

Won't You Be My Neighbor?
The First Sunday after Christmas
Sunday, December 29, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

'And the Word became flesh and lived among us.' In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Our Gospel passage today is the prologue of John, a masterpiece of poetry and prose with the quality of a hymn that hearkens us back to the very beginning in Genesis and gives the birth and life of Jesus a profound, cosmic dimension. Verse 14 is the transitional stanza that sums up the whole hymn. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

As beautiful as that is, I wonder if Eugene Peterson better reached the heart of this passage in his translation of the Bible called *The Message*. His alternative version goes like this: "The Word was made flesh and blood and moved into *the neighborhood*. We see the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish."

While maybe not as poetic as other translations, Peterson's prose brings the cosmic to the particular, which is what the incarnation of Jesus is all about. It places the mystery of God becoming human in a real place that we can see and touch and hear, our neighborhood, whatever that neighborhood might be.

A person who built his whole life around the concept of neighborhood was Fred Rogers, better known as Mister Rogers, host of the children's television program, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Mister Rogers seems to be experiencing a renaissance of late. He was the subject of an acclaimed documentary last year, was portrayed by Tom Hanks in a new movie this year, and last weekend Eddie Murphy reprised his parody of Mister Rogers on *Saturday Night Live*. I wonder, why all the interest in him now? Perhaps he's the prophetic voice we have been longing for to help us out of the increasingly polarized and transactional times we live in.

As Mitzi Minor pointed out in our adult forum a few weeks ago, Mister Rogers gave us three adages that can best help us navigate this age:

Be kind,
 be kind,
 and be kind.

And, while that is sage advice, I believe there's more to why we yearn for Mister Rogers now than our longing for kindness. I think we have to go back to his childhood to discover his deepest yearnings to understand our own longing for him. In other words, why did Mister Rogers become Mister Rogers?

Fred Rogers was a sickly, overweight child. He was shy and was more comfortable with adults than children. And he became the target of school bullies. One day, school got out early and he

decided to walk home. As he walked, behind him he heard his tormentors, “Hey! Fat Freddy! We’re going to get you!” As the boys got closer, Fred willed his legs to go faster, his corduroy pantlegs zip-zipping against each other as he urged his jog toward a run. He turned on to Weldon, his street, but still had 3 blocks to go, up an incline, before reaching home. He remembered that a kind widow lived along his route. He prayed that she would be home as he turned up her front walk and climbed her stairs.

When Mrs. Stewart answered the frantic knock at her door, she found a flush, panting boy, his face shining with exertion and fear. She let him in immediately. The bullies gave up and took off, looking for new entertainment, as bullies do. Mrs. Stewart called Fred’s house so that someone could come and pick him up. But Fred thought about those bullies for the rest of his life.

Sixty years later, he could still recall that day. He said, “I resented the teasing. I resented the pain. I resented those kids for not seeing beyond my fatness or my shyness. And what’s more, I didn’t know it was alright to feel any of those things.”

Fred started to look around him for other people who were struggling, other people who were sad, and he began to see that this included just about everybody – even the bullies themselves. Fred recalled, “I started to look behind the things that people did and said, and after a lot of sadness, I began a lifelong search for what is essential, what it is about my neighbor that doesn’t meet the eye.”

Later when Fred was a freshman in high school, he learned that a classmate named Jim was in the hospital following an injury. Jim was a football and basketball player, popular and attractive. Fred began taking Jim his homework to the hospital. Over time, the two of them built a real friendship. Fred said, “I learned to trust Jim and told him some of my deepest feelings, and he told me about his dad’s dying two years before and what that was like for him and his mom.” When Jim returned to school, he told their classmates, “That Rogers kid is OK.”

Jim invited Fred along when he and his friends made plans. Jim’s acceptance gave Fred a new confidence with others. Fred was elected president of the student council, editor of the school yearbook, and was voted “Most Likely to Succeed.” Fred and Jim became lifelong friends. Fred was the best man at Jim’s wedding, and, though they lived in different parts of the country, they wrote letters and visited when they could. When Jim was dying of cancer in 1995, Fred traveled with a broken ankle to see him. “What a difference one person can make in the life of another,” Fred said, remembering Jim’s willingness to see and embrace who Fred was at his core. With a slight smile, he added, “It’s almost as if he said, ‘I like you just the way you are.’”

Fred’s experience with the bullies and his friendship with Jim were pivotal to his call to a ministry of children’s television. He remarked, “When I say that what we do through Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood is theological, I’m referring to the Incarnation. The Incarnation means man is not isolated. There is Someone who cares and understands.”

One of his biographers, Shea Tuttle writes, “Fred offered a kind of incarnation through his own loving presence. Through his memory of childhood, through the gentleness with which he held his own childhood feelings, Mister Rogers provided a comfort greater than simply saying, “Don’t cry,” “Don’t be afraid,” or even “Just let on that you don’t care.” God cared, Fred believed, enough to be among us and enough to feel every human feeling. So, Fred worked hard to be with children in their feelings, to explain and alleviate when possible, but more importantly, to take them seriously – as seriously as God becoming human.”

So, why a neighborhood as his metaphor? Tuttle writes this about Fred's most closely held belief: "All people are created by God, in the image of God, so, all people are good. A diverse neighborhood, filled with a broad representation of the people God loves, was, for Fred, a natural and necessary response to God's inclusive love."

Throughout his life and especially in his last years, Fred believed that the incarnate God was not only present within him, but would nudge him to take a particular action for a particular person at a particular time. Lisa, one of his co-workers on the program, was going through a difficult time. Her husband Scott had been diagnosed with cancer. They had a young son named Teddy. One morning Lisa woke up, holding Scott's hand, to find that he had died. "I was really panicky," she said. "And the doorbell rang." When she opened the door, she found Fred standing there. Lisa, who is now an Episcopal priest, remembers that he was licking his lips, which she said he sometimes did in situations where he felt uncomfortable. Fred said, "I was praying and I felt you needed some help." Fred called the funeral home, he stayed and wept with Lisa, and he gave her some gentle advice: make sure Teddy knows you will be there for him.

This is a time for making New Year's resolutions. Some really good ones for 2020 are:

Be kind,
be kind,
and be kind.

Another good one might be this: listen to the nudges of the incarnate God within you and act on those nudges.

When Fred was invited to be the graduation speaker at his neighborhood high school a few years before his death, he said these words that may have been his best response to the meaning of the prologue of John. He said, "With all the sadness and destruction, negativity and rage, expressed throughout the world, it's tough not to wonder where the loving presence is. Well, we don't have to look very far. Deep within each of us is a spark of the divine just waiting to be used to light up a dark place."

Amen.