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September 30, 2018

Won't You Be My Neighbor – “Look for the Helpers”

Invitation to Worship

*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, A beautiful day for a neighbor,
Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

This morning we close our three week series on the lessons of faith we find in Mr. Roger's Neighborhood – the children's program that touched so many hearts over the years, impacting an entire generation with messages of kindness and care. We've been exploring the lessons we learned through Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, and through Jesus' teachings about the second greatest commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself. This week, we'll be looking for the helpers that step up in times of trouble, and listening for how God might be calling us to be helpers within our communities. For it is in times of trouble that we most need to hear these words, reminding us that we are never alone... *Won't you please, Won't you please, Please won't you be my neighbor?*

Hebrews 6:10

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

Matthew 25:35-40

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we

see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Every day we are bombarded with bad news: bombs exploding, refugees fleeing from war-torn countries, people flooded out of their homes, individuals overdosing on opioids, victims of violence and assault seeking justice. It's enough to make you weep.

In the midst of tragedy, as the images are put in front of us, we sometimes find it too difficult to turn away. Each of the news channels capture our attention and don't let go as we witness the destruction. And yet, even with our attention focused intently on the scene, all too often, we miss the ones who are helping.

'Look for the helpers.' Mr. Roger's mom said, 'You will always find people who are helping.' When we have been able to look past the smoke, to see past our fear and concern, we've seen them: the helpers.

On September 11, 2001, as thousands of people ran away from the towers, we saw firefighters, police officers and EMTs run towards the danger.

Only seconds after the bombs went off at the Boston Marathon, we saw helpers run towards the smoke, tearing away the barriers to get to the injured.

What Mr. Rogers' mom said is true, the helpers are always there, and if we look for them, we'll see them. For Fred Rogers, this practical outworking of loving our neighbor—using not only our heart and eyes but our hands—is what defined a hero: "To see people who will notice a need in the world and do something about it, and rather than view it with despair they view it with hope—that to me is such an enormous gift in this life. Those are my heroes. "You know, there are so many people who say, 'It's not my kid, it's not my school, it's not my community'—you know, 'forget it.' But there are others who say, 'It is my kid, it is my school . . .'" They chose to care for others as if they were their own. Fred did look for the helpers, those who notice a need in the world and do something about it, and they became his heroes, modeling the lesson Jesus taught His disciples, as recorded in Matthew 25:35–45.

This scripture offers a snapshot of our final day when we meet our maker and “face the music” – receiving the eternal reward for living out our faith through action by caring for the “least of these” in our midst. Whether it’s realized in the moment or not, each time we extend a hand of care to a person in need, we are, indeed, offering aide to Christ himself.

But first responders to terrifying, earth shattering events aren’t the only helpers. Being a helper doesn’t have to be running towards burning cars or smoking buildings or exploding bombs, it can also be something simple as lending an arm to a person who is struggling.

We see “people who are helping” when work crews show up in the wake of floods and tornadoes, when hygiene kits are compiled and relief funds are donated. We see people helping when counselors walk the halls of schools after shootings. We see them helping when chaplains walk alongside people beaten down by the world’s stress. We see them when Christians, Jews, Muslims and others meet to pray for their community. We see them when strangers on a train stand up to a bully who is picking on a minority. We see them when people respond to hungry children in the neighborhood by packing backpacks full of food for them to take home each weekend.

I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was frightened, and you stood by me and gave me strength. I was a stranger, and you invited me in.

If we take the time to really notice, we’ll see “people who are helping” every day, in all sorts of ways. We see people helping when they prepare a meal for a family going through a difficult time. We see them when they mow the lawn of an elderly neighbor. We see them when they take a struggling friend out for coffee or sit down to talk to a lonely coworker. We see them when they provide respite for a weary caregiver or babysit for free to give strapped parents a break. We see them practically everywhere, if we would just take time to look. Helpers are also those who come into our lives and bless us with the encouragement, support, and aid we need to help us get through a challenging stage. Someone who helped us past a complicated time, helping us to grow into who we were becoming.

Fred Rodgers never lost sight of this – that helpers are all around us – and have been so important in our own development as well. In 1997, Fred Rogers was presented with the lifetime achievement award at the Daytime Emmy Awards. To a standing ovation crowd, actor Tim Robbins said, “For giving generations upon generations of children confidence in themselves, for being

their friend, for telling them again and again that they're special and have worth, it is my honor to present this award." A journalist described what followed: "Mr. Rogers went onstage to accept the Emmy – and there, in front of all the soap opera stars and talk show hosts, he made his small bow and said into the microphone, 'All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are. Ten seconds of silence.' And then he lifted his wrist, looked at his watch, and said, 'I'll watch the time.' There was, at first, a small whoop from the crowd, a giddy, strangled hiccup of laughter, as these celebrities realized that he wasn't kidding, that Mr. Rogers... expected them to do what he asked. And so they did. One second, two seconds, seven seconds – and now the jaws clenched, and the bosoms heaved, and the mascara ran, and the tears fell upon the be-glittered gathering like rain leaking down a crystal chandelier. And Fred Rogers finally looked up from his watch and after saying a brief thanks to two groups of people, said softly 'May God be with you.'" before leaving the stage.

On that note, I invite you all to take a moment and think about a person who has loved you into being, and helped you become who you are. Perhaps a family member, a teacher, a minister or church member, a mentor, or a friend. Whether they are near or far, living or have passed on, let's take ten seconds ourselves, to think about them, and send some thanks their way... "I'll watch the time..."

There are so many – world changing – life shifting – ways to help others, if we would simply take the time and offer the care. We all know we live in a polarized society. The spreading, divisive forces of politics, class, race and ethnicity are fragmenting our culture in ways and to degrees we haven't seen for several decades. We live in a world desperately in need of the loving kindness Mr. Rogers taught us.

If we stand up and become "the people who are helping," trusting that a little kindness makes a world of difference, perhaps we can provide the catalyst for restoration. As we extend a hand and heart of care for the least of these, living out our call to "be the good neighbor", may God continue to pour blessings out into our communities and world. May we work together with God to bind up the broken, strengthen the weak, and offer help to all those who need it. How is God calling you to be a helper this week? May we all go to serve, actively loving our neighbor as ourselves, through word, action, and simple presence and compassion. Amen.