

“WON’T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?”
III – “SAY THANK YOU”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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II Timothy 1:1-5

John 21:15-17

Well, this is the last sermon in this October sermon series that’s given a nod to the wisdom and compassion of a man named Mr. Rogers – a man who touched thousands and thousands of young lives over his years on public television with “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” If you were here, you’ll remember that the first sermon was called “Who is My Neighbor?” and through it we thought about breaking down barriers and seeing all of God’s children as our neighbors. The second sermon was called “The Ripple Effect” and we learned again how one little thing we do can ripple on, in and through others for a long time.

Today, this sermon will give a nod to that which was most basic to Mr. Rogers’ life and ministry – kindness, compassion, affirming others and caring for them. Watch any episode of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood and you’ll see how he constantly affirmed people and thanked them for who they were. It might be thanking Mr. McFeeley for being such a good postman, or Officer Clemons for protecting the community as a police officer. Mr. Rogers valued people and he made

sure they knew how much he thought of them, and how much they mattered – just for who they were.

That was not something that Fred Rogers created on his own. No, most assuredly, it's one of the things he most admired about Jesus. In a wonderful book I read in preparation for this sermon series entitled *Peaceful Neighbor*, I learned that Fred Rogers got his pastoral education at Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh and his favorite professor there was a man named William Orr. And William Orr spoke often about the Jesus who “will do anything to encourage us to know that God's creation is good, that we, his brothers and sisters, can look on each other as having real value. Our advocate will do anything to remind us that we are loveable and that our neighbor is lovable, too.” (Michael G. Long, *Peaceful Neighbor*, p. 29)

Embracing that, Fred Rogers began to see the Lord as, he called him, “The Great Appreciator.” Isn't that a lovely sentiment? The Great Appreciator - the Lord who will do anything to encourage us, and let us know we matter, that we have real value?

That belief in God infused everything Fred Rogers himself did – not just on the television show, but in all of his life. He too was a great appreciator, and he encouraged children to do likewise, and maybe his example will, even this day, encourage us to do the same as well.

Tucked away in this morning’s Epistle lesson, we see the Apostle Paul doing just that. Paul is writing to Timothy, a faithful disciple of Christ with whom he ministered. He’s writing to encourage him. But you may not have even noticed that at the very end of the passage Paul lifts up the names of two women and praises them, thanking them for the great things they had done in young Timothy’s life.

They were Lois, Timothy’s grandmother and Eunice, his mother. And Paul talks about the light of their faith, and how he knows they have helped to flame the fires of faith in Timothy, faith that now is reaching out to draw many others to lives in Christ. That one verse is Paul’s way of saying “thank you” to them for their faithful witness that, well, yes, started a ripple effect, touching Timothy and then touching countless others along the way.

You know, in the United Methodist funeral service there are some wonderful lines in a prayer that go like this: “for all that this person has given us to make us what we are, and for that of him/her that lives and grows in each of us, we give you thanks.” I love that, because it is a reflection of the truth that there are people in our lives who help to make us who we are, who touch us in such a way that something of them lives and grows within us.

For Mr. Rogers, surely one of those persons was Professor Orr. For Timothy, his grandmother and mother. Who are those persons in your life? Who has helped to make you who you are, who has given you something that still lives and grows within you?

Sometimes those who have helped shape us are people we never met in person. I’m thinking of our spiritual forefathers and foremothers – Biblical characters whose stories helped change our own.

Perhaps, for instance, Ruth helped someone here take up and bear the mantle of caregiving. Reading her story, and learning of her sacrificial commitment to her mother-in-law, gave someone here the courage to care for a loved one.

Or perhaps someone else here was locked in a life of sin and opened the Bible and read about a King named David who also was locked in sin, but came out on the other side. And perhaps hearing about that journey helped someone here see the possibility of a new life, a new start.

Surely Mary's story has brought comfort and hope to many a woman facing an unplanned pregnancy.

And I know that there are others who, ironically, grew deeper in their faith by reading the angry, hurting words of the psalmists crying out to God, because they discovered through those psalms that it's okay to be angry and honest with God when you're hurting. God understands.

For me, it's Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Easter morning. Her story, as it said in that prayer, helped to make me who I am, in ministry. Her story, of encountering the risen Christ, and then going out to be the first person to proclaim the resurrection, is an empowering story for any woman in ministry. Her words to

the world, “I have seen the Lord,” are the words that I hope come through every message I preach. “I have seen the Lord, he’s alive, and all will be well.”

Thank God for all the Biblical witnesses whose stories speak to us still today and call us to be all that God has created us to be.

And thank God for all of the special people he has put in our lives, who have made their marks on us and made us better. I know every one in this room can name at least one person who has much such an impact on your life – one person you will never forget.

Perhaps it’s one of or both of your parents. It was for Fred Rogers. He, many times, talked about the power of his father in his life, and particularly, his father’s example on how to live a good life. Jim Rogers worked for a brick company and Fred remembers how loyal he was to his customers. He remembers once, when a customer he called “Uncle Murph’s” wife got sick, Mr. and Mrs. Rogers got in their car and drove over to West Virginia to visit them. And then, years later, after they had both retired, he still stayed in touch with Uncle Murph. Now, that doesn’t seem extraordinary, yet Fred Rogers said, his father’s constancy in friendship was

inspiring to him, and he said, “I wanted to be like Dad. I wanted to be a trustworthy friend, co-worker, person . . . Perhaps I’ve always been trying to live up to the example of Mr. Rogers, my father.” (Ibid, p. 37)

So, for some, like Timothy, and like Fred Rogers, and like many of us, those special persons are our parents.

I know for a lot of people, that special someone was a teacher. If I went around this room, I would imagine that almost everyone could name a special teacher who made a real impact on you. There was something special about him or her that inspired you, that made you feel valued, that encouraged you to be all that you could be, that lit a spark of learning inside of you.

I read a beautiful remembrance this week from someone whose life was indelibly touched by a teacher by the name of Brittni Darrus. Brittni cares not just about teaching her students the subject matter at hand, but she wants them to know they matter. In these days of bullying and high anxiety for students, Ms. Darrus, at the end of every school year, writes a personal note to every single one of her students, which is an average of about 130 young people each year. And in

those notes she lets them know how unique they are and how cared for they are, and in the words of one who received one of those notes, “she gives students a glimpse of how they can positively impact this broken world.” (On-line, St. Edward the Confessor Catholic Church, Dana Point, CA)

Those young people will never forget those notes. And they’ll never forget the teacher who wrote them.

I could go on and on, about people who touch our lives. They’re everywhere – parents, siblings, teachers, coaches, Sunday School teachers, Scout leaders, neighbors, co-workers. They are gifts from God who help to make us who we are, help to make us the best that we can be.

Let me just give you one more example from my life. Actually, the other day I ran into Joan Perry in the Smyrna Diner as I was coming in to have lunch with this group of special friends. These friends are all clergywomen. There are four of us. We’re all about the same age. And we all are Senior Pastors of large churches. We get together once a month for lunch, and we can tell each other anything – and we do. All the ups and downs of life, all the ups and downs of ministry, all our joys,

all our sorrows. We pray with each other and for each other. We're always available at the other end of the phone or text message or email. And no matter how busy we are, we are all committed to getting together once a month, because you see, we know that these sisters in Christ are gifts of God in our lives.

One day, after I had returned from one of our lunches, I sat down and wrote to them all, and thanked them for what they mean to me, and how much our time together helps my journey in ministry and in life. All of them, to a person, wrote back and expressed the same thing.

Which brings me to a proposal I have for all of you, actually, for all of us. I want to invite you to write a thank you note this week to someone who has been a gift from God in your life, someone who has guided you, or encouraged you. Someone who has inspired you, or carried you through tough times. Someone who lifts you up and helps you know that you matter. Someone who, through their presence in your life, has drawn you closer to Christ.

Then after you write the note, be sure to send it. You may not think this is a big deal, but it really is.

Let me tell you one way that I know that to be true. Every person on our church staff has a Secret Pal, a member of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee who secretly, throughout the year, shows appreciation to that staff member in any number of ways. It's really wonderful, and I've been blessed to have great secret pals over the years, and do this year, by the way!

Well, last year, after our dear custodian Donny Ewing passed away so suddenly at such a young age, and his parents were cleaning out his house, they came upon a pile of cards, and they opened them up to discover that Donny had saved every single one of the cards he had received from his Secret Pal here at church. He saved them all. You see, you might not think a note matters, but it does.

So say thank you this week. Say thank you to the person or persons who have touched your life with the light of Christ, have helped to make you who you are, have helped make life better for you. Say thank you to them.

And while you're at it, say thank you to God – the Great Appreciator - most of all, for putting those people in your pathway. Just as he put Lois and Eunice in Timothy's life, so too he has put special people in each of our lives, and for that, and so much more, we are eternally grateful. Thanks be to God!

Amen.