

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

MEGAN SANBORN JONES

The beloved children’s show *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* premiered in 1968. It ran for thirty-one seasons, and it remains unique for its commitment to addressing the real concerns and feelings of children in real ways. The show’s host, Fred Rogers, didn’t play a character; he would just be himself, and he let generations of children know that they could just be themselves too. I was one of those children raised believing that Mister Rogers had always wanted to have a neighbor just like them.

A close look at his iconic opening song reveals what Mister Rogers means by *neighbor*. Certainly he is building on the literal definition of the word, which comes from the Old English: *nēah* (“nigh”) *gebūr* (“dweller”).¹ So *nēahgebūr* means a “near dweller,” or someone who lives near someone else. For Mister Rogers, however, there are some additional meanings to the word.

The first verse sets up that “it’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor.”² In this opening, the song moves from describing the weather to describing the

relationship. It is a beautiful day—not just because the sun is shining or because the clouds are puffy but because our involvement with those near us makes the day beautiful. Then, in a charming linguistic reversal, he underscores this point: “It’s a neighborly day in this beauty wood, a neighborly day for a beauty.”³ Being neighborly is not just what makes the day beautiful; it turns us—the neighbors—into beauties.

I am compelled by the vision of the world that Mister Rogers created, one filled with good neighbors who like each other just the way they are and in so doing turn a neighborhood into a beauty wood. However, it seems as if the world has—as if we have—forgotten this message. We are living in a moment in which neighborly behavior seems hard to find. Civil discourse is dissolving into partisan debate, small kindnesses are being lost in expansive intolerance, and rampant individualism is replacing community spirit.

The last two years have been really hard as the entire world has struggled under the mortal threat of a global pandemic. As horrific as this

Megan Sanborn Jones, chair of the BYU Department of Theater and Media Arts, delivered this devotional address on March 8, 2022.

physical threat has been, its pressure on our lives has revealed what I believe to be another devastating plague. Today I would like to talk about that plague—the plague of selfishness—and about how understanding what it means to be a good neighbor might point the way to curing it.

Selfishness

In one of his greatest sermons, Elder Neal A. Maxwell outlined the slippery slope of selfish behavior from self-centeredness to societal decay. He explained:

The early and familiar forms of selfishness are: building up self at the expense of others, claiming or puffing credit, being glad when others go wrong, . . . [and] preferring public vindication to private reconciliation. . . .

By focusing on [them]self, a selfish person finds it easier to bear false witness, to steal, and covet, since nothing should be denied [them]. . . .

Selfishness likewise causes us to be discourteous, disdainful, and self-centered while withholding from others needed goods, praise, and recognition as we selfishly pass them by and notice them not (see Morm. 8:39). . . .

Alas, gross, individual selfishness is finally acculturated. Then societies can eventually become without order, without mercy, without love, perverted, and past feeling (see Moro. 9). Society thereby reflects a grim, cumulative tally which signals a major cultural decline.⁴

There are three particular kinds of selfishness that stand out to me in Elder Maxwell’s description. The first is a selfishness of intellect, in which the selfish person claims credit, bears false witness, and is disdainful of the ideas and opinions of others. The second is a selfishness of individualism, in which the selfish person builds himself up at the expense of others because what they want is more important than the needs of those around them. The third is a selfishness of income, in which the selfish person withholds from others needed goods and services.

This selfishness—of intellect, of individualism, and of income—is, as President Gordon B. Hinckley declared, “the antithesis of love. It is a cankering expression of greed. It destroys self-discipline. It

obliterates loyalty. It tears up sacred covenants. It afflicts both men and women.”⁵

Friends, we are so afflicted, and as a result, we are beginning to see that “grim, cumulative tally” in the world around us. Fortunately, however, I do not believe we have gotten to the bottom of the slide. Jesus Christ Himself has given clear direction on how to turn selfishness into selflessness. His lesson comes to us, as so many of His lessons did, in a parable.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

In the tenth chapter of Luke, Jesus was in discussion with disciples when “a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him” with the question “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”⁶

Jesus replied by asking the lawyer to answer his own question from his knowledge of the law.

The lawyer replied easily, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . and thy neighbour as thyself.”⁷

After Jesus explained that the lawyer already knew the answer, the lawyer followed up with the tricky question “And who is my neighbour?”⁸

Famously, Christ’s response was the parable of the good Samaritan.⁹

Once a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and on the road he was set upon by thieves who beat him, stole his clothes, and left him for dead. By chance, a priest was going the same way, but when the priest saw the broken and bloody man, he passed by on the other side of the road. Soon after, a Levite came by. He stopped and looked at the man, then he also passed by.

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where the wounded man was, and when he saw him, he had compassion on him. The Samaritan went to him and bound his wounds after cleaning them with oil and wine. He set the man on his own beast, took him to an inn, and continued to care for him through the night. The next day, before he left, the Samaritan left money with the host, asked the host to look after the man, and promised to reimburse any expenditures that were necessary to take care of the man.

Selfishness of Intellect

Now I am not a biblical scholar, but I am a passionate reader. Here are some things I read in

this parable. First, Jesus was telling this story to a specific person—a lawyer, or a Jewish expert in the law of Moses.

As a theater maker, I am keenly aware that it is the primary responsibility of storytellers to know who the audience is so that they can create a bridge between the audience's experiences and the ones they are building onstage. Jesus Christ was a master storyteller, so I have to assume that He was creating a world familiar to the lawyer, who was His intended audience.

This means that from the perspective of the Jew asking the question, the hero of the story was someone his people disdained. In framing this story about a Samaritan, Jesus was creating an opportunity for the lawyer to identify mercy in a person who looked, acted, and worshiped differently from him. Jesus was inviting the lawyer to set aside his own high opinion of his learning and position and to see the good in another.

Jesus Christ's whole life was an invitation to put aside one's own perspective and see the world through the eyes of others. Throughout His ministry, Jesus spent time with tax collectors, whores, lepers, and the poor, as well as with people of different races, different religions, and different nations. In all of His relationships, He welcomed those whose opinions and lifestyles were different from His own.

In my own life, I have at times been like the lawyer who questioned Jesus—confident that I am the star of the show and selfish in that security. I am grateful for some life experiences that have shaken me out of this self-centered complacency. One such experience occurred on a trip my husband, Glen, and I took to visit dear friends in Morocco, which is the most foreign place I have ever been. I was nervous to navigate a country that the news reports at home suggested was dangerous to women, Christians, and Americans. I am all three.

After a weekend with our friends, my husband and I set out in a rental car to road trip across most of Morocco. We had a paper map (that was nearly useless) and a few reservations along the way, including one night in which we rode camels out to camp in the Sahara Desert. The rest of the trip followed a pattern: We would drive

into a small town, park at the center, and wander around. We would find places to eat, shop, and stay by talking with local Moroccans in French, which was a second language for both them and me. On our way out of town, we would ask people on the street to give us directions back to the main road, and we would head off again on our journey.

I found myself sometimes hesitant in these encounters. My self-focused worldview had me looking for differences to judge. For example, the toilets in these small towns were not at all what my husband and I were used to. Rather than providing a seat, toilet paper, and a flushing mechanism, the toilets were frequently spotlessly clean pits with markers on which to place your feet and a bucket with dripping water for cleaning.

In one town, after a delicious meal, I asked to be shown to the toilet room before we headed back out on the road. The owner of the restaurant told me to wait, and then he hurried away. He was gone long enough for us to become concerned about the safety of the facilities and our own safety. I became impatient and discourteous in my heart.

But after some time, the restaurant owner returned bearing a small roll of toilet paper. This man had selflessly seen me not as a foreigner whose ideas and opinions, frankly, may have been abhorrent to him. Instead, he saw me as his neighbor. He had taken some money out of his till and had used it to go next door to the souk and buy me a roll of toilet paper so that I would be more comfortable. I was immediately ashamed, and I repented of my selfish ideas. The rest of the trip was infinitely better for the lesson I had learned.

It is perhaps easy in extraordinary moments of cultural exchange to identify both the "cankering expression[s] of greed" and the kindness of strangers. It may be more difficult to see these closer to home. Even in our own neighborhoods, we may be guilty of the selfishness of intellect when we hold on so tightly to our own "right" ideas that we stop listening to, learning from, and loving those with whom we disagree. We must work even more diligently in the familiar to set aside our own egos and to put away our overweening confidence in our own opinions.

Elder W. Craig Zwick has encouraged us to develop this kind of empathetic selflessness. He observed:

There exists today a great need for men and women to cultivate respect for each other across wide distances of belief and behavior and across deep canyons of conflicting agendas. It is impossible to know all that informs our minds and hearts or even to fully understand the context for the trials and choices we each face. . . .

The willingness to see through each other's eyes will transform "corrupt communication" into "minister[ing] grace."¹⁰

Selfishness of Individualism

To return to the parable of the good Samaritan, once Jesus established the setting—a deeply wounded and naked man on the side of a dangerous road—He explained that two different religious people passed by the man. We can probably all understand the impulse to see the situation as uncomfortable (“He’s not wearing any clothes”), time consuming (“I have somewhere important to be”), or possibly dangerous (“I don’t know what happened here, but I know I don’t want it to happen to me”). And heeding this impulse, we hurry past. However, passing by someone who needs our help is rooted in a selfishness of individualism, in which our own comforts, wants, or even needs are put ahead of the comforts, wants, and needs of others.

In a general Young Women meeting, Sister Sharon G. Larsen reframed the story of the good Samaritan to a story about an emotionally wounded girl in high school who was passed by other girls who didn’t want to bother themselves with her. Sister Larsen reflected:

Each one who passed the girl in need had one question in her mind: If I stop, what will happen to me? The girl who did stop to help also had one question: If I don’t stop, what will happen to her?¹¹

To be a good neighbor is to wonder how your words and actions will impact others rather than to wonder how you will be impacted. This is not to say that we should abandon personal safety or

exhaust ourselves in unhealthy ways. Instead, we should build the faith to understand that when we are unselfish, our needs will also be taken care of.

This principle is one of the most difficult of Jesus’s teachings, but it is also one of the most foundational. It makes no real logical sense that the best way to care for yourself is to stop caring so much about yourself. But again and again Jesus taught:

Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister;

And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.¹²

I hope you can look at your life and see the many times that you have been blessed when someone put your needs ahead of their own. I can trace those patterns of service in my own life, from the tireless goodness of the parents who raised me to my remarkable daughter, Eden, who never wearies in doing good for our small family, for her friends at school and church, and for every member of our neighborhood. I have been served by faithful ministering sisters, loving colleagues, and dear friends.

At times the selflessness of service has been extravagant: my father retired early at the height of his career in the Marine Corps so that my sister and I could attend high school in one place. At other times I have been cared for with small kindnesses whose cumulative effect has made my life rich and blessed.

One such small kindness occurred on my mission. I served those who were French speaking in the Canada Montreal Mission, where it was cold—so, so cold. In the winter we would bundle up with long johns and leggings under our skirts, with snow boots and sweaters, with hats, and with scarves under huge down coats that covered almost everything. The only things to see were our eyes and our name tags.

The entrances of most homes in Quebec feature a big plastic pan to catch the snow melting from boots left at the front door. As missionaries, we would come in from the cold, take our boots off and leave them in the pan, unwrap everything else, and have a visit. We would reverse the

process to leave. Sister Barney and I spent most of one winter together and became very adept at moving in and out of our snow gear.

That winter we were also privileged to share the gospel with a wonderful woman, Sister Jeannine James. Sister James was elegant and gracious. Her home was well appointed and her cooking was divine. As we taught her, she welcomed the gospel with an open heart and an open mind. We were comfortable in her home, where we felt the Spirit and felt loved.

One afternoon, on a particularly cold and difficult day, we ended up at Sister James's house for a quick stop. We read scriptures and prayed together, and then when it was time to go, I was just overwhelmed. I didn't want to leave her warm, lovely home. I thought I was hiding my stress well, but apparently I wasn't hiding it well enough because Sister James noticed and came down her stairs to where Sister Barney and I were putting all our snow clothes back on.

When I paused before reaching down to shove my feet back into my boots, she knelt down in the dirty, melting snow and started to put my boots on for me. I was first embarrassed and then emotional, because as she knelt before me, the only thing I could see was the image of Jesus kneeling to wash His disciple's feet—an equally dirty and uncomfortable task, I am sure. When she was done, she gave us both hugs and sent us back out renewed to continue our work for the Lord. But that day, Sister James's simple, unselfish act was truly the Lord's work.

If you can review your life and see the ways you have been blessed by others, I also hope you can see the ways you have been sustained, supported, and renewed as you have set aside your own selfishness and ministered to others. In a fireside he gave here at BYU forty-five years ago, President Hinckley stated:

Generally speaking, the most miserable people I know are those obsessed with themselves; the happiest people I know are those who lose themselves in the service of others. . . .

If the pressures of school are too heavy, . . . I can suggest a cure for your problems. Lay your books aside for a few hours, leave your room, and go visit someone

who is old and lonely. . . . Or visit those who are sick and discouraged; there are hundreds of that kind here, including not a few on this campus, who need the kind of encouragement you could give.¹³

I have a testimony of this principle. We must be willing to accept small or even large discomforts in our own lives in our efforts to be better ministers to those around us. We will become our best as we think of ourselves the least.

Selfishness of Income

One of the key features of the parable of the good Samaritan is the material support the Samaritan gave to the man on the road. The Samaritan used his own oil and wine to clean the man's wounds. He took time out of whatever business he was about to take the man to an inn and to stay the night tending to him. He then paid for the room and promised more money to the host for the man's care. The Samaritan was a good neighbor because he gave freely of his wealth to help someone who needed it. His example stands as a stark counterpoint to the selfishness of income.

I am grateful to belong to a church that provides the opportunity for me to share not just my time and my talents but also my resources with those around me. After all, none of it is mine anyway. As King Benjamin preached:

I say unto you that if ye should serve him who has created you from the beginning, and is preserving you from day to day, by lending you breath, that ye may live and move and do according to your own will, and even supporting you from one moment to another—I say, if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants.¹⁴

Every penny in our banks, every thing we own, every award we win, every grant we receive, every job we land, every scholarship we are given, or every raise we earn is a blessing from the Lord. He is the one who preserves us day to day and supports us from one moment to another. And in His generous goodness, He allows us to keep 90 percent of it all. Then He sends additional blessings to us for keeping the commandment to pay a tithe.

The Lord does ask that we also dedicate some extra portion of our income to support those who have less. Through fast offerings, missionary support, and humanitarian aid donations, we can help build the kingdom of God in real, material ways.

Brothers and sisters, we need to be better about giving our resources to help those in need. A key feature of every Zion community—from Enoch’s Zion in the book of Moses to the citizens in 4 Nephi to the efforts of the early Saints in the United Order—is that they had no poor among them. In our day, we have been called to repentance for this selfishness. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland declared:

*Down through history, poverty has been one of humankind’s greatest and most widespread challenges. Its obvious toll is usually physical, but the spiritual and emotional damage it can bring may be even more debilitating. In any case, the great Redeemer has issued no more persistent call than for us to join Him in lifting this burden from the people.*¹⁵

Elder Holland gave further guidance about how we can better obey the commandment to care for the poor and needy. First, he advised that we stop “withholding our means because we see the poor as having brought their misery upon themselves.”¹⁶ Second, we can “pray for those in need.”¹⁷ Finally, we can conscientiously look for and pray to be guided toward compassionate acts of giving.¹⁸

When my son, Cohen, was four years old, more than anything in the world he wanted to be a construction worker. He would frequently start his day by strapping on all his tools, and then he would work throughout the day “fixing” things around the house. Now a sophomore in high school, Cohen is old enough to hold an actual job instead of just a pretend one, to have a bank account, and to manage some of his own funds.

His father and I were thrilled last summer when Cohen decided to find a job. He did some research, dressed professionally, and went around to businesses near our home to pick up applications and talk with managers. We were even more thrilled when he secured a position at a

food establishment within walking distance of our home. Nearly every day last summer, Cohen would walk from our house to work and then walk back past a lot of other businesses to come home. And nearly every day we would ask him how much money he had made in tips. Cohen’s response was always the same: he would tell us that he didn’t have any tips that day.

Glen and I wanted to make sure Cohen understood that if he worked a full shift, he had earned his portion of the tip jar. We talked to him about the payment for his labor, and we encouraged him to be more responsible—and even aggressive—in getting the money we felt he was owed.

After one of these discussions, Cohen finally, with exasperation, clarified. It wasn’t that he didn’t get any tips, it was that he didn’t have any tips by the time he came home.

The logical follow-up question we had of course was, “What are you doing with all your tip money?”

As his path takes Cohen past a number of fast-food restaurants and stores, we first assumed that he was stopping in and spending his money on the way home. However, with some additional prompting, Cohen explained that his path also took him past various people who would set up at the entrances to these stores to ask for money. Instead of passing by on the other side, Cohen would stop to talk with them and offer his tip money to whoever was in need that day.

Now I don’t know how much money my son was making in tips, but even if it were only a few dollars a day, across a summer that adds up to a notable sum. But when asked why he wasn’t keeping the money for himself, Cohen replied, “Objectively, it’s just the right thing to do. I have some money; they need some money. Why wouldn’t I share what I have?”

My son’s quiet example of selfless donation is one small way to answer King Benjamin’s charge:

*I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants.*¹⁹

Building the Kingdom of God

As we give our selfishness to the Lord, He will turn our weakness into a strength of selfless service. When we stop seeing every one of God's children for their differences, the ways in which we disagree with them, or how they make us feel uncomfortable, we build a neighborhood of Saints. This is the message of the good Samaritan—we are neighbors when we set aside our cherished prejudices, when we think of others before ourselves, and when we give of our wealth to those in need.

“And who is my neighbour?” Look at the person next to you, then the person next to them. Neighbors start as near dwellers. But in a covenant community, we have promised God that we will “bear one another’s burdens, . . . mourn with those that mourn . . . , and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.”²⁰ There is no geographical restriction on this expansive, eternal commitment. President Russell M. Nelson has clarified that being a good neighbor is a global endeavor. He said, “Our highest priorities in life are to love God and to love our neighbors. That broadly includes neighbors in our own family, our community, our nation, and our world.”²¹

Salvation is not a solo effort. Our happiness in this life and the promised blessings of the life to come are dependent on the interdependence we develop with God and with our neighbors. When we are selfish, we are alone. And we were not meant to be alone.

To return to Mister Rogers’s song, imagine our heavenly parents giving us its invitation to heal ourselves of the sickness of selfishness. Our heavenly parents are pleading for us to do God’s work in the world: “Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor?”²² Through the mechanism of the second great commandment, we are given this very invitation, which I now

extend once again to you: “Won’t you please, won’t you please? Please won’t you be my neighbor?”²³
In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Dictionary.com, s.v. “neighbour.” See also *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), s.v. “neighbour,” 1911 (83).

2. Fred M. Rogers, words and music, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor? (It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood),” Hal Leonard Music Publishing, 1967.

3. Rogers, “Won’t You Be?”

4. Neal A. Maxwell, “‘Repent of [Our] Selfishness’ (D&C 56:8),” *Ensign*, May 1999.

5. Gordon B. Hinckley, “What God Hath Joined Together,” *Ensign*, May 1991.

6. Luke 10:25.

7. Luke 10:27.

8. Luke 10:29.

9. See Luke 10:30–37.

10. W. Craig Zwick, “What Are You Thinking?” *Ensign*, May 2014; quoting Ephesians 4:29.

11. Sharon G. Larsen, “Standing with God,” *Ensign*, May 2000.

12. Matthew 20:26–27.

13. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Forget Yourself,” BYU fireside address, 6 March 1977.

14. Mosiah 2:21.

15. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Are We Not All Beggars?” *Ensign*, November 2014.

16. Holland, “Are We Not?”

17. Holland, “Are We Not?”

18. See Holland, “Are We Not?”

19. Mosiah 4:26.

20. Mosiah 18:8–9.

21. Russell M. Nelson, “Teach Us Tolerance and Love,” *Ensign*, May 1994.

22. Rogers, “Won’t You Be?”

23. Rogers, “Won’t You Be?”