

05/19/19 SERMON

“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mind? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor?” These are the opening words to the theme song of “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood,” a show I was raised on. It, like many children’s programs, while having a variety of lessons depending on the episode, has one common message in every episode: inclusion. Above all else, Fred Roger’s main message on his show and in his life was “Love your neighbor as yourself,” a message taught by Jesus and his disciples, and a message we all know.

Now, if I went around the room and asked people who their neighbors are, the answer I’d receive would be something like “everyone,” and that’s right. If I went around and asked about who you associate with on a regular basis, that answer would be different. I’m no different: I like to think that I’m inclusive and that I love everyone as my neighbor. However, growing up on a mostly White Christian island in SE Michigan, my pool of friends growing up was very much limited to those of the same race, socio-economic class, faith, and generation. My friends list on Facebook reflects this fact.

So too is that true for most people: their friends/those they associate with regularly are reflections of their beliefs, upbringing, and current place in life. There are of course exceptions to this rule for all of us (someone who doesn’t reflect us in one way or another), but, the average person’s social pool reflects them in many ways.

Such was the case in Peter’s day. You had “Jew” and “Gentile,” “us” and “them,” “saved” and “unsaved,” “clean” and “unclean.” Gentiles, at this point in the Christian narrative, were seen as “unclean,” and therefore were not to be associated with, much like the Samaritans that Jesus both speaks to and talks about in the famous parable. In today’s reading, Peter is “on trial” (so to speak) because he not only spoke to a group of Gentiles, but sat down and shared a meal with them. He only did this though after having a vision from God telling him to eat animals that (according to Jewish tradition) are “unclean” (much like the Gentiles were seen as), and Peter resists multiple times, saying each time that nothing unclean has ever passed his lips. Finally, in response, he is told “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” In this same way, Peter is taught that God has the ability to do pretty much anything, even make clean those “Gentiles” and that they too are to be included in the community of faith. In other words, they are to be also considered “Children of God.” Sure enough, after Peter has told this story to the council he stands before, they themselves are celebrating the baptism of these Gentiles whom they had just moments earlier seen as vile, filthy, and more-or-less damned.

We see this theme of “unity” or “inclusion” elsewhere in the Bible as well, including every one of the other suggested readings for today:

- In the Psalm reading, which was used for the Call to Worship, we are told that all things are called to praise God. From the smallest crawling insect to the human race to the “sea monsters;” from the planet on which we reside to the stars, the moon, and all the celestial bodies; even the weather is called to praise God. In other words, all things are called upon to worship God almighty in equal chorus. This in turn reminds us of our being a part of something so much greater, so much beyond ourselves, and that we are in fact *not* the center of it all. We are a mere voice in the chorus, called to be in harmony with all other members of the chorus.
- In the reading from John 13, in addition to foretelling his own death to his disciples, Jesus also commands them to love their neighbors as he as loved them. The command to “love

one another” is not a new concept, but to love as Jesus has loved, that is a change. Keep in mind that Jesus walked with, taught, fed, and washed the feet of Judas Iscariot, the man he knew would betray him. He walked with, fed, and washed the feet of Peter, the man he knew would betray him three times. Still, knowing how things would play out, he loved them unconditionally, and that in turn is the love that Christ is calling all of us to have for one another.

- In Rev. 21 (which I’ll discuss more next week), it speaks of a “new heaven and a new earth,” not in the context of “death and destruction,” but more-so in the context of “renewal” or “reconciliation.” In this “new earth,” many commentators draw particular attention to John’s words saying “there was no sea.” In other words, there was nothing separating us from a proper relationship with God. These “seas” (i.e. race, religion, politics, class, gender, age, all other demographics) would therefore no longer be separating us from one another. We would be unified and neighborly, having been reconciled to one another as well.

In conclusion, we are called upon to love one another as Christ loves us and to bridge the gaps between us, that we might truly be “neighbors.” How do we do this, though? Unfortunately, there is no clear-cut method to solving this problem. One method though for moving forward toward the solution is doing what Fred Rogers suggests in his show: to see the value in every human life, no matter who they are or what they’ve done, and to see them as having the potential to make a contribution to society. From there, seeing said potential, we must actually step forward and encourage them to grow and make that contribution. I’ll give you two examples of what I mean:

1. When I was in middle school and high school, I was of course trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I became an adult and what I wanted to do with my life. All the while, people at my home church saw how involved I was in youth group, Sunday School, fundraising for mission trips, and the mission trips themselves. They heard me be liturgist on a fairly regular basis. They told me time and time again, “You’ll be a great pastor someday,” and even told my parents that I would be a great pastor someday. All the signs were there, but I said, “I’m actually thinking about being a _____” (insert job I was thinking about being here). Now, I truly can’t imagine being anything *but* a pastor, and that’s mostly due to the encouragement I received from others at my church.
2. I recently read a book titled *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*, where a United Methodist pastor from Indianapolis talks about how the various churches he has served have dealt with the poverty in the area. He talks about how, instead of just giving the poor food, water, money, etc., they look for that “something” that a person has the potential to do and to teach to others, and once they start looking at the impoverished from that view, miracles start happening. A delinquent high school student who has a love for fixing bikes is introduced to other people who like fixing bikes, and they eventually get as far as owning a bike repair shop that everyone in the neighborhood utilizes and donates to. A single mother of four who knows how to bake everything you can name ends up getting a bakery that is enough to support herself and her kids along with having some extra money on the side. An immigrant with no money on his person but who can cook delectable Mexican food eventually gets his own catering business.

In all these cases, this all happens because of the potential seen and the encouragement received. Our challenge then becomes to reflect this action.

The challenge though is to do this in day-to-day life and with people we don't know. As one author writes:

“It is humbling to have God show us that our love of the law has become stronger than our law of love; this requires us to acknowledge our error. We matter, but we are not all that matters . . . We are called to set aside some of the things that matter to us in order to welcome the other people God has brought into our midst.”

That is our challenge: to encourage and love our neighbors, regardless of who they are and what they've done, in the hopes that we'll traverse the seas that presently separate us from one another and from God, and to reconcile all those relationships. We also all don't have the same “seas” to cross. So, in closing, I ask you: What is/are your seas(s), and what must you do to be able to cross it/them and ask someone new the question Mr. Rogers asks in his theme song: “Won't you be my neighbor?”