**The Gospel According to Mr. Rogers: Life in Alignment**

**Matthew 5:13-16**

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Will you all sing along with me? “It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? It’s a neighborly day in this beautywood. A neighborly day for a beauty. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you. I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you. So let's make the most of this beautiful day, Since we're together, we might as well say, Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor? Won't you please, Won't you please, Please won't you be my neighbor?”

I have the feeling that song is familiar to a lot of you! I guess that’s not surprising. If you were born between about 1965 and 1998, or if you had children growing up during those years, you could hardly have avoided hearing it somewhere along the way. The theme song of “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood”, it was written and sung by the greatest neighbor of all, Fred Rogers, as he changed from jacket to cardigan, and dress shoes to sneakers.

I don’t know how many of you had the opportunity to see the recent documentary, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor”. If you haven’t seen it, I can’t recommend it enough. It is a lovely film about Fred Rogers and his life, of course, but it’s also incredibly inspirational. The more you learn about Mister Rogers, the more you want to be like him.

What a lot of people don’t realize is that while Fred Rogers never preached or spoke directly about religion on the program, the content of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood was highly influenced by his Christian faith. In fact, Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. After finishing his bachelor’s degree in music, Rogers had planned to go to seminary. However, just before starting, he saw a television for the first time and was fascinated by the potential of this new medium. The programs that he saw were largely slapstick comedies in which people threw pies at each other, tripped or slapped each other, all in the name of humor. Rogers could see that television was going to be a powerful tool and believed that someone should use that tool for good – particularly in teaching children.

He was very interested in child development and soon started a program for young children. At the same time, he went ahead and began his seminary coursework, using his lunch hours to study. After eight years, he was ordained by the Presbyterian Church to be an evangelist serving children and families through the mass media. An unusual calling but clearly where God was leading him.

And so Mister Rogers found his vocation – that work he could do that served God and the needs of the world. He evangelized not by knocking on doors or preaching on street corners but by ministering to his viewers and teaching a whole generation the basic commandments of our faith. To love God and to love…neighbor. Or, as Jesus re-words it to the disciples at the Last Supper – to love each other as Jesus loves us.

Jesus understood, as did Fred Rogers, that we as individuals are at our best – and we as the church of Jesus Christ are at our best – when we live out love of God and love of neighbor. And, in fact, often we demonstrate our love for God through our love of neighbor.

For the next four weeks, Pastor Nick and I are going to explore what we can learn about faith and loving our neighbors from Mister Rogers. But first, why do a sermon series about neighborliness right now? For at least two reasons. First, just as it was 2000 years ago, to actually live our lives loving our neighbors is incredibly counter-cultural. In this century, Americans have become more and more isolated from each other. Our children spend less time physically with each other and increasingly more time communicating through social media or simply engaging with the world through a screen. With social media, we also see much more widespread insulting language and hateful rhetoric. People seem to feel freer to say what they are thinking without editing or considering the consequences of what they say. The combination of increased isolation and decreased concern for how we communicate is breaking down our neighborliness. We, as Christians, have the opportunity to demonstrate the opposite through living our lives out of love.

The other reason for a series right now is that the Christian church has always flourished when we engage with our neighbors and faltered when we isolate ourselves. We see that in the history of our own denomination. As an Anglican priest, John Wesley founded a reform movement because he saw the Church of England as increasingly elitist, increasingly closed, and he believed that the heart of the gospel is to love and embrace our neighbors not to distance them. His movement spread like wildfire as he took the church out to the people – preaching in coal mines and farm fields.

As a congregation, as we look toward our future, one question we must ask is how we will continue to reach outside of our four walls and into our community. How will we embody love for our neighbors?

Now, back to Mister Rogers. He clearly believed in the importance of loving our neighbor. Actually, if you’ve seen the film, you know that in an interview one of his colleagues says, “Fred really felt that communicating love of neighbor and love of self was the most deeply spiritual thing he could be doing.” Rogers himself says this, “Love is at the root of everything – all learning, all parenting, all relationships – love or the lack of it.”

But, the thing about Mister Rogers is that he not only believed that, he lived it. And he not only lived it on television, it was the person he was. His love was visible, almost palpable. Not in big, showy ways, even though he had a national audience to play to. He taught us what it means to love our neighbor in the simple things he did and said in the course of everyday life. His whole way of being – his words, his actions, and his behavior – was aligned with his faith.

Many of us struggle with what we see as our own hypocrisy. As people who follow Jesus, we want to love like he did. But, we get caught up in the immediate needs of our lives, our work, and our families. Sometimes, we get bogged down in our dissatisfaction and frustration with our lives. Or, we stumble over our fears – fear of people we don’t know or trust, fear of people who are different, fear of looking or feeling foolish, fear of getting hurt. All of these are real parts of who we are and can lead us to turn inward. Yet, as we heard in the reading from I John, we know we are faithful in following Jesus when we follow his commandments and his greatest commandment is to love.

So, what does it look like to align how we behave in the world with what we believe? What does it look like to live out of love? It looks like this…and this…and this…and this.

Fred Rogers expressed his love - and, therefore, his faith - in all sorts of ways. Here are a few of the things we can learn from him about living our lives in alignment with our faith. First of all, he made a point of helping people see their own worth. He was known for saying things like “I like you just the way you are” or “I always wanted to have a neighbor just like you”. Undoubtedly, there were times when people irritated him, but he focused on the value of each individual person he encountered. He is quoted in the film saying, “A person cannot grow unless they know they are accepted exactly as they are”.

How do you communicate to a person that you love them and accept them? You give them time. You slow down, stop what you’re doing, and make eye contact. And then you listen, really listen, to what they say. You join them in their world for a few minutes – seeing what they see, experiencing what they experience.

And finally, you are kind. That seems so basic, doesn’t it? But we see an awful lot of the opposite in the world. We see an awful lot of name-calling and criticism, judgment and flippancy, anger and aggression. What a difference we could make by being consistently kind. What does that mean? Being positive. Looking for ways to be helpful. Offering a compliment or a word of comfort or reassurance. Being humble enough to recognize that reaching out to our neighbor is, perhaps, more important than whatever our own agenda might be in a given moment. And, perhaps most importantly, assuming good rather than bad, seeing the other person as sincere rather than manipulative, as worthy rather than lesser.

All of this is what Jesus means when he says that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. When he teaches us not to hide that light but to let it shine in the good things we do and the love that we give. And that begins right in our own neighborhoods, in this church family, and in our community. We need each other. The world needs our light. Ann Arbor needs our light. The University of Michigan needs our light. Our light is the love we give. Or, as Mister Rogers puts it… (Play clip)

May it be so. Amen.