospitality puts us, our reputations, our time, and our money at risk. How far to you go in FEARLESS LIVING WITH YOUR NEIGHBOR!

On the other hand, the Bible tells us that the rewards of creative hospitality are huge. Because, not only are you sharing Christ's love, but you are forging relationships that will impact people for eternity. So what are we being called to do as Christians?

Let’s look at our community. In many ways, it seems like the world is coming closer and closer together. Cell phones and the internet have provided ways to connect with one another like never before. And yet people, living in the same community, seem to be drifting farther and farther apart. Town homes are built, and neighbors who literally share a wall . . . never meet each other. People don’t even know who their neighbors are! Differences are magnified. Prejudices are amplified. Mistrust and suspicion becomes stronger! Isolation and alienation in the midst of crowds of people seems to be the reality more than ever before.

In this context, Jesus' call to love and serve our neighbors becomes a very daring thing to attempt. FEARLESS LIVING WITH OUR NEIGHBORS dares us to actions that are “out of the box” . . . “not normal behavior” . . . “beyond our comfort zone.” FEARLESS LIVING WITH OUR NEIGHBORS means:

- Daring to put yourself on the line by reaching out to someone in need.
- Daring to think of others . . . in a new and different way . . . as part of your life

So let’s think about questions like these . . .

- Do you know your actual neighbors? Do you know them by name? By family story?
- If you think about the term, “neighborliness” what does that look and feel like?
- If you were in need, what would you hope your neighbors might do?
- How do you welcome new neighbors?
- What is your definition of “a neighbor?”

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus suggests a different definition of neighbor. And that definition is really not based on words, but on actions. According to Jesus, being a neighbor is not a definition, but an action.

While it may involve a value, what is really at stake is an action. While it may involve an attitude, it is really about an action. The question Jesus asked those who heard his parable was this, “*Who was neighbor to the man in need?*” The correct answer was, “*the one who helped him.*” Jesus’ simple response was this, “*Go and do likewise.*”

Several years ago, we moved into our current house which is located on a cul-de-sac. That first year, we had only one person in our neighborhood that provided what I would call “*a warm welcome.*” I’m not exactly sure how I would define “*a warm welcome*” but I don’t think we got one! It was well over a year later that we were finally invited to a neighborhood New Years Open House by some folks across the street – h’ordeurves, soup, sandwiches, desserts – and almost everyone in the neighborhood came. The hospitality was warm and welcoming, but it took well over a year before it happened.

Some neighborhoods are different. Some of them are better and some of them are worse. But let’s just say that neighborhoods today are definitely different! Communities today are definitely different! Churches and schools today are definitely different!

We talk about our new building expansion and the kinds of things that we’d like to do . . . to expand our gathering spaces with more room for the purpose of hospitality and welcoming. But guess what is the most important aspect of hospitality . . . it’s not the space . . . it’s what the people do in the space! What do we do about these new people . . . these new neighbors . . . who visit our congregation?

Do we go out of our way to meet them and greet them. Or do we talk to the same people we talk to every single weekend. What happens before and after worship here in our church, is nothing more than a microcosm of what happens in our community and in our neighborhoods.

My guess is that most people would like to be known as “a good neighbor.” After all, State Farm has had that as their tag line for years as they encourage people to buy their insurance. Most of us want to be the kind of people who live our values, who act on what we believe, who accomplish a lot in our lives.

The truth is that very few of us actually do. Why is this?

The reason is because too often people simply assume that what they believe will automatically result in their long-term accomplishments and living a full and successful life. But belief is not enough. Vision is not enough. Dreams and ideas are not enough. Values and ideals are not enough. What is required is Action! “*Go and do likewise,*” said Jesus.

The truth is that while these things are very important, they are not enough in and of themselves. We actually need to do something! And this is where most people stop. We need to take action on our dreams and our values and our beliefs every day.

Here are some examples of how this works.

- Who loses weight? The one who knows all about the benefits of exercise or the one who walks 3 miles a day?
- Who retires early? The one who dreams of a house on the beach, or the one who invests \$300 a month?
- Who writes books? The one who desires to become a best-selling author, or the one who gets up early and writes for half an hour a day?
- Who has the best marriage? The one who knows how much spending time with their spouse can improve their relationship, or the one who sits down and talks with their spouse every night?

I think you get the point. What it all comes down to is this: WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING. FEARLESS LIVING WITH OUR NEIGHBOR means doing something! We must act upon our vision, our beliefs, and our ideals or we won't see them come to fruition.

There are way too many people who know what is right, but don't ever do anything about it. Imagine what a difference we could make in our own lives and the lives of others if we would simply begin to act upon our beliefs!

When I get to the end of my life, I want to know that I have done all that I can to make this world a better place and to enhance the lives of those around me. I want to know that I gave it my best shot. And I am sure that you do to.

FEARLESS LIVING WITH OUR NEIGHBOR is one of those values. We can talk about being a good neighbor. We can talk about being hospitable. We can express our opinions about what it means to be a neighbor.

One of the best recent examples was our effort on "*Bring a Friend Weekend*" here at St. John's. I can't tell you how many people told me what a good idea it was. But how many of our members actually did it. I think we had about 20-25 visitors that weekend. But think about the number of people who thought it was a good idea, but never acted on their belief!

I remember reading an interview about an author who has written numerous books that have sold in the tens of millions. They asked him how he did it. His answer was that he got up every morning before anyone else in his family and he wrote . . . long hand, with a pencil, for an hour. Then he quit and went about his day. But his short-term actions piled up. 7 hours a week. 30 hours a month. 365 hours a year. After a while, he had lots of books!

FEARLESS LIVING WITH OUR NEIGHBOR means daring do so something, like Rahab, like the good Samaritan, showing hospitality, showing generosity, being a neighbor . . . Jesus said, "*Go and do likewise.*"