

The Fellowship of the Sent: 1 John 5:1-5

Norwalk Christian Church, November 17, 2019, Stewardship Series, "The Fellowship of God", Non-lectionary, Proper 28, Year C

Last week Marti confessed to you her love for Mister Rogers and Tom Hanks, who will be playing Mister Rogers in the upcoming movie "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood", which opens THIS Saturday, by the way. Well, I might as well confess, as well, that I, too, share this love of Fred Rogers and Tom Hanks.

And last week while preparing for this sermon, I read an article from the New York Times interviewing Tom Hanks about the upcoming movie and his role playing Mr. Rogers. The author, Taffy Brodesser-Akner, spent a couple of days with Hanks, writing her article, "This Tom Hanks Story Will Help You Feel Less Bad". Never has a story been better named. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/13/movies/tom-hanks-mister-rogers.html>)

I dare you to read it and not smile! She begins by recounting several great stories about Hanks, about that time he was filming Angels and Demons in Rome and a bride was blocked from entering a church for her wedding. He stopped production, and personally escorted her in. Or that time he bought a bunch of girl scout cookies, gave the scout an extra \$20, then stood by the table offering selfies with anyone who would buy a box from the girl. There are a lot more stories. All equally charming.

Which lead Taffy to wonder, was Tom casted in this role simply because he was as quirkily good as Mr. Rogers. Hank's publicist wanted Taffy to know, Tom was, indeed, acting--he wasn't just playing himself. And yet, Hanks is still a good, good guy. And it's not just a schtick. It's true. And he was casted as Mr. Rogers, because, yes, he does sort of resemble the Public Television Saint in appearance, but also in character. Hanks is believable as Mr. Rogers, and he may be about the only actor who would be.

Which led Taffy to realize that her biographical article about Hanks was going to be, kinda, boring. She wasn't going to uncover some hidden secret or flaw with Hanks. It was going to be a story of Hanks being as boringly good as we know and love him to be.

The new movie was inspired by a 1998 Esquire article about Mr. Rogers, entitled "Can You Say... Hero?" by Tom Junod. A character based on Junod is the subject of the new movie, and like the real Junod, his life is forever changed by his contract Mr. Rogers.

Taffy's interview with Hanks was, perhaps, not as life-changing. And yet, still, she places her own experience with Hanks at the center of her story. During their conversation, they get on the subject of parenting and Taffy shares how hard it is to parent. How she gets how children, when they grow a little older, begin to resent their parents, because we spend so much time correcting them, telling them no, and ignoring them.

And Hanks looks at her and says, "Somewhere along the line, I figured out, the only thing really, I think, eventually a parent can do is say 'I love you, there's nothing you can

do wrong, you cannot hurt my feelings, I hope you will forgive me on occasion, and what do you need me to do?' You offer up that to them. I will do anything I can possibly do in order to keep you safe. That's it. Offer that up and then just love them."

And Taffy says, "He looked at me for my next question and when he saw my face he said, 'O.K. Go ahead. I'm right here for you, Taffy. It's good to cry. It's good to talk.'"

And that's Tom Hanks. So consistently, boringly good.

Taffy ends her biography of Hanks in this way: "[Hanks] is the Platonic ideal of a man, a projection of what we wish we were, or, more worrisome, a theory of what we actually are, and, well: Have you read the other pages of this newspaper?"

"I am too old for Mister Rogers. My children are too old for Mister Rogers, too. So instead I showed them "Splash," then "Forrest Gump," then "Big," then "A League of Their Own." I showed them "That Thing You Do!" and parts of "Cast Away." I told them about the man who heard I wasn't feeling well and adjusted his schedule for me. I told them that *it doesn't matter why you do nice things; all that matters is that you do them*. And one day, something changed. I had just finished "Toy Story 4," and suddenly all my algorithms were recommending openhearted movies with heroes and good values, and I realized that I had begun to feel a little better. My heart was never a spike; it was always an umbrella but sometimes it would invert against a storm. That day I recalibrated, and suddenly my umbrella was upright, once again able to shield me from the weather. It was enough. It was more than enough. This is an accurate reflection of the time Tom Hanks spent with a journalist."

The article moved me, and I encourage you to read it try not to smile. Because, let's face it, it's hard to recalibrate sometimes when our world is so filled with bad news and worse news. We need feel good stories--we need heroes--which is why, I think, Mr. Rogers has become so popular 16 years after his death.

I didn't read this New York Times article for sermon-fodder. I read it because I love Tom Hanks. But when I read it, I knew--there's my sermon.

We've been spending the last couple of weeks talking about the church--who are we and what is our purpose. Last week we had our annual congregational meeting, where we approved our 2020 budget--a budget that has increased from previous years because your generosity to our mission together has increased. We approved a new slate of board members for 2020, members of our church who have stepped up to say--I want to be a leader of my church.

We are the fellowship of God. And in your bulletin today, you received a Commitment Card. On one side, you can reflect on your financial commitment to your church. On the other side, you can reflect on your other gifts--ways you can step up and serve. You can

place it in these baskets as you come to the Lord's Table today, and if you aren't ready to fill it out now, take it home. Pray about it. Talk with someone about it. And drop it in the collection plate on a future Sunday.

But I challenge you to ask yourself, How do you want to grow next year, in your gifts and talents in serving God's mission? It's not about guilt, but about challenging ourselves to be intentional about our part in the life of this church.

Our scripture this morning speaks of a faith in God that conquers the world. This passage is a culmination of the entire book of 1 John, which says--over and over again--the whole point of the Christian life is to love one another. If you say you love God, but don't love other people, you are a liar. Love one another--it's really that simple.

And what happens when the people of God go out into the world, showing God's love? The apostle tells us--they conquer the world.

It's sounds so dramatic, so intense--conquering the world! Sometimes we think, well, I couldn't do that. I'm not a dramatic speaker. I don't have a lot of money to be super generous. I am busy, I am tired, I am conflicted. I'm not good enough to conquer the world! I wish I could, but who are we kidding!

Yet I have news for you today, the love that conquers the world--it's as boringly simple as Mr. Rogers and Tom Hanks. It's as boringly simple as helping a girl scout sell cookies. It's as boringly simple as giving someone who is going through a hard time a call. It's as boringly simple as offering a smile, a small gift, a baked good. It's knitting a prayer shawl. It's writing a letter to an inmate. It's making a meal for a family in grief. It's working with a kids' Sunday school class. Volunteering for youth group.

It's giving Christmas gifts to families in need. It's setting up a meeting with school officials to help a woman caught in a difficult space. It's like the many stories I've heard about Doc Raun from many of you, and the ways he showed love and generosity when you were down.

It's living your life for someone other than yourself. Messing up--yes. Not being perfect--yes. But doing your best. Saying to others, "I love you, there's nothing you can do wrong, you cannot hurt my feelings, I hope you will forgive me on occasion, and what do you need me to do?"

It's boringly simple--but this is church. This is who we are called to be.

Because we believe that all are loved by God. And we believe that no matter your political party, you are a child of God and we can come together and learn from one another. And we believe that we can become better, and our past choices do not determine our future. And we believe that the way of love and peace, not manipulation,

intimidation, and cynicism is the way to change the world. And we believe that everyone deserves a chance. And we believe that no one should have to suffer alone. And we believe that everyone deserves justice and hope. And we believe that love IS, indeed, more than enough for all of us.

And we believe we are sent with that very good news--to conquer the world with love in a thousand boringly simple ways. To offer hope. To turn people's umbrellas over, so that they receive God's loving shelter from the storms of life.

This is our calling. This is why we are church. This is why we've been saved, called, and sent--to share God's good news with the world.

May we go out together, conquering this world with God's love. Amen.