

“Taking Care of Our Neighborhood”

Psalm 85: 8-13

As I sat down to write this sermon, I could not help but feel this weight of sadness on my shoulders. Maybe it was the fog or maybe it was the news of the week—Senate proceedings where emotions on both sides were running high; the news of the young autistic boy being found but not in the way we all hoped; the stories still coming to us about the recent devastation from natural disasters—hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, just to name a few. All of it seems to add up to a lack of neighborliness continuing to fill our world.

This weighed heavy on my heart and mind as I sat down to write this sermon, knowing that we were drawing this sermon series to a close today. My plan was to wrap things up by offering words of hope to guide us through until we meet again. But...But in the midst of all this sadness, all this weightiness, all of it seemed shallow and vain.

I mean 50 years later, we are still having Mister Roger’s voice invite us to be his neighbor so that all may grow together in community yet...yet there is still violence. There is still brokenness. There is still hurt. The joyous sound of Mister Rogers’ trolley seems disconnected and disjointed from the pain so many are experiencing in our world today.

But still it rings, drawing us back, waking us up, shaking us up, inviting us to remember. Still that trolley bell rings almost as if it can and will break through the weightiness to remind us that there is still light and hope in our midst. So I thought I would take a page from Mister Roger's playbook and invite us once again to travel back to the neighborhood...

Show the segment...

This segment is from the very last episode of Mister Roger's neighborhood. The beautiful thing is that it is no different from all the other episodes which came before it. Fred Rogers starts the same way, the same way he did each and every episode as before. The show starts with a song, then Mr. Rogers invites us to be his neighbor. Next he changes out of his coat and into the trademark cardigan. Lastly, he sits down to change his shoes, signaling we are ready to begin our time of imagination and make-believe.

The other beautiful thing is that he ends this very last episode the same way he did each and every episode as before. He ends with a song and a promise, a promise to be back again next week, a promise to always be our neighbor. The true character of the neighborhood remains constant for us.

Even in the very last episode, there are things we can count on to remain the same. Even as the series was drawing to a close, there were things that were constant no matter what. There was always a song, There was always a promise. There was always the joyous sound of the trolley, inviting us to go along for the ride.

And for me, in the midst of the weightiness which seems to be filling our world right now, this is the good news I need to hear right now. This is the good news we all need to hear right now. We need to hear that no matter what there will always be good and life giving things we can count on as we continue our journeys through life. We need to know that there will always be helpers when we need them. There will always be songs. There will always be promises. And for us as people of faith, this is shared with us through the constant character of our God. We know that no matter what, no matter what this world might say, no matter what it might seem like now, no matter how weighty the sadness might be, we know that no matter what, God is still at work in this world, bringing us all towards that moment when we live in the fullness of God's shalom. We might not know when. We might not know how but there is always one thing on which we can rely...as Beloved Children of God, we are always, always rooted, always always connected to the unconditional love of God.

This is what Psalm 85 tells us. It speaks to the hopes and dreams of the human heart. It speaks to the promise which we all know is true, that promise being when God speaks, new life springs forth. When God speaks, peace will reign. When God speaks, full harmony and unity results. As people of faith, the light that guides now and forevermore is rooted in the promise given to us by a God who loves us more than we will ever know, that promise being...When God speaks, God offers us a word of grace, a word of hope, God offers us a word of love which brings us back to life, time and time again.

This psalm was written in a time of exile for God's people. They wondered if they would ever see their home again. The first few lines remind the people of how God has remembered God's people time and time again, and now they are asking God to do so again. They are asking God to be the God they have come to know and experience in their lives...a God who is steadfast in love and grace, a God who brings salvation to God's people, a God who invites them to come home once again. Maybe not with the bell of a trolley but the people know there is always an invitation to come home once more, to center themselves in the presence of God, to know always that God is not finished with them yet. Because after all, God's kingdom where death and sadness will be no more, where pain and dying cease, after all God's Kingdom is not fully realized here on earth yet. So in the

meantime, the people are invited to hear God's promise of love and grace once more, knowing that all creation is in the process of moving toward full shalom.

It seems only fitting that as we draw this sermon series to a close, that Mr. Rogers to have the last word. This next clip I want to share with you aired on the one year anniversary of September 11th. PBS asked Fred Rogers to come out of retirement and speak. They asked him to address the pain and hurt so many were feeling as they remembered the devastation of that particular day. I offer up these words to you.

Show segment....

May these words remind us of our calling to help foster the intellectual, and spiritual, and emotional growth of all. Those of us who have this particular vision must continue against all odds. Because we know, the future of creation, the future of our neighborhood, the future of our world is bound up with the character of God, a God who is steadfast and loving, a God who is faithful from generation to generation, a God who is consistent and constant in God's love, a God who is our Creator, who is our Redeemer, who is our Sustainer, our God who is not finished with us yet. Thanks be to God. Amen.