

*Order of Service  
November 3, 2019  
Won't You Be My Neighbor?*

*Musical Prelude*

*Greeting -- Edward Burrough quote, 1659*

*1st Hymn: Diverse in Culture, Nation, Race, Green 320*

*Readings -- Luke 10:27-36; Mr. Rogers, Won't You Be My Neighbor?; Blackbirds,  
Julie Cadallader-Staub*

*2nd Hymn: A Song of Peace, 304*

*Joys and Concerns*

*Musical interlude*

*Prayer -- Mercy and Love*

*3rd Hymn: When I Needed a Neighbor, Green 293*

*Message: What Must I do to Inherit Eternal Life? And Who is My Neighbor?*

*Silent worship*

*4th Hymn: Who Are the Patriots? Green 297*

*Closing -- Neighbors and Enemies, Mercy and Love*

*Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts*

*Postlude*

**Greeting:** Good Morning Friends. This Tuesday, across our country, is Election Day. In my town of Caroline, the lines are drawn. Competing open letters endorsing and attacking various candidates have been sent out to all registered voters. We got another one yesterday. Signs pepper the yards and road sides, and emotions are running high.

In 1650s England, emotions were also running high, but instead of mass mailings, road signs, there were pamphlet debates. One early Friend, a young man named Edward Burrough, who had a deep conversion experience in his late teens after hearing George Fox speak, took up the pen to debate those who found the Quaker message of a direct unmediated experience of God equally open to all people a dangerous perversion of the Christian order. In those contentious times he wrote of Quakers:

*We are not for names, nor men, nor titles of Government, nor are we for this party nor against the other ... but we are for justice and mercy and truth and peace and true freedom, that these may be exalted in our nation, and that goodness...and unity with God, and with one another, that these things may abound.*

Let us offer our worship today in the hope that we too, in our contentious times, may be not for names, nor men, nor titles of Government, nor for this party nor against the other, but that we may be for justice, mercy, truth, peace, true freedom, goodness and unity with God, and with one another, that these things may be exalted in our nations, that these things may abound. ***And let us begin by singing together our first hymn: Diverse in Culture, Nation, Race, Green 320***

**Readings: Luke 10: 25-37** *25Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.*

*“Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” 27He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” 28And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” 29But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” 37He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”*

**From the open canon of the modern era, the songbook of Mr. Rogers, written in 1962:** *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?*

**"Blackbirds" by Julie Cadallader-Staub.**

*...yesterday (on the road) I heard a new sound above my head, a rustling, ruffling quietness...and when I turned my face upward I saw a flock of blackbirds rounding a curve I didn't know was there and the sound was simply all those wings just feathers against air, against gravity and such a beautiful winging, the whole flock taking a long, wide turn as if of one body and one mind. How do they do that? Oh if we lived only in human society with its cruelty and fear, its apathy and exhaustion what a puny existence that would be. but instead we live and move and have our being here, in this curving and soaring world so that when, every now and then, mercy and tenderness triumph in our lives and when, even more rarely,*

*we manage to unite and move together toward a common good, we can think to ourselves: ah yes, this is how it's meant to be.*

### ***Prayer***

*Oh God of all the nations, God of Mercy, God of Love. We are taught to love You with all our strength, mind, heart, soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We come together, to try. We give you this hour, that its peace and the echoes of its songs and prayers may lend peace and strengthen our hearts, minds, and souls in the hours to come, so that when we encounter our neighbors, we may remember more readily that You, Holy One, God of the turning tides and turning seasons, the wind and the rain and the fire, clover leaf and pine, You are present here, and there. In our hearts, and in theirs. In neighbor and in enemy. In joy and in sorrow. In triumph and in pain. So move in our midst, we pray this hour, God of mercy, God of love, that we may see the ways you move in our midst every hour to come. Amen.*

### ***Benediction***

*It's a beautiful day in this world neighborhood. And it's a beautiful day for a neighbor. So let us be neighbors. May we show mercy. May we believe our enemies capable of mercy. May we love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves. May we claim our share, our inheritance, and our full aliveness in the One Eternal Life.*

## ***Message***

This election season has laid bare the divisions and differences between the citizens of my town of Caroline. Neighbors really disagree with one another about the best use of local governing power and money, how individual rights and collective needs relate, what freedom, democracy, government, and private property are for. The divisions in our national politics run like an undercurrent through it all. Neighbors are wary of one another. Cultural and class fault lines run deep. Meanwhile, in the midst of the campaigning and candidate forums, the current town board, though beset by conflict, secured NYSERDA funding to supply every household in Caroline with 12 energy-saving LED light bulbs each, an effort they're calling Brighten Up Caroline. So last weekend, my husband George and I and our eight year old son Caz set out through our rural neighborhood, to knock on doors, to talk to people we normally just glimpse from the road as we drive by, and to offer them their free share of LED light bulbs. If you've ever canvassed or gone door to door for anything other than trick or treating, you know the vulnerable feeling of intruding on someone's private space and time, with an agenda that they might not want to be interrupted by. But Caz was enthusiastic and disarming, bounding past a variety of Halloween decorations and political signs, many of which reflected a different viewpoint from our own, carrying hand-sewn cloth bags with their LEDs inside them, wearing a Brighten Up Caroline logo button pin on his coat. And as we got back in the car after a successful donation, passing some of those campaign signs on the way, he asked from the back seat: *"If Andy and Marshall (his two best friends) had signs up for the guy we don't want to win, would you still want me to be friends with them?"* Caz has always had a way of getting right to the heart of the matter. His question was a challenging one, because, deep down, if I'm honest, I **am** wary of those "on the other side." It *was* discomfiting to knock on the doors of my neighbors on that other side. For me, Caz's question was as pointed and challenging as the ones posed to Jesus by the lawyer in Luke's Gospel, and as plaintive and guileless as Mr. Rogers' melodious query from my childhood, "Please Won't You Be My Neighbor?"

In the famous story from Luke, a lawyer stands to test Jesus. The Greek word translated 'lawyer' here denotes an expert in Mosaic Law, the Torah. "Teacher," his voice rings out: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And then after an exchange, he asks his famous second question: "And who is my neighbor?", he demands to know. Two profound, high-stakes questions asked with an undefined chip on the shoulder and an unspecified agenda. Jesus, a very good teacher, asks questions in return. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" he responds, to the first query. The lawyer distills what is written in the Law into one

sentence: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”* In parallel passages in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus calls these the Great Commandments, upon which rest all the law and the prophets, the totality of the Torah, and the way that people are called to live into their nature as children of God, the Most High. In these verses Jesus says simply, ‘you have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.’ The usual meanings for the words “eternal life” that we read into the text assume a realm and an existence outside of, apart from, and achieved after this regular, mortal, non-eternal Life. With that other-worldly, after-this-life, future-reward assumption underlying our reading of the words “eternal life,” what we’re primed to get out of the story is scaffolding for a religion ultimately concerned with a destination or consequence in a future separate from this life and this world, self-focused, and transactional. It’s easy to hear in the lawyer’s challenge a question that conveys something like “What actions and beliefs must I invest, to receive in return one eternal life when I die?” because that is the question that much Christian theology over the last two thousand years has been focused on. But, the Greek words for eternal life here do not emphasize or privilege a sense of reward in the future. Rather, the sense is of something perpetual, past and future cohering together, a Life that is everlasting, from the beginning of the world, until forever. This etymology gives us other possible ways to understand the words ‘eternal life’ that do not have it happening elsewhere, and to understand it instead as something that never stops, that always-is, that *already* is. And so another way to hear the meaning of that famous question -- ‘What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?’ might be something like “What must I do to fully participate in, and to claim my share of, my place within, the Life that was in the beginning, is now, and evermore shall be?” Maybe Jesus knows this, understands and answers the question in this second sense. Because when he affirms, yes, you have answered correctly, do this and you will live, the Greek word translated “will live” connotes aliveness, that which is lively, the state of being full of life, a quickening. Love God with all that you are, and your neighbor as yourself, and then you will really be living, Jesus says. You will be participating in, and claiming your share of Eternal, Perpetual, never-ending LIFE, the life within all life in this curving and soaring world. When mercy and tenderness triumph, when you love God and neighbor, and there is unity and a move toward the common good, you align with that eternal life, that sense of quickening aliveness, and a knowledge settles into your bones: ah, this is how it’s meant to be. It truly is quite an inheritance. You will feel so alive.

But it seems like the lawyer doesn’t see that beautiful vision. Wanting to justify himself, he asks for parameters. And Who is My Neighbor? He presses. Qualify

the category of neighbor, define it so I have some guidelines about who it is I'm supposed to love as myself, narrow the scope a little, make this thing I need to do to inherit eternal life a little more manageable. He just doesn't get it. So Jesus tells him a story. An anonymous man was traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he *fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.* One by one, three people — a priest, a Levite and a Samaritan — come upon this naked, half-dead man as they are traveling down the same road. In the hierarchical Jewish society of the time, the priest and the Levite -- his temple assistant, a kind of second-tier priest -- had elevated social status, and would be expected to behave according to the Law. But they pass by the beaten man, crossing to the other side of the road to avoid him. They are merciless. What does it mean? The suspense builds. Who will come down the road next? Perhaps it will be a lay Israelite, lowest rung on the hierarchical ladder and an everyman that listeners could identify with, appearing in the role of hero to bind the injured man's wounds, and give the story a satisfying moral arc. The question would be answered: the neighbor we are to love as ourself is any of our fellows in need. But, no! It's not an Israelite who comes down the road. It's a Samaritan. A Samaritan! Samaritans were not only outsiders, but were reviled mortal enemies of the Jewish nation and people, having desecrated the temple with human bones. They were defectors from the Jewish religion, filthy worshipers of false gods. For those listening to Jesus' story, a Samaritan was totally unacceptable, a representative of a vile, repugnant class of people. The audience would probably have gasped, and thought that the wounded man was doomed, for who knows what cruelties a Samaritan is capable of? Instead, the Samaritan ministers to the wounded man. He takes him to an inn and pays for his stay. To really understand the complete reversal of the expected moral hero of this story, think of a group of people or a person you struggle to believe could ever behave mercifully to someone they happen upon in abject need, and replace the word Samaritan with that word, that category of people, or that person, whoever it is for you. And now put "Good" in front of it. The One Good One. Picture them as your only hope. Is it hard to trust? Do you doubt their true goodness, their capacity for mercy? Does it feel very dangerous? Foolish? Naive? Hopeless? A long shot? A miracle?

Who is My Neighbor? Was the question the legal scholar asked Jesus. But Jesus seems to answer a different question, not who is my neighbor, but "who is my neighbor when all is lost, when I am utterly broken, when all my self-protections and self-justifications are ripped away?" He performs some kind of mythic, parabolic slight of hand, the enemy shows mercy, and suddenly the world is upended, the power dynamics and hierarchies and categories of people are

scrambled. We are not confidently arranging the story into its expected conclusion, judging the uncaring priest and Levite, comfortably sorting neighbors from non-neighbors, given guidelines for who and who not to love as ourselves. We are like the beaten man left for dead, all the ways of categorizing ourselves and others stripped from us, bereft of the power and privilege of deciding who to consider our neighbor, at the mercy of someone deplorable, too broken even to plead, “please, please, won’t you be my neighbor?” Maybe, Jesus knows, God knows, only such great love, such great need, such broken-ness *could* move us to pity, *could* shatter our self-justifications, our notions and assumptions about enemies, neighbors, and eternal life. Jesus says: picture someone you revile behaving with mercy to a stranger in mortal danger. That might *be your neighbor*, disguised as your enemy. That is what a neighbor is, and that is what a neighbor does. Now, go and do likewise.

*instead we live and move and have our being here, in this curving and soaring world, so that when, every now and then, mercy and tenderness triumph in our lives and when, even more rarely, we manage to unite and move together toward a common good, we can think to ourselves: ah yes, this is how it's meant to be.*