

“Honesty: When We Wonder”

May 27, 2018

Through the Eyes of a Child series – Trinity Sunday

Fred Rogers, or Mr. Rogers, as he’s commonly known, was always good at reflecting kids’ questions and feelings back to his audience. This year marks the 50th anniversary of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood first airing on public television. He covered so many topics and helped kids to explore and learn - not only about the world around us, but also about ourselves.

I was a faithful watcher as a kid, but I didn’t realize until I was much older - even as I watched special coverage this year - how revolutionary Mr. Rogers was in offering, as he called it, “a meaningful expression of care.” I didn’t realize how incredible it was that he helped us to know that, as he said, “Feelings are mentionable and manageable.” He tackled difficult subjects like racism and divorce. He encouraged kids to be honest about feelings.

I even found one of the songs he sang to help this morning as we think about honesty and wonder:

What if I could know the truth and say just how I feel?

I think I’d learn a lot that’s real about freedom.

I’m learning to know the truth.

I’m learning to tell the truth.

Discovering truth will make me free.

It sounds a lot like Jesus, doesn’t it? “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Somehow Fred Rogers knew the gift and blessing that children offer when it comes to honesty. He’s quoted as saying, “The greatest gift you ever give is your honest self.” I think our God would agree, though sometimes we might struggle to believe it. We want kids to be honest - to tell the truth - and we value honesty, so how come we don’t keep that same value when it comes to our relationship to God?

God desires that we’re honest. And that’s a part of the childlike faith we’re seeking to reclaim: not a “simple faith” that’s passive, but claiming the simplicity of faith that’s active - where we ask honest questions, take time to wonder, and even discover new things about who God is and who we are. Being honest is a part of being faithful. Being honest is how we seek truth and learn to trust. Being honest helps us to grow.

And this isn’t a new thing. We hear it in Scripture: **SHOW SLIDE** - James 3: 17 (TNIV) - *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.* That word “sincere” is vital to a growing faith. God offers us wisdom that is built on honesty and sincerity. We’re called to interact with God in the same way.

We hear it from Jesus, too. When he tells the people about who they are in relationship to God, he says, **SHOW SLIDE** - Matthew 5: 8 (TNIV) - *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.* There's something about honesty there - coming to God just as we are.

But we struggle. There's something that keeps us from being childlike in our faith. We don't want to be wrong. We don't want to be viewed as ignorant or uninformed - or stupid. We don't want to admit that we don't know something or don't understand it. Maybe we're afraid **not** to know something about God or faith or Jesus. Maybe we feel like we must have an answer. Somehow we've come to believe that "believing in Jesus" means having all of the answers rather than trusting that God is with us.

But I can tell you that three of the most powerful words we can use are "I don't know" and "I'm not sure." Claiming we don't know or that we're not sure doesn't mean we don't care. It doesn't mean we're not faithful. It simply means we don't have the answers.

And there are so many times that we don't have an answer. All of us can think of a time when an answer to "why?" seemed elusive and impossible to grasp. Tragedies that claim lives, illness that comes and devastates, grief that overwhelms, violence in our world - we don't have good answers.

What we encounter in Luke's Gospel is the only account of Jesus between his infant years and his adult years. And it's a story about him asking questions. Yes, it's also about him getting lost and separated from his family, and perhaps we can relate to Mary lecturing him, but we hear clearly that he was asking questions of the teachers and learning.

We don't know exactly what Mary and Joseph taught Jesus at home, but they were faithful Jews, so we assume that they followed the directive from Deuteronomy 6 to teach children God's commands and to love God with all your heart, soul, and strength. I wonder what Jesus asked them and what their mealtime conversations were like. I can only imagine!

So this is a glimpse of Jesus - Son of God and Savior - in the midst of seasoned teachers. Picture a teenage Jesus asking questions and offering answers. Consider what it must have been like for these teachers to look at this young man and think "who is this kid, and how does he know this?"

Maybe we'd do well to pay closer attention to the honesty and wonder that young people offer - the questions they ask that are real, soul-bearing issues for them and for us. They're not burdened by pride or fear like we sometimes are. They claim the freedom to ask, question, and wonder.

Words from a song by Billy Joel kept coming to my mind this week:

Honesty is such a lonely word

Everyone is so untrue

Honesty is hardly ever heard

But mostly what I need from you.

I know that Billy Joel isn't talking about faith, but I wonder - is this how God feels about us? Is this what God is saying to us? "Honesty is hardly ever heard, but mostly what I need from you."

Sooner or later, we ask questions. And if we don't have honest questions about faith and life and God's role in all of it, I wonder if we're really engaged. If we've never experienced doubt or struggle, I wonder if we're being honest about our relationship with God. Stephen Mattson wrote an article called "13 Questions All Christians Eventually Ask Themselves," and his claim is that in our walk with Jesus, we face questions about salvation, what we really believe, the nature of the Bible and how it applies to our lives, why bad things happen, who God is and how God is portrayed in the Old Testament vs. the New Testament, and how Christian faith intersects with science, social issues, and other religions.

Can God take our questions? The answer is a resounding "yes," and we have examples throughout Scripture of people asking and wondering and struggling. Bible study and discussion with others who are seeking God helps us to ask our questions and know that we're not alone. Every Tuesday, the Lounge is a sacred place for really good questions - and a lot of "I don't know" or "I'm not sure." But it's a space of learning and growing.

This past Thursday was the anniversary of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience. It was May 1738 when Wesley experienced a conversion moment after a time of feeling separated from God, but still seeking God and preparing his heart for an encounter with God. He wrote that he went "unwillingly" to a Bible study and his heart was touched in such a way that he claimed salvation for himself. Even as Wesley was serving God and others, he still needed to be open and honest about his struggles.

Wesley's experience can be a reminder and consolation for all of us - our life with God isn't static; it's dynamic! Even now we're living in this season of Pentecost - trusting that the Holy Spirit is just as Jesus said - giving us power to love and serve God and others with honest hearts and minds that wonder. We want to have safe space where we can explore faith and express questions and wonders, and we must offer the same gift to everyone.

Ana told me that when she was on a field trip with her classmates this past week, they talked about the Bible - different stories and characters. One person even looked up images to show. What an incredible thing - for a group of middle school students to engage one another talking about God and faith. Another parent texted me afterward to tell me how amazing it was!

How many of us are willing to be honest with ourselves, with each other, and with God? Maybe that starts with asking more questions when we encounter Scripture.

I've been helped by Pastor Adam Hamilton who invites us to ask three questions as we read: *what does this passage teach me about humanity? About myself? About God?*

Kids teach us that we don't have to know it all, that questions and wondering are good and welcome, and that honesty is a vital part of our faith in God who is calling us to open our hearts widely. So, what would you ask if you could? What would you say if you could? What are the questions on your heart? Where do you need to be more honest with God?

Friends, we really can come to God with questions, wonderings, and even doubts. It's a part of how we're faithful and open to God's leading and guidance. Day by day - we seek to see God more clearly, follow God more nearly, and love God more dearly. Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE