

Written by Krista Strahan
Foundation text: Isaiah 56:1-8

“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood”

I almost don’t have to preach this text. It just about preaches itself. If you would turn to Isaiah 56 and verses 1-8, this is how it was written in the New Revised Standard Version ...

“1 Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. 2 Happy is the man/mortal who does this, the man/one who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.” 3 Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The LORD will surely separate me from his people.” And do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” 4 For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, 5 I will give, in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. 6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. 8 Thus says the LORD God—who gathers the outcasts of Israel: I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”

Amen

I watch a lot of television. I have always watched a lot of television. My family watches a lot of television. I used to get awful grades because I watched a lot of television but I still love television. And one thing I like to do sometimes is just look back and remember all the television shows I watched when I was younger. I would watch Alvin and the chipmunks. I watched Chip and Dale the Rescue Rangers. And I loved Jem. She had pink hair, magic earrings, a friend called Synergy and she was in love with Rio – who had purple hair.

But I tell you – in all my days – I never remembered a more idealistic, optimistic television show than Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. I mean – really. I know you remember his opening song.

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’ve 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?

I think back and I say to myself – what in the world was he thinking? Where was Mr. Roger's living? I know he wasn't living in my neighborhood. This idealistic song, through the television came into the homes of millions of diverse families. And somehow I think that Mr. Roger's happiness, his excitement, his jubilation about this particular neighborhood had something to do with the fact that **anyone could get in**. Anyone and everyone could be a part of Mr. Roger's neighborhood. He didn't care.

There were no credit checks. No background check. No neighborhood association regulating what the look of the neighborhood should be. Anyone could get in. **Anyone!?** And still, for Mr. Rogers – **it was a beautiful day in the neighborhood**. It's a difficult concept to grasp and so I looked to the inspired word of God for assistance and it brings me back to this text, Isaiah 56:1-8. Let's first look at the character of this text – so we can get a better context of the ancient Israelite neighborhood.

In this text we first have the foreigner, the alien.

Foreigners already come with fears of not being accepted. They already have an inkling that they aren't getting into the Israelite neighborhood. Maybe they aren't going to be treated fairly. They aren't going to be treated like true family – more like unwanted in-laws. They aren't going to be loved unconditionally – instead they will be kept at arms length.

And remember - foreigners had to make a costly decision just to accept the Lord. Yes, we have all had our own personal experience with the Lord – but remember many of us came into our faith on the family plan. You know what I mean – we grew up in church, we went to church maybe four or five days out of the week. You remember when your mom kindly suggested that you go to church...no she didn't! Sometimes she dragged you to church kicking and screaming! And you went. And later you built your own relationship with God.

Well, the foreigner does not have this same testimony. They have in many cases made a choice to leave their own family plan; leave what was familiar; leave what was comfortable and join someone else's neighborhood. For the foreigner – there may have been some “kinda-sorta-alright days” – but there were no **beautiful days in the neighborhood**.

In this same text we also have the eunuch.

Now some say that eunuchs had a personal defect – so it was a choice that the eunuch had made to mutilate himself due to pagan rites. Some say the eunuchs had a physical defect – that it was part of their nature. It was a natural problem. That's how they were made. Deformed by nature. Here me now.

The Israelites weren't sure – maybe it was a choice or maybe they were just born that way. This was the eunuch – the one left out of the community. The one nobody talks to. They're not included into the full community of the Lord. And remember they might get in, we may allow them to participate in *some* part in the service. Who knows – maybe they can play the piano. Maybe they can be part of the music ministry – but they're not **full** members of the community. No, for the eunuch it's not such **a beautiful day in the neighborhood**.

And then we have the Israelite community.

This was a time, after the exile, where conflict abounded within this community. There were remnant people already living in the land. There were other Israelites returning from Babylonian exile. There were foreigners and there were eunuchs.

The text suggests that Israelites were excluding certain people from community worship. It was a members only club. It became a restricted neighborhood, not everyone could get in. Maybe certain people were physically inside the community – they were let in the church doors, but they remained outsiders, strangers, aliens - the text says they were foreigners and they were eunuchs.

And maybe the Israelite community felt justified. These foreigners and eunuchs looked different. They dressed different. They spoke differently. They even walked differently. They may have even smelled different.

And on top of all this the law, the word itself said that these outsiders *should* be excluded from membership in the community. There were restrictions on access to Israel's assembly – the assembly of the Lord. We read it in Deuteronomy 23:1-8. It spoke specifically about people who could not get in. Those born of an illicit union cannot be admitted to the assembly of the Lord – even until the 10th generation! This was to protect against those children from incestuous marriages. No Ammonites - no Moabites – it's written in Deuteronomy that these people didn't help the Israelites on their journey out of Egypt. So they don't get into the neighborhood. No one whose testicles are crushed – this was because of the importance of procreation and thus the absolute longevity of the pure Israelite community.

All these rules had been laid out. It was Israelites only from the start. The members of the neighborhood were following the rules and now – now Isaiah's going to say a foreigner gets in! A eunuch can get in! And not only can they get in but they may gain some sort of monument in the temple instead of my own sons and daughters!! Isaiah wants a **beautiful day in the neighborhood??**

Well, the people said no. I went through the exodus – they didn't. I was born into this community – they weren't. I've been here too long. My family started this church. I grew up in this church. I have been a tithing member of this church for 48 years. I sit in the fourth pew, on the left, two seats in, near the deacons. I always sit there – everybody knows I sit there. And now you want to waltz in here – wearing God knows what – speaking your language to your friends so I can't understand you – prancing in here like that – acting all feminine when you should be a real man – and you're gonna sit in my seat. No. Sorry Isaiah. I know you want a

beautiful day in the neighborhood but I got grandbabies - it takes a village to raise a child – I sent you a list last week who I predetermined could live in the village – and these foreigner and eunuch ain't on the list. Nope. Sorry.

This is what the community was saying – I have to explain it like this because I know that nobody listening here is familiar with this type of talk.

Then there's Isaiah.

He's in charge of all this. He's the president of the neighborhood association. What is he going to do? What can be done? What can Isaiah do to make it **a beautiful day in this**

neighborhood? And so he begins an oracle. *“Thus ... says ... the ... Lord. Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed.”*

(Isaiah 56:1) And while there is salvation and deliverance in this oracle - I don't want to shy away from the reprimand. God is lovingly but seriously admonishing his people. Isaiah says in order to make it a truly beautiful day in the neighborhood - there has to be some changes. There has to be a shift, a transformation, an adjustment, an alteration, some modification of the people. Something has to change!

First, in order to make it a beautiful day in the neighborhood we have to rethink the regulations.

Isaiah says I know what Deuteronomy says but this is what I am bringing to you – Thus says the Lord.

Nobody is excluded from the house of God – not by nationality, not by sexual orientation, not by class status, not by hair color, not by perfume choice, not by age, not by height, not by weight, not by ethnicity, not by native language. **Nobody** is left out of the neighborhood.

The text says in verse four and five “for thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters”

The text says in verse six and seven “And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; ... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” This is what the text says.

So there are **new** conditions that are named for the Israelite community. Note that the distinguishing mark of the covenant was the Sabbath. You had to observe the Sabbath. Today with the benefit of an expanded understanding of God’s proclamation we know to love God and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. These are our new membership regulations. And the clouds are starting to part, the sun is coming out and yes - it’s starting to be just a little bit more of **a beautiful day in the neighborhood.**

The second change in order to make it a beautiful day in the neighborhood is to know it in your hearts and to also know it in your minds. It’s no coincidence that doctors are still arguing over

whether a person's life source is their brain or their heart. What is your mind without your heart and what **is** your heart without that brain partnership? The two together are so important.

Your heart may have pushed you to take the road less traveled but your mind helped you navigate the pot holes. Your heart allows you to love another person, but your mind gives you that certain amount of discernment to say that not everyone you love really truly has your best interest at heart. Your heart gave you the faith to follow Jesus and then your mind kicked in to explain to you what the heck that really means.

It's both. We are not only on this earth to develop our faith but also to investigate and critique the text. We need to get a full understanding of the inspired words of God. We need to properly investigate the context of covenant regulations and the Decalogue – which still so heavily affect our way of living today. We need to properly critique the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 to understand that it is **not** a story demonizing homosexuality but instead is a story about the failure of a people to have hospitality to strangers.

We need to study to show that we understand ... the fallibility of a humanity ... who worshiped an infallible, perfect God. We have to know it – both in our hearts **and** in our minds. We have to love and **fully accept** the foreigner and the eunuch. And we have to know why it's in God's plan for this to be so.

The third change to make it a beautiful day in the neighborhood is old school – if you truly love and accept all the people in the neighborhood you've gotta show some signs.

You can say you love your neighbor all you want but you gotta show some signs. You can welcome them into the church but if they aren't made to feel welcome – you're not showing any signs. Yes, we can walk with our neighbor from the narthex, through the nave and into the sanctuary – but if we aren't walking next to them as we both walk in the footsteps of Christ Jesus we aren't showing any signs.

Yes, we know that Jesus ministered to those that were outcast from society but if we aren't stepping out of our own comfort zones to show love to those that are fearfully and wonderfully created different from us – we aren't showing any signs. We can let them into the church doors but if we don't truly, honestly believe that they belong there it doesn't work.

It **is** a beautiful day in the neighborhood. I said it **is** a beautiful day in the neighborhood. We have to tell the foreigner – I've **always** wanted to have a neighbor just like you – and mean it. We have to tell the eunuch - I've **always** wanted to live in a neighborhood with you – and mean it. We have to tell the immigrant population - I've **always** wanted to have a neighbor just like you – and we have to mean it. And we have to tell the lesbian woman and the gay man in our community - I've **always** wanted to live in a neighborhood with you – and we have to mean it.

It is a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Amen? Amen.

