

“In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe”

February 3, 2019

Learning from Mister Rogers series – Season of Epiphany

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

A song from *Sesame Street* came to mind this week: *Who are the people in your neighborhood?* It went through different professions that a kid might meet every day. And Mister Rogers had a similar goal when he invited us into the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. We met characters that we could relate to and understand. They formed their own community with different personalities, gifts, and interests.

Some of you may know the puppets who are a part of our neighborhood. There are many more, but I want to introduce you to the ones we have here. Daniel Striped Tiger is shy and gentle; sometimes timid and sometimes brave. He asks honest questions and expresses feelings. Some have described fun-loving, X the Owl as an adolescent because of X’s love of learning new things and growing. I’m not sure that’s true for all adolescents, but you get the idea!

Henrietta Pussycat is lovable. King Friday XIII can be demanding, but cares about the people in his neighborhood. And Lady Elaine can be mischievous, but she’s also brave and bold - and ready to speak up. The story is told that she might be modeled after Rogers’ own sister! Fred Rogers said, “We all have lots of facets to who we are, and it’s fun to be able to express them.”

And it’s true! Maybe we know people who are like these characters. They are not the same. Each of them is unique, and yet living together in community. They appreciate each other. They listen. They learn from each other, and they grow. Each one is important to the whole.

The Neighborhood of Make-Believe was an important part of each visit with Mister Rogers, partly because it encouraged imagination. Some have said that it was a place “where anything can happen and anything can be talked about.” And they did talk about a lot of things, including death and divorce, feelings, and struggles. There’s something about the atmosphere and these puppets that eases tension and helps people open up.

SHOW MEDIA: Importance of neighborhood of make-believe

And there’s something about the Neighborhood that invites us to have honest conversations about who we are and how we relate. How many spaces are there where we can truly be ourselves and share the joys and struggles of life? If there’s one place where that *should* happen, it’s the church. And yet we struggle sometimes to welcome one another. We struggle to feel like we belong. But that’s the goal!

SHOW SLIDE: “Fred was once asked whether he thought the Neighborhood was a metaphor for heaven. He answered that it was never his intention to make the

Neighborhood a utopia, a 'Pollyannish state.' His television neighbors and the residents of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe dealt with real issues like death and divorce and real feelings like anger and fear. That's not how he pictured heaven: *'When I think about heaven,' he said, 'it is a state in which we are so greatly loved that there is no fear and doubt and disillusionment and anxiety. It is where people really do look at you with those eyes of Jesus.'* *Eyes that see what is wonderful about our neighbor. Eyes that can see the invisible, the essential in one another.*" (Hollingsworth, p. 152-53)

But I wonder if Rogers was thinking about the church - at least in some small way. Perhaps the church should be a foretaste of heaven. It certainly should be different than anywhere people *aren't* treated with love. And as we planned this series, someone said, "Twitter is not an image of the Kingdom of God." We struggle to find safe spaces these days - places of love and belonging. Shouldn't the church reflect the Kingdom of God?

There's a desire in all of us to belong. Psychologist Abraham Maslow said that love and belonging come right after our physiological needs like food, water, sleep, and shelter and our need for safety. Being a part of a community and finding our place is a part of how God created us. We're created for relationship with God and others, which is where we started a month ago with Mister Rogers.

We hear something of belonging from Jesus. In the Gospel of John, he's facing the cross. He knows that he'll be betrayed, and he's told the disciples so. It's right after that when he says, "Don't let your hearts be troubled." Can you imagine? Of course, they're troubled! They can't fathom turning away from Jesus!

But then Jesus tells them that the antidote for a troubled heart is to trust in him. Many times prayer can't change a situation, but it can change how we feel and how we respond. It can lessen the trouble we feel and remind us that we belong to God.

And then Jesus promises them a dwelling place with him. Even amid the uncertainty, there's assurance. And we constantly need assurance, don't we? There are moments when we need to remember that we are not alone - even in the midst of the struggle. We need to be reminded that God is right there with us and will not leave us. We need to hear that we belong to God.

And we hear something of belonging from Paul, too, when he writes to the people in Corinth - a community of Christians in conflict. His talk about spiritual gifts addresses one part of the conflict. As a new community, there was tension around how they would come together even with different gifts.

Paul says that he doesn't want them to be ignorant. Many scholars believe that some in the church in Corinth were holding their gifts as more important than others. Perhaps some thought that speaking in tongues was the best gift, and if you didn't have it, then you didn't matter so much. Those gifts that were more public were given greater

importance. There was a superiority complex at work here, and it wasn't serving the church well. It was hurting the church.

So you notice that Paul reminds them that Jesus brings them together. All who claim that Jesus is Lord are united by the Spirit. And it's the Holy Spirit that distributes different gifts among the people. They might serve in different ways, but they are all serving the same Lord Jesus. God works in all of them in different ways, but again, it's one God working among them and through them.

Maybe we have moments when we think that our gifts are the best, most needed, and most important - and maybe we're the only ones who can do it the way it needs to be done. Maybe we've been in that place where "it's just easier to do it myself." I'm not sure that we have a superiority complex about spiritual gifts as much as we struggle with apathy in the church. We don't know what our gifts are, and we're apt to leave it that way so that we don't have to do anything more.

We need to hear that powerful Good News that each of us is gifted by God with spiritual gifts for the common good - to make a difference for the sake of Jesus Christ in the world. The truth is that each of us who claims to follow Jesus Christ is gifted with spiritual gifts. Rogers might say, "There's only one person in the whole world that's like you, and that's you." Each of us is beloved and uniquely gifted to serve God.

We belong to God, and God uses us to share Good News. "To be the church is to hold onto one another, to be a team, to value each other's gifts, and to work together to carry out the mission Christ has entrusted to us." Friends, you and I are here because someone (or probably more like many people) shared their spiritual gifts. They used their gifts to share Good News, and that matters.

Walter Brueggeman says: "When the Church is empowered by the Spirit, the world finds it irresistible." When we use the gifts of God, people are drawn to God. It's not that we get the glory, but our lives point to the Source of our giftedness and the Source of grace - our God who is faithful and who is the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

Rev. George Wirth said, Rogers "was a community builder. The neighborhood was symbolic of Fred Rogers' desire for people to live together in peace, with respect and love and affirmation, and when things go wrong, forgiveness and reconciliation." That sounds like a vision of the Kingdom of God to me! How do we commit ourselves to that as the church right now?

Perhaps we can remember some important lessons. You have a bookmark-size card in your bulletin today: "13 Good Neighbor Lessons."

Conflict is a part of community.

People with different belief can co-exist.

Remind friends of their authentic value.

Love your neighbor and love yourself.

Be a good listener.

*We respond best when there's an attempt to understand.
Treat everyone with respect.
Be a helper.
Don't be afraid to discuss the tough stuff.
Build people up.
Expect and accept mistakes.
What is essential in life is invisible to the eye.
Take time to think about someone who has helped you.*

How can we keep on doing these things or start doing them? I wonder what difference we might see in ourselves and our community.

When we come to the table that Jesus sets and remember the meal that he offers us, it's a time to know deep down that each of us belongs to God - and that Jesus forms us into a community of love and grace by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We come in prayer, knowing that we're not invited here because we're perfect, but because we're deeply loved by the One who created, redeems, and sustains us. Let us pray:

PRAYER OF CONFESSION and WORDS OF ASSURANCE