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Neighbors: Gospel According to Fred Rogers: Part II

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Scripture: Matthew 18 and 20, Acts 3 and 5

I'm not going to change into the sweaters and shoes this week. We don't have time for that. It's Confirmation Sunday. We've got some good work to do here for a few minutes. We are in a three-part sermon series to kick off a new year, inspired by the life and ministry of Fred Rogers. Millions have been reminded of his kindness and compassion and his giftedness with children through a movie over the summer titled *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, and we're going to take the opportunity to show that in the next few weeks in our own chapel. We've gotten permission and rights to do that, and we'll let you know when we're going to do that in case you didn't get a chance to see it in the theater. We've got a great little theater in our chapel. So, stay tuned for that.

But I'd like you to take a moment. Take out your bulletin, that *Inspire Weekly*, that third of a page sheet-shaped kind of a thing and flip it over to the back side. We have listed there some of the sermon resources from this series as well as a place for you to take notes. It's our prayer, it's our hope, it's our expectation that something would stir in you during worship that you'd want to remember, and we want to give you a place to write that down and then to take that with you.

Now, the aim of this series is to be reminded of who we are as a community within a neighborhood, who we are as a church community within the wider neighborhood around us, and it's worth a quick review of last week because it's confirmation Sunday. Some of this is Church 101 stuff. So, high school students, listen up. We're leaning on two sources in Scripture. One is the teachings of Jesus, and second the early church, the work of the early church as it's recorded in the book of Acts. Now, Acts is the name of your Wednesday night program as I recall, right? The idea is to learn from the early Church the things that we can still apply today. Last week, we looked at Jesus and his exchange with a lawyer who asked him straight up, "Who is my neighbor?" And then he gave that memorable answer in the form of a parable about a Good Samaritan.

Last week, we also looked at the birthday of the church in the book of Acts. We call it Pentecost. It's in Acts 2 where we read four things that the church then did that the church today would be wise to do. One was fellowship. We have a weird Greek word called *koinonia*. That means the same thing – small groups is what that looks like, the community groups we're launching in the next couple of weeks. The second thing is the breaking of bread, not just having a meal together. I mean, did you ever go to Chipotle alone, students? No. You always go with friends, right? It's the same idea. When we share a meal together, something special happens. That happens every Wednesday in the space right below us. We call it the community meal, and last week, Methune Hall was filled from wall to wall. Five dollars for a great meal. You don't have to cook it or clean it up. Now, I've got your attention.

The third thing it says is prayers. They were dedicated to prayers. That's worship, and I confessed to you last week that if I had a prayer for this church, a desire and a dream for all of you, it would be two-fold. Number one, that you would be in worship every week unless you were out of town or sick, and, secondly, that you would be in a small group. So much happens in and through those small groups and

those connections that can't happen in a big space together. So that was last week. This week, Confirmation Sunday, is the fourth of those things the early church was doing, and that is being devoted to the Apostles' teachings. What that means is that you are devoted to continuing to learn and to grow and to recognize that a day like confirmation, a day like today, is not the end of anything. It's very much the beginning of the rest of your life of faith.

So, with those things in mind, the scripture passages this morning come from a variety of places that match that theme, the words of Jesus mixed with the Acts of the Apostles. First from the Gospel of Matthew, the eighteenth and nineteenth chapters, we hear some of these words from Jesus:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus called a child, who he put among them, and said, "Truly, I tell you unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." He says, "Woe to the one who puts a stumbling block before one of these children." Then Peter came to Jesus and said, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus said, "No, not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven times to forgive." Now some Pharisees came to him to test him. "Is it unlawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" And Jesus answered, "What got has joined together, let no man separate." Then Jesus said to the disciples, "Truly I tell you. It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." "Then who can be saved?" they asked. Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God, all things are possible." Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. The congregation responds: Thanks be to God.

The year was 1968, and our country was still embroiled in a bitter battle over civil rights. Racism was still blatant and rampant in many parts of our nation and even in public pools. From 1964 to 1968, there was a rash of clashes that happened when African Americans tried to swim in public pools. Civil rights workers, both black and white together, were staging dive-ins. They'd come together in these public pools, they'd take hands, white and black people together, and they'd jump and dive into the pools, and they'd continue to stay in that place until the authorities would come and arrest them and pull them out. One particularly brutal display of racism took place at the Monson Motor Lodge in St. Augustine, Florida. As both black and white, children and adults, were enjoying a break from hot temperatures, the motel manager, named James Brock, poured gallons of muriatic acid - that's a cleaning agent - into the pool while they were in the pool. Photographs of this unimaginable event were all over newspaper all across our country that week.

In this context of racism and civil rights being slugged out at swimming pools across the country, Fred Rogers scripted one of his most memorable episodes ever, and it's notable that it was also one of his very first episodes. In this episode Mr. Rogers didn't put on his little blue sneakers. Instead he went barefoot because it was so hot outside, and to cool off, he stepped out into his back yard with a hose and a baby pool to soak his feet in cool refreshing water. Along came Officer Clemmons, the police officer, who was portrayed for twenty-five years by a man named François Clemmons. Mr. Rogers in his kind way invited Officer Clemmons to join him in soaking his feet in this little pool, and he does. One

boot and one sock at a time, he bares his feet and joins Mr. Rogers in the cool of the pool. Now, if you didn't know it, François Clemmons, Officer Clemons, is African American.

So, on a national television program, while the news was raging over racism and violence at public pools, Mr. Rogers and Officer Clemons were offering an alternative vision to our nation, a vision of peace, of unity and of inclusivity. If you thought for one second that Mr. Rogers only spoke to children, it's time to think again. Remember, Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian Minister, and this idea of loving children and speaking to adults is right out of Jesus' playbook. Fred Rogers, like Jesus, cared for children and spoke boldly to adults about relevant issues and tough topics. You heard some of it a moment ago. He called a child that he put among them and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." He says, "Woe to one who puts a stumbling block to one of these little ones." Later on he would say, "Let the little children come onto me and do not stop them." Fred Rogers, like Jesus, welcomed children and spoke boldly to grown-ups about relevant issues and tough topics.

When we consider who we are called out to be – the ekklesia – when we consider who we are called out to be as a community, this really matters. It's part of our purpose. It's part of our reason for existing, and like all things, if we don't do it with intention, it's likely to not happen at all. When it comes to calling for and welcoming children, it doesn't sound so radical to our ears, does it? It's kind of a given that we care for them. We love them and we bring them up, but in first century Judea, children were of little more value than livestock, dismissed, invisible, property. Jesus had a very special understanding of and place in his heart for children. They were the key that unlocked the very kingdom that he sought to usher into this world.

Now, let me read a few passages from the Gospel according to Mr. Rogers and its childlike simplicity. Mr. Rogers once said. "There are three ways to ultimate success. First is to be kind, second is to be kind, and third is to be kind." He once said, "The greatest thing that we can do is to help someone know that they are loved and capable of loving." That's refrigerator worthy, and it's on the front of your bulletin this morning. "The greatest thing that we can do is to help someone know that they are loved and capable of loving." We do a great job here at Wayzata Community Church, to be sure, of loving and caring for our children, but there's always room for improvement, and next month I'm going to talk to you about the ways in which we can do a better job of loving and caring for the most vulnerable among our children, and those are the children among us who have special needs.

But Mr. Rogers did not leave it at loving and caring for children and neither did Jesus. They both spoke boldly and plainly to adults. Now, confirmation class, listen up. You are adults now, and I don't say this lightly. I say it choking back tears because my youngest is among you, the one who learned how to walk in this very space. So, to say that you're grownups now is a very personal thing to me, and I know it is to your parents and grandparents who are seated behind you. This is your church now. Part of confirmation is becoming full members of this community, and this is what it's all about – to keep growing. You are the ekklesia, the called out, called into existence by Christ, and we have a lot of important things to do and to learn.

In both the Gospels and the Book of Acts, there's a special place where these kinds of things were happening. It's called Solomon's Porch. Both in Acts and throughout the Gospels, they refer to this place where Jesus was teaching and leading people and healing people. It was called Solomon's porch, and it was just a little area within the temple mount that was kind of behind some columns, like the columns in this very room, where the ekklesia, the called out community of Jesus, would gather to hear from him and to learn from him, not just on feel good, easy things, but on tough topics like the ones you heard me read about from Matthew's Gospel, things like forgiveness, things like divorce, things like how can a rich person get into the kingdom of heaven. These are tough topics, important and relevant issues. In the tenth chapter of John, he's at Solomon's Porch teaching and dealing with these issues, and people begin to attack him, questioning him. They even tried to arrest him, and here's the honest part for all of you. Speaking plainly and boldly to relevant issues and tough topics, people will attack you. People will question you. They might even try to arrest you. It's scary because it's important.

Mr. Rogers knew this as well. In his soft, slow voice, Fred Rogers spoke boldly to countless issues. In the aftermath of the assassination of Robert Kennedy, he spoke to children about assassination and to adults. As the divorce rate soared, he spoke straight to kids and to parents, all of whom suffer in that situation. When super heroes sort of reached their peak of popularity, he spoke to children about the difference between these cartoons and the things that they can do versus themselves and the things they can't do, because some kids were starting to throw themselves off rooftops, thinking they could fly, and Mr. Rogers spoke into that moment, and after 911, who do you think they called to talk to children about terrorism and to adults about forgiveness?

Let me read again from the Gospel according to Mr. Rogers, this part for grownups. He says, "I wonder if God and neighbor are somehow one, loving God and loving neighbor – it's the same thing." He says, "All we're every asked to do in this life is to treat our neighbor who is in need exactly how we would hope to be treated ourselves. That's our ultimate responsibility." Hear what Mr. Rogers is saying to the Church. Thanks be to God. In a profound irony, one of the best ways that we can love and care for our children is to have plain, difficult, courageous conversations about relevant issues and tough, tough topics. To make our world more loving, to help everyone know that they are loved and capable of loving is the best way we can say to our kids, "I love you!"

And, speaking of saying I love you, I need to close so we can move on with our celebration this morning. I need to close this morning by telling you the rest of the story of Officer Clemmons and Mr. Rogers. You see, these two friends recreated that same pool scene twenty-five years later as our nation was facing yet another form of prejudice. Our country was still coming to grips with the understanding and granting full civil right to lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender persons. Officer Clemons once again joined Fred with his feet in the pool, barefooted, enjoying a cool break, but what we couldn't see from just the color of his skin was that François Clemmons was himself gay, and for nearly a quarter century, he concealed that reality for "the good" of the program, but on this day, with their feet splashing in the shallow water of that same baby pool, Fred and François has a conversation about the many different ways of saying, "I love you." This was no longer two television characters in front of a camera. These were two men who loved each other very much. François says to his old friend, singing is one of my ways of saying I love you. Mr. Rogers then asked if he had time to sing a song to him, and he did. He

sang (Dr. Ross singing), "There are many ways to say I love you. There are many ways to say I care about you, many ways, many ways, many ways, many ways, many ways, many ways to say I care."

At the close of the show that day, Fred Rogers did his usual routine, changing back into his grown-up clothes, and he said the same words that he said at the close of every show for 25 years. He said in the camera, "You make every day a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are." And after the cameras were off, François approached and asked Fred, "Fred, were you talking to me?" And Fred Rogers, the man and the minister, said, "Yes, François, I've been talking to you for years, but you finally heard me today."

Let's be that kind of church that says to itself and says to its neighborhood every day, in word and in deed, "I LOVE YOU."

Now, I'm going to invite two of my friends, Ellie and Jack, up here to share one of their gifts, the gift of music with us as we lean into the celebration of confirmation now. I want you to hear in their very voices a word for you.