

Truax United Church of Christ
November 24, 2019, Pentecost 24, Cycle C
Psalm 46, Jeremiah 23:1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

The Atlantic Monthly for December published the article, “What would Mr. Rogers Do?”, and it was not coincidental that they mimicked the well used phrase “What would Jesus do?” It is written by the Tom Junod now senior writer at ESPN whose relationship with Fred Rogers is the basis of the new movie “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” and was scheduled to release in theaters on November 22. The article reveals the transformative nature of the friendship that Junod developed with Fred Rogers through a series of interviews on American heroes for Esquire. The writer confesses that at the time of his interviews he was a known cynic in his interview approach; fractured by a challenging relationship in his family. The stories he shares and the way he talks about his experience with Fred Rogers as an actor, as a man and as a mentor are compelling. It started as an interview for a story and became an important relationship for him personally.

Fred Rogers was generous with his time and attention, prompt in his responsiveness. Mr Junod says, “Remembering him as a nice man is easier than thinking of him as a demanding one.” At that point, Mr Junod is talking not about the character Mr. Rogers, but the real Fred Rogers who was a Presbyterian Minister and a man who lived what appeared to be a seamless life of faith, even and graceful in all of life’s aspects. Regardless of the character of the many persons whom Fred Rogers met, that individual was received with an attitude of unconditional positive regard, was viewed through Mr. Roger’s patient, intelligent, aware and loving eyes as a child of God. On this final Sunday of the church’s liturgical year, we are asked to imagine what it would be like if we, like Mr Rogers take our knowledge and faith out of the church, out from the pew and into our everyday lives. What if Jesus the Christ was king over our life? When one thinks of that, I believe that it might just look like Mr. Rogers neighborhood.

Well, if it were at all easy, we *would* be living in Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, don’t you think? So, there must be a catch to it. I have been extremely grateful for many of the things that have come my way while working in Christian Education. In particular, I benefitted from the writings of Marcus Borg who was a professor of Religion at Oregon State University until his death in 2015. His approach to Biblical interpretation seemed to strip any confusion or misunderstanding away. The way into Mr Rogers Neighborhood from Borg’s perspective is one of relationship to God. It does not come from an understanding of the Bible or attesting to its truthfulness. It is this *work* of relationship with God that transforms our day to day living and the world around us.¹ Using the Bible as a lens through which to see the life of Jesus is enough to know what God is like and what a life filled with God is like.

¹ Borg, Marcus J. and Wright, N. T., The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions, HarperSanFrancisco, CA, 2000, p229.

Borg's vision of a Christian life² then rests on these two central ideas:

Understand faith as relational: the transformational truth is not the *writings* of scripture. What is written on a page does not change our life. Instead, transformation comes through a deepening relationship with the God to whom scripture and our faith tradition points. The quality of that relationship, its practice and strengthening can and does change our life.

And, the Bible as a lens: What matters is hearing the voice that speaks through our tradition and not believing in the inerrancy of scripture or our tradition. It matters that we hear the voice.

I think that we can agree that to end up with a loving, conflict-free neighborhood, community, or country requires some change. To discover life in which we are living under the rule of Christ would be different. Persons who live in the Royal palace or under a monarchy understand the culture of kingship. There are a lot of things that one does and many more things that one doesn't do in the presence of a king or queen; one doesn't turn their back to the Royal when leaving a room. When the king/queen asks you to do something, it is not an invitation to negotiate. When a king or queen asks, the response is "yes, your majesty". For us to build "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" we would have to say yes to a spirit led life, a life full of God; our answer to an alternative wisdom, compassion, justice and community would be YES³.

And isn't this where it all becomes difficult, tricky to navigate, often disappointing or frustrating and sometimes painful? Out into the world we go with ideas that we have already decided would work in a particular way and assumptions about people, about goodness and about relationship. There seems to be a separation, a true division between what happens in here as in this room and in here as in our hearts and what happens out in the world of business, education, science and politics. To guide our inner life has been the function of church for more than 2000 years of Christian history. But, many will point instead to the history of religion, a history in which one could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain, yet still believe that Jesus is "personal Lord and Savior." Spiritual practice of a relationship with God has been overtaken by images of a relationship in art or literature or psychology. Commitment to church membership or religious practice has declined to some extent because we have fallen off on the job of helping people to build a relationship with God that matters.

Richard Rohr is a contemplative, Catholic priest who created the Center for Action and Contemplation, dedicated to deepening one's spiritual life in order to effectively change our political or public life. He points to some of the same barriers to a transforming faith that Borg identified. "Believing doctrines, practicing rituals, and following requirements are not, in and of themselves, inner or deep. And, the institutional church has been so disconnected from the authentically political—God's people, the public forum—that soon

² Ibid, p239-40.

³ Ibid., p243-44

we had nothing much to say in public.”⁴ To say nothing is to say something. The world has no time for such a divided position anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great. Our faith must show real fruit. Again, Rohr says, “In the end, politics is nothing more than an instrument of social good and human development meant to be the right arm of those whose souls have melted into God. It is to be the living breath of those who say they are religious people and patriotic citizens.”⁵

As followers of Jesus, having seen his Spirit filled life through the eyes of the disciples and the gospel writers, we know what to do and we should just put our heads down and get to the work of loving. And here is where I want to go back to the statement that Tom Jurod made about Mr. Rogers, that “Remembering him as a nice man is easier than remembering him as a demanding one.” Tom Jurod said that Fred Rogers did not discuss public policy with him. There was one time in response to an email question, “I would like to go on the air and say something like ‘Whoever is without sin cast the first stone’ or ‘The Lord’s property is always to have mercy’ or some outlandish thing and then ask for a minute of silence to think about forgiveness for those who want it. In fact if our country could dwell on forgiveness for a while I think that would be the one real positive outcome of the pain that is now pervasive.”⁶ This is the public expression of our faith. Using that uniform lens of seeing the world through compassionate eyes, the discipline to apply God’s love and law to our human situations is not really nice. It is hard, demanding and transformative to withhold judgment and pour out our love.

Hear these words: “God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change. These are words from Psalm 46, 1-2a which were read this morning and written to the leader of the Korahites. Korah was a cousin of Moses and Aaron and was a Levite. The Korahites were known for their singing. They are noted at other passages in the Jewish Bible for being present to sing in celebration of events. With other cousins, Korah was jealous of the role that Moses and Aaron took in the Exodus and following. God showed God’s displeasure for the rebellion. When those who were against Moses and Aaron stood aligned with one another, God caused the earth to open underneath them and they vanished. All were dead, except some of the children who had broken ranks from the family stand against Moses and Aaron. The children lived to write and sing this Psalm. Knowing they had this experience gives new meaning to the later words in the Psalm “We will not fear though the earth should change” and later “he utters his voice, the earth melts”. This Psalm is a testimony to the strength and courage that comes through making choices to stand with God.

Later we will sing together the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” which was inspired by the first stanza of this Psalm. It was written by Martin Luther when he was challenging the church to accept the direction of the Gospel. It is thought to have been

⁴ Richard Rohr Meditation, Week Forty-seven, Politics: Old and New, The Strength of the Link, Wednesday, November 20, 2019

⁵ Ibid, Richard Rohr Meditation.

⁶Jurod, Tom, “What would Mr. Rogers Do?”, The Atlantic, December, 2019, p 84

sung by those who marched publicly for the support of Martin Luther's work when it was challenged at the meeting called The Diet of Spyrer.⁷

Let us take the example and instruction of those who have come before us. Let us sink deeply in a supportive and transforming relationship with God. Let us look into the word and work of God. Let us listen carefully for God's voice, as though it is the only thing that is important, the only thing that supports; the one things that saves us. Amen.

⁷ Buxton, Daniel, Blog page: Fulcrum: Your Scriptural Pivot Point, "The Sons of Korah, January, 2018.

Sermon Questions

Literary Questions

- 1) Character—Who are the main characters, what are they like and described
Presumably the Korahites, singers in the Temple
- 2) Plot—What happens in text, why and what is the sequence of events?
This Psalm is a description of the presence of God in all terrible things that might threaten our physical environment. God is our refuge and strength.
- 3) Context—What happened before and after this section. How does context affect the meaning here?
This is a Psalm, but I did look up what the Karahites experienced and discover that their father and family were destroyed for their plotting and jealousy of Moses and Aaron's roles in the Exodus and after.
- 4) Conflict—What is the main conflict here and its cause?
WE are not told about this particular Psalm's creation, but resource attributes it to the experience of family extermination.
- 5) Resolution—What is needed for resolution? Who must do it? Or, if conflict is resolved, will resolution last?
It is a song of encouragement for Israel. Rely on God, The Lord of Hosts is with us, he makes wars cease,
- 6) Author—What can be said about the human author or writer? Why was it written?
Some of this is suggested above. This is a song of Zion, encouragement for the latter days—I hear this as being the days when exile was experienced and threatened.
- 7) Audience—For whom is it written? What effect was intended?
For Israel to encourage
- 8) Reader identification—With whom in the text do I identify? Why have I made that choice
Hmmm, this isn't a person with whom I would identify, but I am captured by the experience of the people and their role as singers forever....I honor that discipline.
- 9) Form—What is the form or genre of this passage (i.e. song, letter, law, epic, parable, saying)
Song—hmm. would this increase the motivation, amplify into the future because it is a learned part of worship?
- 10) Function—What is the function of this passage in terms of the entire work?
- 11) Structure—How could the structure be sketched? Does it build to a climax? in parts?
High energy and affirmation, listing that broadens the context of the many places where God holds influence and if we only hold fast to God our wars and despair will cease—Be Still and Know that I am God.
- 12) Style—What is distinctive about the author's style? Are there distinctive phrases or key words?
- 13) Power—Who has money? Power? Who is Poor and/or powerless?
God holds the power for all who come to God—the poor, the powerless, the rich and the influential, everyone who comes is supported by what they find in God.

- 14) Patterns—Are there unusual patterns? (e.g. three times of questioning, two acts that fail, four journeys) Three Stanzas, but I am not able to see that has meaning outside of the content of three pieces.
- 15) Connections—Do any of the above connect with similar things elsewhere in the Bible
Yes, they connect with the experience of the people who are writing/singing, it is thematic with the relationship that God’s people have with God,
- 16) Translations—How do several English versions compare?
- 17) Parallels—Do parallel accounts differ
- 18) Puzzles—what is surprising or does not fit? What questions do I take to the commentaries?
I am glad that I looked for the information about the people who sang the song. It contrasts a bit with Luther and his experience. Luther might have been similar to the people who disagreed with their father and took a different stand. The reformed church became a movement that was unintended. The Psalm is written by persons who also broke from their “family” tradition.
- 19) Do I like this text? Dislike it? Why? With what feelings am I left?
It is beautiful and motivating

Theological reading

- 1) God in the text:
.All over
- 2) God behind the text:
All over
- 3) Judgement—What is God’s judgment of human failing?
.We are fickle and faithless
- 4) Change—What change is demanded of humanity !
We need to get with the program and dig into the God part of us that has strength and stamina in the face of difficulty.
- 5) Hope—What is the hope(i.e., grace, Good News, empowerment)
This is the good news in that God is present with us today. The empowerment would have been more primitive and concrete in that time, but needs to be more concrete in this time as well. Even though our perceptions have changed, there remains a connection to the power of God that is necessary. We cannot rely on our own resources and power to judge what is and can be.
- 6) Empowerment in the text—Does the text itself indicate what God does to enable change?
God is swirling in there all the time, in the midst of the city, at the dawn of the new day, the earth responds to Gods voice. In this text it is God’s direct intervention and power.
- 7) Empowerment beyond the text—What is God doing in the larger story to which this text belongs
This is the still speaking God. God present in all aspects of life the public and the private.
- 8) Identity—What does this tell us about who we are? Who God is ?
We are God’s people God’s servants, workers, representatives.
- 9) Belief—What are we asked to believe?

We are asked to believe in a “speaking” God even if it means still speaking or speaking again or has always spoken.

10) Action—What is God instructing and therefore enabling us to do?

We are partners, cocreators in the working of the world.

11) Christology—What does the cross and resurrection say to Christians concerning themes raised in this text?

Well this is where the sermon hits the road. This is the Jesus who is Christ the King. If God is revealed in Jesus, the power expressed in the life of Jesus is ours also. How do we participate. How do we live under a King of humility and justice? It looks like faith and hope and love.