

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

November 10, 2019 Pastor Mary Koon

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Luke 10:25-37

This morning our scripture is the story of the good neighbor, I mean the good Samaritan, told by Jesus in the gospel of Luke. It's such a familiar story, I invite you to close your eyes as the story is being told, to invite the Spirit to allow you to hear it with fresh ears today.

Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He 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." And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He 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. The next day he took out two denarii, (that would be two days wages), gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

*The lawyer said, “The one who showed him mercy.”
Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” AMEN*

This morning I’ll pray the prayer that Fred Rogers would whisper each day as he arrived at his set for Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood. Please pray with me, “Dear God, let some of the word that is heard be yours.” AMEN

Fred Rogers is making a comeback. I’m not going to lie, I am just the tiniest bit obsessed with Mister Rogers, his work, life, his ministry. As a young mother, his presence in our family room brought calm to two active little boys, and modeled a way of helping them express and manage their feelings. Plus, I learned how crayons are made!

The world seems to be hungry for the words of peace, love, grace and acceptance for many years. He had the capability for deep listening, moments of quiet reflection and thoughtful responses to difficult situations.

There is a resurgence in interest in this icon of children’s television. Last summer, Michael Neville’s film, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor” was the highest growing biographical documentary ever. In an article in the Atlantic this week, Tom Junod wrote, “*Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* became so popular because it makes people cry unashamedly, because it shows what radical kindness actually looks like, because it depicts a man who gave his life to what turned out to be a hopeless cause—the cause of sacralizing mass media. He was a genius; he had superpowers; he might as well have been a friendly alien, thrown upon the rocks of our planet to help us find our way to the impossible possibility that we are loved.” (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/what-would-mister-rogers-do/600772/?utm_source=nextdraft&utm_medium=email) Tom’s friendship with Mister Rogers is the basis for the upcoming movie, “It’s A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” starring Tom Hanks, comes out later this month.

Fred Rogers planned to go to seminary after graduation from Rollins college where he majored in music composition. He was home on spring break his senior year and watch this new thing – television – for the first time. The programming he saw for children appalled him – people demeaning one

another for laughs, pies thrown in actors' faces. He thought children deserved better, and a reformer was born.

Fred eventually went to seminary in Pittsburgh, taking classes on his lunch break from this public television show, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. He was ordained to the ministry of mass media for children – in other words, television was his church. Rogers never preached in the traditional sense, but expressed his abundant faith and God's love and grace in everything he did, said, composed, and wrote.

A highly disciplined person, Fred woke each morning at 5:30 to read the Bible and pray. He kept notes on everyone for whom he prayed, and often kept up with them through letters. After his quiet time, he swam each morning. As you heard, he struggled with his weight as a child, but with his swimming and a strict vegetarian and no alcohol diet, he kept his weight at 143 his entire adult life. The numbers 1, 4 and 3, held meaning for him – they signified the number of letters in the phrase I love you. (1 for the I, 4 for the love, 3 for you.)

I hope that “Won't you be my neighbor?” was familiar to all of you. It was the song Mister Rogers sang each day as he changed from his jacket to sweaters, initially knit by his mom, and from shoes to sneakers. In the parable we read this morning, we can almost hear the injured person ask each passer-by, “will you be my neighbor?”

We have enough scholarship to understand some the dynamics of Jesus' story. He positions the despised Samaritan as the surprise hero of the story, the priest and Levite too concerned about traditional taboos. A neighbor is the one who shows kindness and compassion – it has nothing to do with living proximity, race, ethnicity, religion.

I wonder if Mister Rogers would have tried to understand the feelings of the lawyer who asked Jesus the loaded question? Perhaps he would have tried to work out some of those emotions with puppets in the neighborhood of make believe, with Daniel Striped Tiger and X the owl.

Would Rogers have sat with the priest and Levite, deeply listening to how their cultural and religious traditions constrain their attitudes and actions and the difference that makes in their lives?

Jesus knew that once we are able to see the image of God in our neighbors, once we recognize their inherent value, we strive to help them be who they are meant to be. (*The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, Amy Hollingsworth, pg. 85) In her book, *The Simple Faith of Mr. Rogers*, Amy Hollingsworth quotes Fred as saying, “To be able to be accepted for who we are and to be able to grow from there is one of the great treasures of life.”

The show, Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood was the very enactment of what Fred believed the kingdom of God to be. A place where every neighbor is respected, every age, race, color, creed, welcome, where all ages feel safe to share their feelings, and where curiosity and beauty are held in high esteem.

I want to share a couple of stories of the radical inclusivity and forward-thinking nature of the Mister Rogers and his Neighborhood.

African American opera singer François Clemmons shared his beautiful voice and played the public safety officer in the Neighborhood. In a 1969 episode just after the first anniversary of the assassination of MLK Jr., Officer Clemmons is invited to sit alongside MR in a little wading pool on a hot summer day.” (Friends, this is when children trying to integrate swimming pools in the south had bleach thrown on them.) Clemmons said,” The icon Fred Rogers not only was showing my brown skin in the tube with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub, he was helping me dry my feet.” (*The Good Neighbor*, King, 206).

Close to the beginning of each episode, after Fred had put on his sweater, he fed his fish. As he did, he would say, “I’m feeding the fish!” He received a letter from a 5 year old girl who was worried b/c she was blind and couldn’t see him feeding the fish. She feared they were forgotten. So Mister Rogers made a point to narrate the fish feeding, telling viewers that there were some neighbors who were worried about the fish. He said, “It’s good to know that

even if I forget to feed them when we're together, I come back later and feed them so they are always taken care of. It's good to know that fish and animals and children are taken care of by those who can, isn't it?

<https://www.upworthy.com/there-s-a-wonderful-reason-why-mister-rogers-always-said-aloud-he-s-feeding-his-fish>

And we must mention the puppets in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Puppets were a big part of Rogers' life as a child – he was often lonely, ill, and in bed, where he would entertain himself with puppets, making up stories and creating imaginary worlds.

Puppets were an essential part of the show, as they allowed for fantasy and storytelling – they inhabited the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

Each week Rogers would tell a story in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe and puppets provided for a safe place to explore difficult topics and speak to children's fears. Psychologists know that children often say things with puppets that they wouldn't say on their own.

On the very first airing of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, the country was in the midst of the Vietnam War. Rogers knew that children were watching images of the war on the news, and, because he remembered so vividly what it was like to be a child, knew that they would be frightened. So, in make-believe, Fred wrote a story where the puppets – the King, Queen, X the Owl, Henrietta pussycat, were at odds with one another – everything was changing and the king didn't want change. The Neighborhood was anxious and frightened. Messages from the sky were sent to the king, but instead of bombs falling from the sky, they were word of peace and love. King Friday, in the midst of building a wall to keep out change, took the wall down when he learned that his neighbors were friendly.

And, Fred's secretary, Elaine Lynch, recalls inviting a group of children onto the set from the Make-a-Wish Foundation. One 12 year old boy was had autism spectrum disorder and was non-verbal. His family had never heard him speak – he grunted, said, “mmmm,” and pointed to what he wanted.

When Mister Rogers came to meet the family, he showed up with the King and Queen puppets on his hands, and he started talking to the family and finally got to the boy, who was almost as tall as Fred. The child started speaking in full sentences to the king and queen puppets.

The dad was filming the entire thing, and Lynch had to take the camera because he was crying so hard. Can you imagine the impact of that visit? The family left that day with a king Friday and Queen Sara of his own. (*The Good Neighbor*, 224-225.)

Jesus...and Fred Rogers....knew that there was more to people than meets the eye. That how we see people affects the way we treat them.

We live in a global neighborhood, despite politicians world-wide who try to claim that nationalism is the way of the future. As followers of Jesus, as students of Fred Rogers, we know better.

So let us recommit to building the neighborhood of tomorrow by loving people today.

Fred said, “the older I get, the more I seem to be able to appreciate my “neighbor” - whomever I happen to be with at the moment. Oh, sure, I’ve always tried to love my neighbor as myself; however, the more experiences I’ve had, the more chances I’ve had to see the uniqueness of each person...as well as each tree, and plant, and shell, and cloud...the more I find myself delighting every day in the lavish gifts of God, whom I’ve come to believe is the greatest appreciator of all.” (*World According to Fred Rogers*, pg. 143)

Thanks be to God.

AMEN

Sources

Children's Message, "Fat Freddy" story from *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, Hollingsworth, pg. 125, *The Good Neighbor*, King, pg. 30-31

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Upworthy website – see link above