

“Loving Ourselves, Loving Our Neighbor”

January 6, 2019

Learning from Mister Rogers series – Epiphany Sunday

Note: We’re grateful to Rev. Amanda Rohrs-Dodge for the idea for this series.

Today is a special day – it’s Epiphany. After the 12 Days of Christmas, we come to this day when we remember the arrival of the Magi to the infant Christ who came bearing gifts, the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. Their journey and their presence show us that the revelation of God in Jesus is for all the world.

So epiphany is a church word, but it’s also become a word for an inspired moment – a time when we learn something new or understand something in a new way. Lots of people talk about epiphanies that have changed their perspectives – and even changed their lives.

We know that the magi totally changed their plans to go back to King Herod because God led them home by another route. They didn’t return to King Herod or give him any information about this new king. They stood against the power of the empire, and their actions protected Jesus in his young life.

But I wonder if we’ve lost the power of the epiphany. Do we have those “a-ha” moments anymore? Are we paying attention? Are we anticipating that God might be speaking to us and offering a new revelation about who God is and who we are? I ask these questions because I’ve been spending a lot of time thinking about Mister Rogers. I grew up watching him come in through the door, take off his coat, put on his sweater, change his shoes, feed the fish, and talk right to me.

That’s the thing: I felt like he was talking right to me – and only to me. He told me I was special. He told I was important. He sang songs about feelings. He told me I could do good things. He taught me things about the world – like how crayons are made in the factory – which was enthralling! Through the magic of television, he made a connection.

And connection is important. We’re created for connection. We’re created by God. **SHOW SLIDE:** Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created humans to be like himself; he made men and women.” And we’re created to be in relationship with each other.

Jesus continues the call to connection when he answers the question of the religious leaders of the time: the greatest commandment is to love God. He goes back to the Law that we know from Deuteronomy, but then he adds to it out of Leviticus - love your neighbor. A call to connection.

We’re called to be connected – to God and each other. That doesn’t look the same for every person. Some of us are married; some not. Some have a large group of friends; some keep a close few. Regardless of what it looks like for us, connection is

important. We're not meant to be alone. But in this world of short tweets and texts, connection that is life-giving, life-honoring, and life-affirming is even more vital.

Fred Rogers wanted to connect with children personally. This wasn't simply a job or a paycheck; it was his calling. He used music, puppets (like X the Owl, Henrietta Pussycat, Lady Elaine Fairchild, King Friday XIII, and Daniel Striped Tiger), books, and make-believe. He didn't shy away from tough topics and the real questions of kids, and he honored children. He even wrote a song about a child's fear of going down the bathtub drain!

Rogers was a powerhouse in public television for decades - from 1968 until 2001. 2018 was the 50th anniversary of the first airing of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood - and a documentary about his life and work along with a PBS special. His influence is obvious, and his legacy is clear.

Rogers was a gifted musician, had a seminary degree, and was ordained in the Presbyterian Church as an evangelist for television. His congregation was the viewing audience – countless children and their families – who watched him every day. Tom Brokaw, former anchor of *NBC Nightly News* said, "Mister Rogers was an ordained minister, but he never talked about God on his program. He didn't need to."

So what can we learn from him? A lot! I didn't know until I read and watched how revolutionary Mister Rogers was in his work. I didn't know that he was crystal clear about his calling to care for children – and use television as a tool. I didn't know how prophetic he was in breaking barriers and how powerful his reach was until I heard others talk about him. I didn't know that he was someone others turned to in times of national crises to offer a message to kids and families. After 9-11, people asked Fred Rogers what they should do and what they should say. I didn't understand that his slow pace and intentional time was a part of sharing a message that he felt was important: "Deep and simple is far more essential than shallow and complex." He is a saint in every sense.

But this isn't a eulogy – nor is it simply a time to be nostalgic. I'm not saying that the world needs to go back to way it was when I was a kid – because it won't. But we can be tempted to look back and get stuck there instead of looking forward. But how we can reclaim what's important in our life and our faith?

The renewed interest in Mister Rogers makes me wonder if he was onto something, and I'm sure he was. **SHOW SLIDE:** "Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now."

When our Worship Team gathered in September, we talked and prayed and discerned a theme for this year: *Love God and love neighbor*. It should always be a theme for us as followers of Jesus, but there was something especially poignant in the midst of the divisiveness and vitriol around us. How could we reclaim that call from Jesus?

I heard social scientist Arthur Brooks speak this week as a part of the January Series at Calvin College. Brooks says that the real problem in our country is how we're treating each other – not a surprise. His contention is that we're not just too angry; what we're really dealing with is contempt. Anger is hot and has a hint of caring, but contempt is cold and basically views the other person "worthless." I was intrigued by what he said and challenged to consider how I act and interact.

Beyond the challenge of how we treat each other, here's something to notice: Jesus' call to love God and love neighbor are a challenge, but we sometimes forget the end – Love your neighbor *as yourself*...Love your neighbor *as you love yourself*. Perhaps that's the real challenge: to consider what it means to love ourselves.

I'm not talking about nurturing self-righteousness or self-importance or self-indulgence – we have enough of that. But this is about knowing deep down that we are beloved children of God, created in God's image, persons of sacred worth, with gifts, skills, and abilities that God can use for good right here and now. What we say and what we do should come from a heart that is transformed by God's love - God's love for each of us!

When was the last time you made a list of what you are thankful for about yourself – things you're good at, qualities you appreciate, characteristics that make you unique, gifts that you share with the world? Have you ever done that? Would that feel strange?

Most of us are pretty good at making lists of what we want to improve about ourselves or our lives. Perhaps you made a list of resolutions. There's a time for that – for visioning and looking ahead, for refocusing and committing. But my guess is that we're much more apt to make the list of what we want to change rather than writing down what we love about ourselves. We simply don't do it well at all.

Again from Fred Rogers: "When we love a person, we accept him or her exactly as is: the lovely with the unlovely, the strong along with the fearful, the true mixed in with the facade, and of course, the only way we can do it is by accepting ourselves that way."

Friends, that was my epiphany this week. We've forgotten that it all starts and ends with love - and that includes loving ourselves, accepting that God loves us completely just as we are, and calls us to embrace that love so that we might love others well - and allow love to change the world because it really can.

The pressures of the world are real. Social media makes them look different and perhaps feel different, but we've always been dealing with them. I talked to my daughter (14 years old), and her wisdom about it was clear. We can start to compare ourselves to each other, but that's not what we should do. I'm not that other person, and they're not me.

We still forget the message of the Gospel. It starts with love – and it ends with love, too. We're created in the image of God. We're loved from the start. We

sometimes forget that pull of love and run the other way, but love doesn't ever end. Even when we run, love pursues us. When we hurt ourselves or others, love is steadfast. And when we return wondering if love is really there – if love can possibly still be there, we're embraced and welcomed. That's really Good News!

The Good News is that love is real. God's love in Jesus can be trusted. It doesn't fail even when we feel like we've failed. It doesn't stop even when we feel like we've given all we can give. It doesn't quit even when we want to. Love never fails. The power of love is real and relevant to the world. And I needed to hear it again – love never fails – for me, for you, for everyone.

It starts and ends with love. Fred Rogers said that “love is at the root of everything – love or the lack of it.” Rogers knew the importance of love in our lives, and he showed it every day by offering a safe place, a place where a child was accepted with questions, fears, wonderings, and even room to play and learn.

“Love is at the root of everything...” Love is what invites us to this table. Love is behind this incredible notion that our Lord Jesus would offer a simple meal as a reminder of the depth and breadth of God's love for you and me. It is amazing grace that saves us, redeems us, and sends us!

May the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Spirit lead us today and always. Let us pray as we come to the table of grace...SILENT PRAYER OF CONFESSION