**The Gospel According to Mr. Rogers: Love By Example**

**1 Corinthians 13:1-8, 13**

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“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 learned an interesting little fact this week – did you know that all of the sweaters that Mister Rogers had in his famous closet during the early years of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood were knit by his mother? Every Christmas, she would knit a sweater for each person in his family, and those she made for Fred became the iconic cardigans we so strongly associate with him. In one episode, he told his audience, “She [his mother] makes sweaters for many different people, but that’s one of the ways she says I love you.”

We’re in the third week of our four-part sermon series on the Gospel According to Mister Rogers, which was inspired by the documentary film about Fred Rogers called “Won’t You Be My Neighbor”. The premise of this sermon series is that the lessons that Mister Rogers taught about love and care and concern for our neighbor were grounded in his Christian faith and are as relevant for us today as they were when we were children. What can we learn about faith from the great neighbor we call Mister Rogers?

We started our series talking about how Fred Rogers truly lived his life in alignment with his faith. He believed that teaching others the Great Commandment, to love God and love our neighbors, was the most deeply spiritual thing he could do. Then, last week, Pastor Nick explored the question an inquisitive lawyer asks Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, “Who Is Our Neighbor?” Mister Rogers would say that your neighbor is whomever you are with at the moment – particularly the person in need.

Today, I would like to give you a little bit of time to appreciate the people in your life who, like Mister Rogers’ mother, have taught you about love by their example. The people who have been living examples of the words we just heard from I Corinthians. “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

In the later years of his life, Fred Rogers was invited to give commencement speeches at a number of universities. By then, he was speaking to graduating students who had watched his program as preschoolers. What an honor and a challenge to give a speech that would in some way inspire this group as they headed out into the world to make a difference.

In many of those speeches, Mister Rogers did a little exercise with his audience that I would like to do with you. This is what he would say. “Beside my chair in my office is a framed piece of calligraphy with a sentence from Saint Exupery’s book, “The Little Prince”. It reads, translated from the French, “The essential is invisible to the eye.” I feel the closer we get to knowing and living the truth of that sentence, the closer we get to wisdom. What is essential about you that is invisible to the eye? And who are those who have helped you become who you are today?

Anyone who has ever graduated from a college, anyone who has ever been able to sustain a good work, has had at least one person – and often many – who believed in him or her. We just don’t get to be competent human beings without many different investments from others.

In fact, from the time you were very little, you’ve had people who have smiled you into smiling, people who have talked you into talking, sung you into singing, loved you into loving.

So, on this extra special day, let’s take some time to think of those extra special people. Some of them may be right here, some may be far away. Some may even be in heaven. No matter where they are, deep down you know they have always wanted what is best for you. They’ve always cared about you beyond measure and have encouraged you to be true to the best within you.

He would then give his audience a minute of silence to think about those people. So, I’d like to give you the opportunity to do the same thing. For one minute, and I’ll time you, close your eyes and think of someone who has smiled you into smiling, talked you into talking, sung you into singing, loved you into loving. Who has seen in you your essential self, your essential worth?

(TAKE A MOMENT OF SILENCE)

As I look at your faces, I see your smiles, a few tears, and a peacefulness and joy that is holy – holy because you are remembering those people who have not only loved you but taught you to love as God loves.

When I did this exercise myself, two people came immediately to mind. And, again in the spirit of Mister Rogers’ mother and the sweaters she made as an expression of love, I brought in these extra sweaters to represent them. This is my mother’s sweater she got in Norway, and this the latest in a series of cardigans my college professor father has had over the course of my lifetime. They are the two of the people, along with a few more, who know the essential of who I am – who look beyond my rough edges, the mistakes I make, the poor decisions, to see in me the image of God.

And that is what this exercise Mister Rogers has done with so many graduating students is all about. Fred Rogers understood that those people who love the essential within us teach us that we have value, that we matter, that we are beautiful, unique, and worthy. The same lessons that Jesus taught as he healed the lepers or blessed the woman caught in adultery.

Ironically, Mister Rogers was occasionally accused of doing more damage than good by teaching children they are special, helping them to see their own worth. His critics claimed he contributed to making a whole generation of children more selfish and self-absorbed. Yet, he believed just the opposite – he believed that helping others see their worth is the first step in teaching them to be more loving of their neighbor and, therefore, in creating a more loving world.

In her book, “The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers”, Amy Hollingsworth shares a lesson Fred Rogers learned from his favorite seminary professor, Dr. William Orr. Dr. Orr taught that there is a spectrum and at one end is evil. “Evil would like nothing better than to have us feel awful about who we are. And then with that in the back of our minds, we would look through those eyes at our neighbor, and see only what’s awful – in fact, look for what’s awful in our neighbor.” Jesus is at the other end of the spectrum. Jesus would want us to feel as good as possible about God’s creation within us and again, with that in the back of our minds, we would look through those eyes and see what’s wonderful about our neighbor.”

What a powerful notion as we look at the state of our country and our world today. How we see ourselves becomes how we view our neighbor. How much of the conflict in our neighborhoods and communities, or even that we experience ourselves, could we avoid if we could see and celebrate God’s image within ourselves and, therefore, see the image of God in others? How would that change our behavior? Rogers says, “The reason we are created in God's image - in God's tzelem - is to be God's representatives on this earth - to do here what God would do - to take care of the land and each other as God would take care of us.”

But, if you are like me, seeing the image of God in myself can be awfully difficult at times – as can seeing the image of God in others. Which is what gives this exercise we did a few minutes ago its power. It reminds us that we are lovable and makes us grateful – grateful for God’s love, grateful for those who love us, grateful that we have the capacity to love others.

# I believe that gratitude is what transforms the love we receive from others into the love we give to our neighbor. Gratitude soothes our doubts, quiets our fears, helps us find our grounding in God. Gratitude makes room in our hearts for those in our world who feel lesser, unworthy, unloved and unlovable. Gratitude leads us to look deeply and seek the image of God in each person we meet, turning enemies to friends and strangers into neighbors.

# So, whose sweater is hanging in your closet? Who is the saint for whom you are grateful, that person who through loving you taught you to love? Take them in your mind’s eye out into the world with you today allowing their example to guide you as you are a conduit of love. Because just as their love has transformed you, your love can transform the world.

# May it be so. Amen.