**Scripture:**

Exodus 1:22-2:10

Matthew 19:13-15

**Sermon Title:**

You are a child of God…and so is your neighbor

We continue this Sunday our theme “Won’t you be my neighbor?” Today we expand our circle and conversation—to realize we are all children of God, and so is your neighbor.

**Prayer:**

Please pray with me…All loving and knowing God, open our minds to perceive you and all your creation in new ways, open our ears to hear your challenging words to enlighten us on our journey, and open our hearts to love our neighbor and ourselves through your never ending grace. Amen.

I remember the first time I walked up to the doors of this church. It wasn’t for a church service but for my son’s first day of pre-K. My son, grasping tightly to my fingers, teetered back and forth full of hesitation and curiosity about the new experience awaiting him beyond the looming church doors. My toddler daughter squirming on my hip, eager to get down and join her brother and figure out how her newly found walking legs could bring her to new paths to explore. Then there was me, a mom desperately wanting to drop myself off at the door. Past the brink of physical exhaustion from running a constant mommy race. My own personal silent marathon of self-doubt, anxiety, and perfectionism. Trying to be a “good enough” mom, wife, daughter, Christian, keep filling in the blank…because I did.

Yet, the Holy Spirit led us to these church doors at first for my son’s preschool but much more was revealed each day we walked across the threshold. Over time trust was built, a community formed, and I experienced the movement and fruits of the Spirit each time I entered this sacred space. I found myself looking forward to the pickups and drop offs because it was a welcoming and healing moment in my day as the Spirit connected me with Kim our children’s director and Suzanne the pastor at that time. Several years later, I realize now that the Holy Spirit was calling us in, guiding us and preparing our new home and sacred space here. By following the steps of my kids through the doors of the preschool, God called me here to the alter.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

Do you remember? Do you remember the first time you walked up to the doors of this church? Who or what led you here? What brought you in? Can you remember what it felt like? If you were too young to remember, imagine what it felt like for the person that brought you in.

When we take a minute to reflect, our silent moments of reflection can turn into acts of appreciation—take a moment to acknowledge your story, the movement, the spirit, the persons. Present or in the past, it is important to acknowledge and remember our story.

Isn’t it amazing sometimes how quickly we forget how we got here. How we forget to remember where we have come from? As a mom, I am reminded every August to the fact that I forget what it feels like to be a kid starting school. How quickly I forget what it is like to be a child. Take it a step deeper, how quickly we forget who we are originally created to be a beloved child of God?

When was the last time you remembered you are a child of God? Really relished in the fact that you are a beloved child of God. When was the last time you opened your eyes and heart even wider saw your neighbors as children of God?

If you are struggling like I am to answer these questions then you are in good company…the disciples struggled with remembering to be children of God too. We find our second scripture reading in Matthew, and it is also in Mark and Luke. Jesus is preparing them for the next phase of his journey in ministry as moves toward Jerusalem. However, these specific words and teaching of Jesus are not exactly brand new to the disciples. He is repeating his teaching from when they were in Galilee. That time they were not fending off families and young children but were arguing over who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God. In that moment, Jesus welcomes a child into their conversation and tells the disciples “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter in the kingdom of heaven.”

Personally, that seems like a big and bold statement that I would not easily forget. But as they moved on to Judea, and children were taking up time during their work, they forgot their recent teaching. The disciples turn away parents and children from coming to Jesus. Jesus stops them, calls the children to embrace them prayerfully, and reminds the disciples again, “…that to such as these the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

It seems pretty straightforward. I can’t believe that the disciples don’t get the message the first time. But when I really try to imagine being in their shoes would I have acted any different? Let’s be real, if I were a disciple I probably would have been like “…Jesus this is great an all that all these people are bringing their kids for a blessing but it is getting crazy. We have been through a lot, moving from town to town, healings and miracles, not to mention the feeding of the five thousand (what a mess to clean that was!), and don’t forget the debates with the Pharisees.”

Well, putting it that way, it sounds all to familiar. I have to prioritize my time. What is most important? We got to “do ministry?” We got to be on task. We got to be it all, at all times. This being like kids is just slowing me down. Are you crazy, I don’t have time to be like a child. I don’t have time for my own kids let alone my neighbor. How am I going to do it all?!?…

STOP!…and Jesus just says, stop. Reflect on what you are doing? Take a moment, breathe…

Jesus says “Change and become like children.” “Let the children come to me”

You are a beloved child of God, and so is your neighbor

Now I am not suggesting Jesus’ teaching literally means to drop all your responsibilities. Actually I believe it is much more challenging than that. We have to appreciate and learn how to be childlike. Jesus said “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 18:3)

In order for me to acknowledge and accept that I am a beloved child of God and my neighbor is a beloved child of God, I have to know how to be childlike.

What does it mean to be childlike today? What does it mean to see our neighbors as children of God? Taking a nod from our theme this month, I went to the original Mr. Neighbor himself from my childhood—Mr. Rogers. For over thirty years, Mr. Rogers came to our family rooms through Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood and now continues through a spin off as Daniel Tiger. I don’t know anyone that was more in touch with their authentic childlike selves then Mr. Rogers. I realized right away in my research that he knew at his core that he was a beloved child of God and believed fully that all his neighbors were loved by God too. As an ordained Presbyterian minister, his appointment was to evangelize through his public tv children’s program. Every afternoon, he lived out calling and his favorite saying by St. Francis—“Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So how do we become like children and remember we are beloved children of God and so are our neighbors? I think Mr. Rogers would suggest three of his favorite childlike qualities to help us.

First, we have to remember our sense of wonder and awe. To be childlike is to have a deep sense of wonder. When is the last time you were filled with a sense of wonder? When did you get that feeling that took your breath away for a split second or gave you goose bumps? Have you ever noticed that you really can’t fake wonder and awe. You can’t force yourself to have it. I don’t think you can fake it because in order to have authentic sense of wonder—that childlike sense of wonder and awe—you have to be humble and self-aware. Having a sense of wonder or awe comes through humility and awareness. Humble enough to realize that there is beauty in the creation around you. To be humble and aware is to know that our Creator is all around you.

Think about our reading from the gospel of Matthew today, Jesus and the disciples are surrounded by children and their parents perhaps filled by sense of wonder of God. Imagine being one of the children in our scripture reading, walking on that long dusty journey and waiting to be a blessed by Jesus. Imagine the wonder and overwhelming awe to be physically held by your Creator and touched in the arms of Jesus.

I believe with all my heart, that it doesn’t end at that time in Scripture. God is calling us to come today and be embraced by God. And as Jesus encouraged the disciples, do not stop children from experiencing God’s love—both the children and the childlike. It seems in all our “adulting” that our sense of wonder gets smaller and smaller amount of our time. Yet I believe God calls us to keep our sense of wonder because God looks at us with a sense of wonder and awe every second, every breath. Not only you but everyone around you too. You take God’s breath away.

You are a beloved child of God, and so is your neighbor.

Another childlike quality is Curiosity. Children are curious. To be childlike is to continue being curious. To be curious is to take the time to ask questions and try to understand something or someone. Grace filled curiosity was a key part of the ministry of Mister Rogers. His themes and activities seemed logically simple but he went deeper to guide us in exploring our feelings. Since childhood, Mr. Rogers considered himself a curious person, especially when it came to feelings and people. He referred to himself in interviews as an “emotional archeologist.”[[2]](#footnote-2) He liked to look under people’s behavior and try to reflect on the emotions and intent of our behavior. Mr. Rogers saw how grace filled curiosity leads to compassion and realizing that the other is a neighbor and child of God.

I saw examples of grace filled curiosity at our church picnic and rally day last week. So many of you took up Pastor Amy’s challenge to meet someone new, the rule of three minutes at the end of service to introduce yourself. I challenge you to try it again today. This time maybe introduce yourself to a child.

However, I feel I should warn you about being curious because we all know that curiosity comes with risks. To be childlike is to take risks. It is not a cake walk being childlike and a child of God. Being children of God requires us to take risk. Our first reading from the beginning of Exodus, is a good example of risk.

Anna Carter Florence, a Professor of Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary, once said during a sermon on this scripture story that we have to get into the reeds and join Moses Sister.[[3]](#footnote-3)To know the risk is to know the context…

The Hebrew people are in the land of Egypt and facing great hatred from the new Egyptian Pharaoh. The king was afraid by the Hebrews growing in number and strength and feared a future threat to his power. We all know how fear can lead to violence. The Pharaoh first tried torturing slavery and when that did not stop their numbers from growing, he turned to genocide of all male babies.

Even in the face of extreme hate and fear, in walks the power of childlike wonder, curiosity and risk—take a walk in the reeds…

You have the sister, who followed her mother to the banks of the river and watched as she placed her brother in a homemade basket of leaves and pitch and placed him in the reeds for almost guaranteed death. I believe she was frozen in awe of the moment. You see, a sense of wonder and awe might not always of a joyful happy moment. Sometimes we are in a sense of wonder of how we got to a moment in time. How did we end up in this situation? How is it that I must leave my brother to die in the reeds? In amazing courage and determination, she could not turn her back and silently accept this great injustice.

Then enters curiosity, pharaoh’s daughter. She saw a basket and heard the baby cry. With curiosity comes compassion. This is not the “other” Hebrew people Father—that you hate and are afraid of—no, she realizes this is an innocent child.

Through curiosity and wonder…leads to the risk of a quick witted, stubborn and outspoken sister. To hatch a plan to save her brother, reconnect him to his family and renew a hope that could change the trajectory of her people forever. The spirit moved her to take risk and wade in the reeds.

We all know we are struggling in a difficult time of division and hate. I am struck at times by my own fear and hesitation to stand up against violence and prejudice and to give voice to love. At times, I feel lost in the reeds. Where do I go and how do I start change? It is time to remember I am a beloved child of God and so is my neighbor. We do not go it alone. Through God’s grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we walk a journey of loved forged by many neighbors…including Mr. Rogers.

I recently found a statement of faith by Mister Rogers. It was as if Mr. Rogers was reaching out to me again and speaking through to my childhood self. He was being interviewed by Amy Hollingsworth at the time and it was during her last visit before his death from cancer. She asked him

*“If you had one final broadcast, one final opportunity to address your television neighbors, and you could tell them the single most important lesson of your life, what would you say?” He paused a moment and then said, ever so slowly:*

*Well, I would want [those] who were listening somehow to know that they had unique value, that there isn’t anybody in the whole world exactly like them and that there never has been and there never will be. And that they are loved by the Person who created them, in a unique way. If they could know that and really know it and have that behind their eyes, they could look with those eyes on their neighbor and realize, ‘My neighbor has unique value too; there’s never been anybody in the world like my neighbor and there never will be.’ If they could value that person—if they could love that person—in ways that we know that the Eternal loves us, then I would be very grateful.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Play video: “It such good feeling” closing song for Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood

You are a beloved child of God…and so is your neighbor.

Amen.

**Bibliography**

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1. Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World’s Most Beloved Neighbor* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2005) xxviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anna Carter Florence, “Chapel Sermon”(Sermon, Schooler Institute, MTSO, Delaware OH, March 14, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers,* 160-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)