NEIGHBOR IS A VERB

Luke 10:25-37

March 17, 2024

 A new friend I met this week, a younger middle aged woman named Dorothy, told this story:

“I had just finished paying for my groceries at the self-checkout at Whole Foods when I saw a mother and her four-year old struggle as they were heading outside. One of the paper grocery bags in their cart had torn completely apart and the contents were strewn all over. She tried to wrap them up again in the bag, but we could all see that this was a lost cause. I rushed over and took one of my cloth shopping bags that I hadn’t needed, and helped her put her broken paper bag and groceries inside. “Take this,” Dorothy said, ”we’ve got lots of them at home.” She was grateful and my friend Dorothy was happy, too. She thankful that there would be less stress and more peace in the other woman’s life as she put her supplies in the car, as she would negotiate herself and her child and her groceries back into the house when they would arrive.

 And Dorothy was thankful most of all that the child would see that people around them cared – that people are kind, and thoughtful; that we would rush over to help one another . . . and smile (even though it might be a mask); that we wish each other well. Dorothy wanted that child to know that we can be good neighbors.

 These past couple of weeks, I’ve spent some time reading about , learning about, the person who did so much to teach us all to be good neighbors—Fred Rogers. And I think I want to say this about him first of all: his witness and work was so faithful to Christ that I am beginning to feel that there is—or should be—Gospel According to Mr. Rogers. He was ordained by the Presbyterian Church as an evangelist for children’s television, which was pretty way out there for the Presbyterians in those days. And though he never mentioned God or Jesus, or preached a sermon in those shows, nevertheless every message he conveyed was one of love and acceptance, of the value of human dignity, of the worth of every single person – a very Christian expression of the vision of peace.

I have lots of notes with quotes from him, from his television shows, and I have to say the man was a missionary marvel. I commend to you, by the way, the 2018 documentary, “*Won’t You Be My Neighbor?*” In that show, his message of love is so profound that it opens your heart—breaks it open—and leaves you wanting to live that way, too. Even through the screen when one encounters Fred Rogers, I can imagine that this is what it was like for people to have an encounter with Jesus –that is to be fully seen, fully known, fully accepted, and fully loved. It's transformative. It’s a blessing. It’s wonderful. It is joy.

 “I like you as you are. Exactly as you are,” was the message Fred Rogers said over and over again. It was his conviction, based on his theology and on deep and careful study of child development, that children need to hear that. “I don’t think children can grow,” he said, “unless they are accepted for exactly who they are.”

 His goal was to help children find peace within themselves so that they can live peacefully with their neighbors.

“Love is at the root of everything,” he said. “All learning, all parenting, all relationships . . . love or the lack of it.” “Love your neighbor,” he said, “and love yourself.”

A study of Fred Rogers can be emotionally difficult because he goes to some dark places. Because Mr. Rogers cared so deeply and fully about the emotional lives of children, and saw it is one of his main jobs in life to help children through the challenges and changes of life, I couldn’t help but experience some of his heartbreak with him as I see what is happening to children in our neighborhood – here, and around the world.

First, a Fred story. Fred Rogers knew what it was to feel bullied and afraid. When he was a child, he was shy and overweight. He was scared to death to go to school each day. Neighborhood boys would yell mean things at him. One day a whole group of them chased him down the street yelling, “Hey Fat Freddy! We’re going to get you, Fat Freddy.” Racing madly to the home of Mrs. Stewart, a neighbor, she welcomed him into her home, giving him refuge. “The teasing boys went on their way,” he says, “but I resented the teasing. I resented the pain. I resented those kids for not seeing me beyond my fatness or shyness.”

Fred Rogers envisioned the neighborhood as a place that should offer care and safety. A place that offered growth and support and nurture and wholeness. And yet there are so many children who are not safe and not cared for. All of our hearts are broken as we see—daily—of the suffering children in Ukraine and Gaza and at the Southern Border. Children are dying. Children who are experiencing trauma of all kinds; children who are fleeing as refugees, separated from family. Children who are totally unsheltered from the horrors of war or of government inflicted cruelty.

Our hearts break for them. God’s heart is breaking, too. When, oh, when, will the wolf lie down with the lamb?

 “Look for the helpers,” Mr. Rogers told us. It was a lesson learned from his mother, and from his own experience, and he shared it with the nation after the devastation of 9-11. Look for the helpers. The Washington Post had an article about mental health experts who were organizing workshops to help traumatized children in Ukraine. They are mobilizing volunteers, putting together resources and networks to help heal these terrible psychic wounds.

Listen, I am so grateful for the work of these people who are using their gifts to offer care and relief and hope. Some of the unsung and unseen helpers are in the Presbyterian Hunger Program, the Presbyterian Disaster Agency, and the Self-Development of Peoples, all of which are supplied and sustained by ministries of our One Great Hour of Sharing.

As we will sing in our Hymn of Response after this sermon,

 Jesus, teach us to be neighbors –

Giving, serving those in need.

 Making peace and doing justice,

Showing faith by word and deed.

 You and I may not, at present, be able to do as much as we would like for children who are far away. But there are children—our neighbors a little closer to home—there are children in our own county, in our own city, who need our care and support.

 Fred Rogers gave an expression of care to each child who visited the set of his Neighborhood, or who clamored to greet him when he made live appearances. He would end his program or talk by getting down his knees or bending down on his haunches—at eye level with the children, you see-- and saying, “You made this a special day, just by being you. There’s no person in ‘the whole world like you. And I like you just the way you are.” Every child—every person, needs to hear and know this and experience it in their lives in real and practical and systemic ways.

For Fred Rogers it was always the children. From the moment he saw his first television and noticed what was being considered as children’s programming – the jokes and pranks and antics of pies being thrown in people’s faces (remember the *Soupy Sales Show?*)—Rogers said that children deserved better. He believed that this new medium could be a source of healing, of helping children navigate their feelings, and helping them grow. Television programming could leave them feeling welcomed, loved, and special.

Rogers said, “Children have very deep feelings, just the way parents do; just the way everybody does; and our striving to understand those feelings, and to better respond to them is what I feel is the most important task in our world.”

He shared the vision of the ancient prophets of what a peaceable world could look like. And he used all his prodigious gifts to try to help us get there. Fred Rogers felt passion for the will-being of children: his music, his creativity, his knowledge of child development, his careful research and study, his imagination and wonder . . . all of that helped all of us become better neighbors.

Another Fred story: In 1969, racism was rampant throughout the country. For example, White people didn’t want Black people in their public swimming pools. In his Mister Rogers Neighborhood program, Fred Rogers quietly and calmly addressed these cruel and callous—and stupid--rules and attitudes, and showed instead what welcome and affirmation looked like.

He was sitting outside with his pants legs rolled up and his feet soaking in the water of a children’s wading pool on a hot, hot day. You could see his face glowing in perspiration. As Officer Clemmons walked up, Mr. Rogers invited this neighbor, an African-American man, to take off his shoes and cool his feet in the wading pool alongside him. American TV viewers saw what peace looks like—what neighboring is-- as brown feet and white feet—side by side—cooled and relaxed in that little blue pool. There was even a Christ-like reference—but you had to know it, you had to recognize it because Mr. Rogers just did it, didn’t explain it. At the close of the scene, Mr. Rogers takes a towel from his shoulder, and gently and tenderly dries Officer Clemmons’s feet.

He knew that it was always going to be an ongoing struggle against evil. He had no Pollyannish ideals. “We are all called to be repairers of creation,” he said. “Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy and light and hope and faith and pardon and love to your neighbors and to yourself.”

Before we leave our little neighborhood here in this room, I want to invite you to help children become peace-filled and peace-making people. The Presbyterian Women have a Dorcas Basket Store. They are providing materials needed for Vacation Bible Schools in the Dominican Republic. (The Presbytery in the Dominican is a sister Presbytery to ours here in Whitewater Valley). So the PW has stocked a store of materials: colored paper, crayons, stickers, boxes of beads, watercolor paints, and other such-like. Stuff to make a Vacation Bible School fun for children. It’s their hope that you and I will buy those materials in the Dorcas marketplace, to then be sent on to the Dominican. And the store is open right after church on Sundays (that would be today!), and Wednesday afternoon, too, from 12:15-1:00 p.m.

Creating a bigger world neighborhood with children, huh?

And so about the song we’re about to sing: Fred Rogers said, (now, he didn’t write it; he commissioned it through the Presbyterian Church, I think) But he says, “I suppose it’s an invitation for somebody to be close to you. I think that everybody longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is loveable; and consequently the greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they’re loved and capable of loving. “ Some of the lyric goes,

Jesus, teach us to be neighbors,

Working, praying for the day

When the Lamb will be the Shepherd,

When our tears are washed away.

Ever learning, ever growing,

Jesus, teach us all to be

Children of the new creation,

Singing praise in harmony.

Amen, huh? Amen.