

“There Are Many Ways to Say ‘I Love You’”

Mark 12: 28-34

(Watch a few minutes of the Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood)

This episode aired in 1968 but with a few changes, it could represent the conversations and concerns happening in our neighborhoods, in our nation and in our world right now. Poignantly enough, the very first week of this show, not episode but week long story line for Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood centered on change. In the clip which we just saw, we hear that King Friday XIII is upset. All his subjects are moving and changing things in the neighborhood of Make Believe. The king believes that they are purposely upsetting the status quo. So in response to this supposed unnecessary change, the king decides to build a wall around the castle. He trusts no one. He orders his guard to question everyone because after all, people could be pretending to be his immediate family just to gain access to the castle. As we can see, the people of the Kingdom of Make Believe become frightened and worried. They do not recognize the peaceful Kingdom they once knew. Everything and everyone is in a state of chaos, that is until one small tiger has the courage to speak up. Daniel Tiger decides that he can change the king’s mind, that he can show the king there is another way. So Daniel attaches words

like “Peace”, “Love”, “community”, “Unity”, “Hope” to big bright balloons, then sails them over the wall to King Friday. The ruler sees the balloons, and realizes he has nothing to fear when it comes to change. To show his change of heart, the king tears down the wall and things return to normal in the land of Make Believe.

The reason I wanted to show this piece of video is because of what happens after...after as in real life, not after in Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood. As I said, this episode aired during a time of unrest during United States’ history. It was 1968. There were protests against the Vietnam War and marches for Civil Rights. Conversations about equal rights for all, conversations draft dodgers and people being ordered to fight filled the mainstream media at that time. Everything seemed to be changing. Everything and everyone seemed to be in a state of chaos. And in the midst of all this turmoil, comes this children’s TV show. One producer shared that if you did everything opposite of what is deemed great TV, like have low production costs, cheap sets, and an unlikely star, then you would have Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.

So it is not surprisingly, that after the very first week of this show, the critics called Fred Rogers “naïve” and out of touch with reality. They said his show would never last. Yet what is amazing is not only did it last. It became a movement of kindness and empathy which changed the world. This year is the 50th anniversary of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood. It aired from 1968 until 2001. And during that

time, he shared his countercultural beliefs about caring nonviolently for one another, animals and the earth... His voice was gentle, his body was vulnerable, his hair was in place. He wore colorful, comfortable soft sweaters made by his "mother" and transformed millions of children's understanding of what it means to be in community with one another. Someone once asked Fred Rogers what was his secret to success. To which Fred Rogers replied, "I never felt like I needed to put on a silly hat or jump through hoops to have a relationship with a child. I have always had a singular vision of unity and that is to remember that love is the root of everything, all learning, all relationships, love or the lack of it." I'll say that again...his singular vision towards unity was remembering that love is the root of everything, all learning, all relationships, love or the lack of it."

And just so we don't miss the importance of such a statement, let me say me say it another way...I invite you to take out your pew bibles....

(Read Text)

Each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all have a version of this story. Yet, each author tells his particular version within a certain context. For Mark, he sticks his version in the middle of stories which tell about Jesus' time in Jerusalem, right before his death. If we remember, just the chapter before this one, Jesus rides into Jerusalem while the people wave palm branches and proclaim

Hosanna. Then Jesus goes to the Temple, calls it a den of thieves, turning over tables and running the money changers out. So we have all that going on as background for this text. There is tension between the powers that be and Jesus. The religious order does not like this Jesus fellow and they are just waiting for him to cause more trouble.

We expect that trouble when we see Mark use the term “scribe”. We think we know what’s going to happen. After all, this is not Jesus’ first tangle with the powers that be. We assume that there is going to be another showdown between Jesus and the powers that be.

But surprise... this story is not what we expect at all! The scribe doesn’t come to test or trap Jesus. No, the scribe is interested in dialogue. He is interested in engaging in genuine conversation, conversation which gets to the heart of the law. He simply asks, “What is the greatest commandment?”

Now let me say, I’m sure that we have heard multiple sermons on this text. So I’m not going to preach another one today. What I am going to do is remind us that Jesus’ answer was not unique to him. It is part of the Jewish tradition, the Shema, the commandment upon which all other commandments stand.

We also need to know that Jesus was not the first one to combine the two commandments either. Rabbis and prophets long before Jesus had joined these two

commandments in their words and writings. They had taken the two commandments... one about loving God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our strength and the one about loving our neighbors as ourselves, combining them so that they would become a foundation piece for faith for the people of God. They did this long before Jesus ever begin his ministry in Galilee.

Mark taps into this tradition, this tradition of combining these two commandments when he tells his version of this story. Mark wants to show his readers of their commonality with others, to show them that they are more alike than they are different. Mark taps into the tradition of combining these two commandments as a way to balance how we live out our faith in God. By continuing to have Jesus combine these two commandments, this becomes a way for Mark and for his readers, to be the people of God here and now so that the law does not lose heart, so that the rituals of our faith do not lose reason and so that our relationships with God and with one another do not lose love.

Mark wants to show his community that since the beginning of time these words of love have shaped the lives of the people of God. They have become a part of what we do, what we say, how we live out our faith, what we believe, how we relate to others. It has become a part of who we are as the people of God so much so that if anyone asks us to sum up our faith in just one word we would simply say, "Love".

Now again let me differentiate between types of love. When I say love, I'm not talking about the mushy gushy type of love. It is not the sacrine love that we often profess in the church which gets boiled down to "God loves you and so do I". The love Jesus is talking about is personal and authentic. It takes courage and strength to live out in word and deed. Because sometimes this love has us speaking up for the voiceless. Sometimes this love has us marching in the streets. Sometimes this love has us breaking down borders and welcoming the stranger. This love which Jesus talks about in this text reminds us that there are many ways to say I Love you, to say I love to our God, to say I love to our neighbor.

There is the feeding way...with Free Monthly Community dinners and blessing boxes. There is the just being there when things get scary and sad by sitting with our neighbors in waiting rooms or holding their hand when their world falls apart. There is the telling way...telling something someone likes to hear like "There is grace and welcome for all. All are created in the image of God and claimed and named as Beloved Children of God." There is the showing way...showing our neighbors we love them by writing cards to let them know we are thinking about them or writing letters to our government officials to speak out against the injustices we see in our community.

You see, this word "love" puts our life, puts our relationships, puts our hopes and dreams for all of God's creation in a different light. It reminds us that

there is another way beyond fear, beyond worry, beyond hate and hurt. It reminds us that the very foundation of our faith calls us to love our God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As people of faith, we have many ways to say I love you. We have many ways to understand what love is. We have many ways to say I love you to our God and our neighbor.

So as we explore the neighborhood around us and meet our neighbors, won't you be my neighbor as we loudly proclaim in word and deed that love is the root of everything, all learning, all relationships, love or the lack of it." May this singular vision of unity continue to transform the world so that God's Kingdom will come here on Earth as it is in heaven. Amen.