

*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood... Won't you be my neighbor....* Did you see the documentary on Fred Roger's life and his show, Mr. Roger's Neighborhood this summer? Do you remember the show? Margy Whitmer, a producer said, "A director once said if you take all the elements of good television and do the exact opposite, you have Mister Roger's Neighborhood. Low production values, simple set, unlikely star. Yet, it worked. Because [Mr. Rogers] was saying something really important."<sup>1</sup>

That message permeated through all the episodes, and in his own words, "Love is the root of everything. All learning, all parenting, all relationships. Love or lack of it."<sup>2</sup>

That was Jesus' message as well and we see it in our scripture today, particularly in verse 8 that says to "Love your neighbor as yourself." James is writing to a church whose members were not very loving to their neighbors. They were playing favorites within their congregation. The wealthy people were being treated better than the poor. They were making class distinctions among themselves in the faith community. In this passage, James points out that in God's eyes, no one is better or worse than another person. We are equal, and God loves us equally.

James echoes Jesus's own words that was originally taken from Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Even though James did not explicitly quote the first part, he shows that the people were bearing a grudge against the poor, simply by treating them differently based on their appearance or life circumstance.

James reminds the people that Jesus did not show partiality or favoritism. He

invited the poor and the outcast to sit with him at his table, not to sit separately. James reminded them that Jesus said to Love Thy Neighbor period, no qualifiers, no distinctions.

Love Thy Neighbor means to Love All Neighbors. Love the poor neighbors just as you love the wealthy neighbors. We can extend this to our current culture, as the distinctions are not only class distinctions.



And, so many more that we could added. But, scripture doesn't have these qualifiers. Jesus didn't make these distinctions. He said love thy neighbor period, and love your neighbor as yourself.

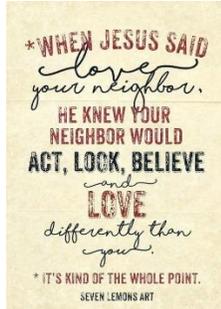
To love your neighbor as yourself means to put yourself in the other's shoes. Regard the person as high as you regard yourself. See the person as you see yourself. Instead of judging someone because they identify as trans, stop and think: You know, I don't know that person's story. Even if you don't understand or don't agree with that person's perspective, love them on a human level. Remind yourself that they are a beloved child of God, which is a foundational belief of our faith.

Before judging all the immigrants as a nuisance, stop and think: You know, I don't know why that person is seeking refuge here. I don't know what drove them to leave everything to seek safety. Were they persecuted for being a Christian? Were their lives threatened by gang leaders? I don't know their story, but they are beloved sons and daughters of God.

<sup>1</sup> *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, documentary, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, documentary, 2018.

Before we make judgments about the homeless, stop and think: What happened to them that caused them to lose their housing? What is going on within them that prevents them from being in a safe environment? Is it mental illness? Addiction? What's their story? They too are beloved children of God.



When Jesus said, love your neighbor, he knew your neighbor would act, look, believe, and love differently than you. It's kind of the whole point. It's easy for us to make connections with people who are similar to us, but our differences can sometimes cause us to make quick judgments or longtime grudges based on whatever qualifier attached to them. In this scripture passage, it's the poor or class distinction. In our context, it's so many more.

But, James reminds us that Christ-followers are different. Our faith is more than just words. Our faith is love in action. I love the Message translation of verse 17: "Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?" Faith without works is outrageous nonsense...it's dead. I don't want to base my life on outrageous nonsense. I want to base my life on a faith that's real. James says, in order to have a real, living faith, we put our faith into action, by loving our neighbor. We love the poor. We love the homeless. We love the LGBTQ+ community. We love the

immigrants – documented or undocumented. We love African Americans, Asians, Indigenous Peoples, Hispanics, just as we love Caucasians. We love Muslims, Jews, and Atheists even though they don't share our Christian faith. Their different beliefs are not a threat to our beliefs.

Even the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, agreed: "It is really so simple! The main thing is to love your neighbor as yourself. Once you do that, you will discover at once how everything shall fall into place." We get a glimpse of the kingdom of God. The world changes when we love.

And, back to our friend Mr. Rogers, he felt that "The only thing that really changes the world is when somebody gets the idea that love can abound and can be shared."<sup>3</sup> We become "repairers of creation"<sup>4</sup> when we love. We bring the kingdom of God here on earth when we put our faith into action, when we love despite our distinctions.

Which neighbor do you need to love? What grudges do you need God to help you remove? I think we can all agree that our world needs to be changed, and we do that by loving our neighbor. "Love is the root of everything. Love or the lack of it."<sup>5</sup> Who do you need to love today? Amen.

<sup>3</sup> *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, documentary, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, documentary, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, documentary, 2018.