

***Becoming Neighbors***

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Kristen Brown

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Music with Fred Rogers singing]

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood  
A beautiful day for a neighbor  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine?

It's a neighborly day in this beautywood  
A neighborly day for a beauty  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine?

I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you  
I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you

So let's make the most of this beautiful day  
Since we're together, we might as well say  
Would you be mine?  
Could you be mine?  
Won't you be my neighbor?

Won't you please  
Won't you please  
Please won't you be my neighbor?

[Voice of Kristen Brown]

I mean, we just had to start out with that, didn't we? To set up to understand the parable of the Good Samaritan, we need a little Fred Rogers in our morning. As many of you know, I have deep affection for Mr. Rogers. There is a documentary that came out last summer and there's an upcoming film, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" that's coming out this fall and Tom

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Hanks will be playing Mr. Rogers. And I can't wait. I will be there to see it in the theater, for sure. I think it is interesting that Mr. Rogers is making a comeback right now. I remember watching the show when I was a kid, and it's very basic if you think about what Mr. Rogers is doing. On TV today, it would seem like, how is anyone watching the show? But 50 years later there is still quite a buzz about Mr. Rogers. And I think it has a lot to do with who we are today and who Mr. Rogers has been. So a couple of fun facts about "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." The show ran from the middle of the Vietnam War until two weeks before the September 11 terrorist attacks. What an interesting time for Mr. Rogers to have a neighborhood. The final episode aired on August 31, 2001. He was on the air when Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy were assassinated. He talked to children and their parents about hatred and bigotry and police violence during the civil rights era. In 1968, officer Clemons joined the cast and became the first African American to have a standing role on a children's television program. He famously said things like, "There are three ways to be successful. The first is to be kind, the second is to be kind, and the third is to be kind," and, "I like you just the way you are." Those are some radical ideas, right? He was in his own way answering the question: who is my neighbor? Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was a model of a different kind of world—one in which people are valued and know how to be neighbors.

It's no coincidence that Mr. Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, picked the neighborhood to set his show. Because neighbor is a very biblical word, we heard it today. We have to come to some kind of understanding of what it means to have a neighbor, to be a neighbor, and who our neighbors are. In the scripture passage today the lawyer said to Jesus, The greatest command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. It's actually not two separate commands even though there's an "and" in there. There really is one thing that we do. The apostle John says in 1 John 4:20, "Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen." It's not if you don't love God, you can't love other people. It's if you cannot love your neighbor, you cannot love God. All of that is the backdrop for our story today. The parable that was read this morning, which was often referred to as the Parable of the Good Samaritan may be the best known parable in scripture. I would guess that is probably the best known parable. I think people that don't know it's in the Bible know this story, right? We have Good Samaritan laws that protect people who stop to help. It's part of our cultural vocabulary, this idea of a Good Samaritan. I've been in church a long time and have heard my fair share of renderings of this parable in sermons, and I've generally heard the parable preached one of two ways. Either the parable is a parable about charity, in which we are the Samaritan on life's road and there are needy people and we are called to help them, to offer charity. Now it's a fine way to read the

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parable and it's true of what our life with God should be like. And the very last line of the parable says, "Go and do likewise," right? So there is this ethical call in the parable.

And I hear it preached the other way. So, in that version we are the Samaritan. But I hear it preached this other way as a parable about us getting saved, about salvation. And in the context, that makes sense because Jesus was asked the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" which is a way of talking about salvation, and Jesus tells the story as an answer to that question. And usually when I hear it preached this way, we are the guy in the ditch, right? We can do nothing and Jesus is the Samaritan, and Jesus saves us from death in a ditch. And that's true. I'm not sure if that's exactly what's happening in the story, but that's a true story and I was going to preach one of those today and then I decided, I actually think there might be something else going on. There's another element that we could consider when reading the story. What if we are the Samaritan in the story. And what if Jesus is in the ditch on the side of the road? What if Jesus is dying in the ditch. Does that change how we read the story? More than a parable about charity or salvation, I think this parable is about love, which is how it was set up. The command to love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself. It's very clearly about love and I think it's asking, do we love Jesus? What does that look like in our lives if we love Jesus? Well to make my case that Jesus is in the ditch, I'm actually going to have a look at another parable. Today it's a two-for-one parable morning at Artisan. I only have like one week left after this so I've got to get all my parables here [laughter]. So we're going to look at a parable in Matthew chapter 25 that will be on the screen but it's on page 807 in the red Bibles in front of you if you want to follow along.

Now 25 is just before Jesus is betrayed and handed over to be crucified in Matthew's telling of the life of Jesus. And in chapter 25 we hear really the last of Jesus' teachings to his disciples. Now before I tell you this story, I should say that some people read this passage as a literal story of a day that will happen in the future about judgment. But I'm actually very convinced that this is a parable that is not literal, it's figurative. And a parable is set up for us to look at our own lives today. It's a mirror for our lives, so it's a story that gets thrown alongside our lives that we look into and we say, where am I in the story? So why do I think it's a parable when other people don't think it's a parable? Well, it's in a series of other parables in Matthew and Matthew tends to clump his parables together. So if you look at Chapter 25 you'll see several other parables there. And there's a lot of markers that make this a parable. It's speaking about the king, and the king uses a typical merit of storyline. It's using some everyday practices like separating sheep from goats, which would have been something that people would have understood. It's going to use an actual literal place that I'll talk about in a minute, a place of fire. So it's a really fun parable, there's some good stuff in there that may have scared you as a child

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when you read some of the Bible. So we'll talk about some of that, but I want to say I think this parable helps us read the other.

So in this passage in Matthew 25 Jesus tells a story about the Kingdom of God. We might say using the language that we've been using, "The kingdom of God is like \_\_\_\_..." The kingdom of God is like a king who separates those who are in the kingdom from those who are outside the kingdom as a shepherd would separate sheep from goats. The king says to the sheep in the story, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Notice the same language being used in this parable as was being used in our parable. The lawyer says in Luke, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and in Matthew the king says, "Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you." This idea of inheritance was a way of talking about being God's people, right? Because we think of an inheritance as something passed down in a family. So it's a way of saying, how are you doing being in the family of God? How do we know who's in this family? The king says, Come and take your inheritance because "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Jesus goes on to tell them the king will also have words for the others, those who do not inherit the kingdom he says that he will say to those on his left, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;" [Kristen] Which we will get back to. "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Thus ends the parable in Matthew, and it's a tough parable about being saved and not being saved. But again, it is a parable and it's for us to look at and to say, who are we in this parable? Look into it is asking, who are you? And then the whole thing about eternal fire, which in the New Testament you'll see the language of fire used quite a bit. And in sort of the Christian

world you might see fire used quite a bit for things that maybe I wouldn't use fire for. And I'm pretty convinced that this is an actual place. So when you see it fire used as a form of judgment in scripture or sort of in that vein, it's actually usually talking about a place. There's a place called the Valley of Hinnom and actually in the Greek text you'll see Gehenna, some of these places. And it's a little place outside the city of Jerusalem. So, the city of Jerusalem is an image for sort of being in God's place and outside the city is sort of understood as being outside of God's place. And it was a trash dump; Gehenna. It was like the city's trash dump and it was always burning. So when Jesus is saying it, they're hearing the actual place; they're picturing this actual place. And there was a history of people offering human sacrifices to other gods in the Valley of Hinnom, or there was at least some sort of imagination that that's what that place was. So the fire that's always burning in Gehenna is for other gods. It's a place of worshipping idols. That's the image I think we can have of what's happening in this passage. It's an image of a place of idol worship, to speak of eternal fire Jesus was drawing attention to this place (the literal place) and they all would have known. And in a way, Jesus is saying, you know, if you want to sacrifice each other to the gods you can do that. But if you live in Gehenna you will die in Gehenna. If you want to leave the poor and sick and hungry and naked there, you can do that. But that's what's happening. In a way this story is about sacrificing other people. When the idols in our lives allow us to leave the poor and sick and lonely and hungry and naked to fend for themselves, when we do not stand with them in solidarity, when we do not offer aid, even maybe when we don't have much, so we don't feel like we have much to offer — we let people fend for themselves. In those cases, we sacrifice them to our own achievement and success.

So who will you be? Matthew 25 after us, who will you be? So back to our parable for this morning of the Samaritan and Jesus in the ditch. Because in a way, in Matthew 25 it's always Jesus in the ditch. And who you are in the parable of the Samaritan can tell you a lot of who you are and the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. So look at our story. This parable is sort of a story within a story, and we heard the whole thing read this morning. You see in the first part of the text a religious lawyer comes and asks Jesus a question. And now, this is somebody whose job it is to make sure that everybody understands the law of God. And this lawyer comes and asks Jesus, What must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus responds to him with a question, he doesn't actually answer his question: What does it say in the law? And the lawyer responds, "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus says, you spoke well. You got it right. So the cadence of the story is: lawyer asked the question, Jesus asks a question, lawyer answers Jesus' question, Jesus responds to lawyer's answer. Now this is just a side note, but if you notice in the gospels Jesus actually asks a lot of questions and he doesn't answer nearly as many. The disciples every once in awhile will get a straight answer

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from Jesus, but most of the time he's going to tell them a story. And I do think there's something interesting about that. Jesus doesn't seem to need to have the final word on a lot of things (just an interesting side note). So back to our story. The lawyer follows up with a second question: Who is my neighbor? And then Jesus in order to ask his next question, tells the story of this Samaritan. So we're putting the Samaritan in the context of all that's happening. The ultimate aim of the parable is to serve as a follow up question: Who became the neighbor to the man in the ditch?

And there is nothing coincidental about who Jesus puts in the story, or that he's speaking to a religious lawyer. This is a story about how we live our religion and in a lot of ways, how we know if we are living rightly. And Jesus says there was a man who fell into the hands of robbers, and they beat him and they left him for dead on the side of the road. And a priest and a Levite — both religious leaders, both people who know all the rules and laws of God, who are sure they know what the Bible says about everything — they walk by a man in the ditch. In a way, this priest and Levite, the people who are so sure they know God's laws, sacrifice the man on the side of the road in order to keep their own reputations intact. See, there are some laws that say what you can and can't do when it comes to dead bodies. You're not supposed to touch the bodies, you're not supposed to touch bodily fluids in these kinds of things. And so when you do that you become unclean and for a day or week or two weeks or whatever the law says, you have to live outside the community. They would have been outcasts if they had helped him and they didn't want to risk their own reputation, so they left him. They sacrificed him to the god of their own reputation. I'm telling you, that's the Valley of Hinnom, people. That is the fire of the Gehenna sacrificing others for our reputation.

It's sometimes easy to say that we would have helped the guy on the side of the road, right? But how many times do we say I'm not going to get involved in that? What would people say about me, what would people think about me? And in the story, it is the people who are the most sure of their religious rightness that sacrificed this guy to their own reputation. Just something to think about this morning. But the Samaritan in the story stops to help. The funny thing about Samaritans is that they were considered to have bad theology. That was generally how they were thought of. Some people will tell you Samaritans and Jews didn't get along because it was racial tension, and that's not exactly the story of it. They were both the people of God, in a sense, there was not an ethnic difference. But the Samaritans lived in some area near this mountain, Mount Gerizim, and the Jews understood from their Bible that they were to worship in Jerusalem. And the Samaritans understood from their Bible that they were supposed to worship on Mount Gerizim. You actually see this play out in John chapter 4 with Jesus and the Samaritan woman. "Where are we supposed to worship? That was the difference, and it was actually in the Samaritan Bible that you worship on Mount Gerizim. So they're reading the

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Bible differently. They hated each other because they worshiped differently. We don't know anything about that, right? [laughter] We don't, right? We're not that petty. It's one of the ironies of the story, really. It's a Jewish religious lawyer who is asking the question, someone whose job it is to know good theology, and he has to admit it's the Samaritan who is actually keeping the law, who is the neighbor to the man. It's almost like he can't even bring himself to say it. Jesus asks him at the end, "So who was the neighbor to the man who fell among the thieves?" and the lawyer says, "Well, it was the one who showed him compassion," right? He didn't say it was the Samaritan. It wasn't the priest or the Levite who knew their Bible verses and went to church every Sunday. They left Jesus in the ditch. In a way, Jesus told this lawyer, you can have all the degrees from all the seminaries in all the world, but if you don't have a genuine love for people, it doesn't matter. You'll just know a lot of things about a lot of things. I'll tell you as a person who has multiple degrees from seminary and teaches at a seminary, who makes my living teaching theology, that it's a hard truth. It's much easier to get an A on a paper than it is to assess your life by the standard of love. I'll say I'm not sure social media is helping us out with this either right now, and there are a lot of people on there who know a lot of things about a lot of things. And I'm in social media, I'm not saying don't be a part of it. I'm a joiner but I do wonder, what does genuine love look like there, right? If that's our road, if that's the road that we're walking every day. I'm not sure it's always clear and I don't know, I feel like if that's going to be our road it's a question we need to have to wrestle with a little bit. What would it look like for us to live genuine love in that space, because there's a lot of people I think are getting left in ditches on social media. So anyway, that's another just a thought out there.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, a passage that may be better known even than the parable of the Samaritan — this passage that we hear at weddings Paul says, "If I speak in human or angelic tongues but I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can remove mountains but I do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body as a martyr but I do not have love, I gain nothing." Paul is saying, I can have the "best theology" in the world and if I don't have genuine love for others, it's bad theology. Love makes a theologian. That's going to be my claim. I know they tell you that it's like studying and reading books, and I do think you should study and read books. I think you should go to seminary — why not? [laughter] You should do that, and I do actually think that seminaries can help us to love people. They don't always, but I do think that they can. Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. Love makes you a theologian. Jesus says the best theologian was the Samaritan who got the most important thing right. He loved this person who was right in front of him and needed loving. Who is a neighbor? Well, this person that's right here and needs to be loved. Jesus says, go and do likewise.

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So what will likewise look like for us this week? Well, the easiest thing for me to say would be to do some charity something this week, which is a good thing to do. And we actually have some neighbors who could use some help this week. This is our RAIHN week if you don't know about that; the Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network where we partner with some other churches and we open up a church building and provide dinner for people that are sort of locked out of their house for the week, who are in a housing crisis, and it's a safe space for them to be. So if you would like to participate in that this week and to love some neighbors, I know are still some spots to do that. And we also have some neighbors who are going back to school in just a few weeks, some people in this room are going back to school in just a few weeks. And nobody loves going back to school unless you have fresh school supplies. We have some neighbors who are in need of some school supplies this week and you can help out with that. If you'd like to know, there are some tags in the hallway for that. So that's two ways that you could love a neighbor this week and both of those are really about loving our neighbors. But what's funny about the parable of the Samaritan is that you can't get very specific on the front end. The Samaritan didn't know who his neighbor would be when he set out on the road. He came across a man in need and he responded. Neighboring can actually be quite spontaneous. He *became* a neighbor to the man, that's what it says the Bible: Who became a neighbor to this man? His eyes were opened and he saw the man. It says his eyes were opened and his heart was prepared to love the people that he met.

Who will you meet this week who might be in need of some love? I have no idea. It might be someone in a ditch on the side of a road. I hope that if you run into that person that you will love them as a neighbor. But I would say it's much more likely that it will be your partner, that will be your kid, your roommate, your colleagues at work, the person who really annoys you on social media, the waiter after church at lunch. I don't know, there's a lot of people that we will run into this week. Will our eyes be open? Will our hearts be prepared to love those people? What will it look like for us to love these people? How will you cultivate eyes to see the people in need of a heart that is prepared to love everyone you meet? Because in meeting them you are meeting Jesus. What does it look like to love the Lord our God? It looks a lot like loving our neighbors. You know, it used to be a thing when I was a child in the 80s and 90s and we'd have these bracelets, right? WWJD, "What would Jesus do." Who had one? [hands are raised] That's right. [laughter] That was the question we were all supposed to ask ourselves in junior high. And you know, I am not sure that's the question. I think the question is, what would I do if this was Jesus? Every person I run into — what would I do if this was Jesus, the person that's right in front of me? How would I respond? We love Jesus through the people around us.

So I will close this morning having given you no answers to what it means to love your neighbor, letting you decide this week as you go out into the world to see people and meet people and



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have an open heart for people. I will close with the rest of Paul's words to the Corinthians because I think they can help us pay attention to how we are living in love this week. This is what Paul said of love: Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." Love never fails. Amen.

We are going to gather at a table that was convened in love. Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, that you lay down your life for your friends." And at this table we remember the love of God in Jesus Christ when he laid down his life for his friends and his enemies. On the night that Jesus was handed over to suffering and death, he took bread. And he broke it and he gave it to the disciples and he said, Take, eat, all of you. Do this in remembrance of me." And after supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them and he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Every time you drink the cup, do it in remembrance of me." And so today as we do every week, we remember Jesus at this table. And if you are in the room today, you are invited to this table. This is Jesus' table and he invites you. So I want to invite you to come this morning and to remember the love of God for you at this table. If you're new with us this morning, how we do it here at Artisan, you can come down the center aisle, take a piece of bread and dip it in one of the cups. We have wine and grape juice and we have gluten free options, so there is room for everyone at this table. We also have a member of our prayer ministry who will be at the back. If you are in need of prayer for anything this morning we would love to pray with you and for you. So as you are arriving, I invite you to come and to remember Christ at Christ's table.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](http://ArtisanChurch.com)