

## Will you be my neighbor?

*You rarely have time for everything you want in this life, so you need to make choices. And hopefully your choices can come from a deep sense of who you are."*

- Fred Rogers

Growing up in the 70's there were not many choices on TV. I think we had four channels, depending on how you positioned the antennas. PBS was one of them, which meant we could watch Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. An unusual man in a red sweater taught me about being a neighbor on the TV in our mobile home. He had puppets who taught life's lessons in the land of make believe. Mr. Rogers wanted me to know that I was loved and that I am special. He said it over and over again so many times that it was hard not to believe it. Each day he invited every child in America to be his neighbor through an awkward little song. He was a different kind of man, who knew he was deeply loved.

Without my understanding it, being a neighbor is something I was invited into by Mr. Rogers and his puppets. He was so welcoming and warm and safe. But becoming welcoming, in the way Mr. Rogers was welcoming, didn't happen when I was young. I was taught not to trust most of my neighbors because we didn't know them. I didn't live in Mr. Rogers imaginary world. His land of make believe was safe, and my world wasn't. I had been taught to keep myself safe, to not open the front door for strangers and never, ever tell a stranger personal information.

At some point in my own adulthood, I realized that I didn't know my next-door neighbors. They had been reduced to strangers who were potentially unsafe. I wondered why Krista and I hadn't invited them over for dinner, while at the same time doing nothing about it. I'm not sure why I couldn't welcome in people who lived next to me, other than that I'd never seen that modeled. It didn't even seem like an option.

We started out by inviting people to our house that we met at church. That always deepened our connections quickly and we really got to know people during that time. It felt safe to have them over because we had the church in common. That sounds odd in retrospect, that I would welcome a stranger sitting in a pew and not invite the person over who lives next door to me.

Jesus talked plainly about loving God and loving neighbors. It's something I wanted to do, I just didn't know how. And it didn't seem like anyone I knew expected me to live out my faith in ways that might make me uncomfortable anyway. I can't think of one lesson where I was told that part of my faith should be welcoming others as part of loving them. Hospitality wasn't a central part of Christianity based on the silence on that topic. But if I wanted to love my neighbor, it seemed impossible to do so if we couldn't let ourselves get closer to them. I couldn't have stranger danger and love at the same time. We seemed stuck. I think our actions, or lack there of, blocked us from becoming the people we wanted to be.

Mr. Rogers invited people who were different than himself over to his television house all the time on his show. I just didn't think they were different from him because they seemed like friends. I think the words "neighbor" and "friend" were synonymous for Mr. Rogers. He used to greet people who walked in his door with a happy, "Hi Neighbor!". For me, "neighbor" was synonymous with "stranger", and that difference kept me from moving forward. Becoming friends with others turned out mostly to be about

having a few conversations, listening, sharing, finding common ground then doing it again and again. It doesn't sound that tough, but we didn't do much of that ourselves.

If we were going to learn to love our next-door neighbor, we'd have to start by actually meeting them to move from stranger to friends. Our big idea was inviting them to dinner. This doesn't seem like a big deal now, but it sure felt like a big deal then. Welcoming the stranger is a biblical thing I said I believed in, but it was so impractical. Because of fear of strangers, opening our doors to people I didn't know seemed particularly scary to do with my children. But it seemed to me that if God was "pro-stranger", something in me would need to change.

We started by inviting our neighborhood to a BBQ at our place. Somehow that seemed easier than picking one neighbor to bring over. Instead we invited the street. We rented a bouncy house and went all out with the party! Neighbors were meeting neighbors for the first time who had lived side by side for years. It was wonderful! But no one actually came into our house, which felt both safe and too distant at the same time. Although we tried getting to know our neighbors, most of the connections continued to happen in front of our houses on the street, with our appropriate shields up. It was a big deal each time I went into a neighbor's house. It felt like getting to see behind the curtain into someone's life. We saw their pictures, the sayings on their walls, if they kept a messy or clean kitchen. Their invitation to come inside signified that we must have become friends. That's when we learned being a good neighbor mostly looked like being a good friend. Friendship seemed much more manageable somehow and less scary than the whole neighbor thing.

We were good at welcoming friends in Seattle, but welcoming strangers into our home didn't happen very often until we moved to Florida. Because so many people we met there were far from home, inviting people over for a home cooked meal just seemed neighborly. So stranger after stranger dined in our home and we became friends. I think loving neighbors became a lot easier when we let them into our house. Sounds obvious, but I had missed that point for a long time.

We have a sign at the front door of our home that says:

*Come at evening or at morning  
Come when expected or without warning  
A thousand welcomes you'll find here before you  
The oftener you come the more we'll adore you*

It's who we want to be, so we put it above our doorbell for people to read the one time they'll ring the bell. When someone rings the doorbell, we know they're new. People just walk into our house because we ask them to. The door is going to be open. We're gracious about the first visit doorbell ring because people think it's polite.

When you enter our home, you'll see our travel room with pictures from everywhere we've been in the world. You'll see grandma's piano, our Starbucks mug collection, our giant couch that hosts loads of friends and you'll see our wooden sign that says Love God, Love People. If you venture upstairs you'll find the Avengers, see our bookshelves filled with stuff we've read and there is our beautiful lake to look out at. You'll likely meet a handful of our friends who live in the houses across the street, because our house seems to be the hub where people gather. We'll sit around the table or the couch for hours, telling stories and laughing about this life we all get to live. If you stay late enough, you'll see the fireworks our neighbors shoot off every night from Magic Kingdom. And we'll talk about the stuff that

matters, we'll listen to one another and we hope you'll feel loved. You'll leave and we'll remind you in a stern voice that the doorbell is now off limits, just come in and feel free to come often.

I had no idea how much I'd enjoy a life filled with hosting people and living in community. Friendship seems central to being neighborly. I think of being neighborly as learning to see neighbor, stranger, friend and family as the same word. If I can do that, all sorts of things become possible. I feel like being neighborly is enough to keep me busy for the rest of my life.

I think Mr. Rogers was onto God's most simple offer and it makes sense why he spent his life sharing it with three to five-year olds. We are all invited to be God's neighbor. It doesn't matter how put together or broken we are, God invites us into his kingdom filled with all his people. And one of my favorite parts of God is that he seems to value the outsider and the stranger even more than those already committed to his family. Instead of building protective walls around his people to keep the strangers out, he sends his children out to be friends with their neighbors, by his own son's example.

It's easy for me to imagine God singing Fred's song of daily invitation:

*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 beauty wood,  
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?*

The best way I know to live this out is to be inviting in the way we live, keeping our doors unlocked and our guest rooms ready. It means inviting all those over who don't have great places to call home. It means doing our best to be safe people in an unsafe world. We will continue to invite people to be our neighbors, and we'll invite neighbors to be our friends - because we've always wanted a neighbor just-like-them.