

Gentleness and Reverence

Psalm 66: 8-20

1 Peter 3: 13-22

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Psalm 66: 8-20

Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard,
who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.

For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.

You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs;

you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have
brought us out to a spacious place.

I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows,
those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.

I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make
an offering of bulls and goats. Selah

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me.

I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue.

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer.

Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

1 Peter 3: 13-22

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer
for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,
but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who
demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and
reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for
your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if
suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to
bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he
went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when
God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is,
eight persons, were saved through water.

And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the
body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers
made subject to him.

I'm sure it's a reflection of the time in which we live, but as I first read through the
Scripture readings for today a simple yet profound phrase in the first letter of Peter repeatedly
leapt off the page. Four simple words, 'with gentleness and reverence.' With gentleness and
reverence.

In the midst of the tension and anxiety we now live with, and which is heightened at each news story, and by concerns that everything is being opened too quickly, and as protest situations escalate quickly and become violent, and as illness and death numbers continue to rise, we surely need some gentleness and reverence right about now. We need to see, hear and feel kindness, tenderness, compassion and stories of humble hearts and generous hands right about now. We need to have those we can look to with deep respect, honor and admire as we navigate what is fearful and intimidating.

Perhaps that is why I, and many others these days, wish that Mister Rogers were still with us. He was the ultimate gentle presence, a reverent man, who always knew what to say in even the most difficult times. He so easily, naturally, recognized and valued God's image in each person. No matter how difficult the topic, or how young or unique his 'neighbor' was, Mister Rogers embodied gentleness and reverence that calmed and brought hope. There is such a longing for his gentleness and reverence, his ability to be calming and reassuring despite the challenges, his ability to accept each person just as they were. His tender presence and soft-spoken wisdom, in the words of Marci Glass, "showed me what kind and compassionate living looked like. He showed me what being a "good neighbor" looked like. He taught me to appreciate the gifts of other people even as they were different from mine. He showed me the importance of the words we use in creating the world around us."

Just last year, not long before Covid-19 was on the horizon, pop culture aficionado Gavin Edwards wrote a book that happens to be perfect for our times, *Kindness and Wonder: Why Mister Rogers Matters Now More Than Ever*, to remind us of the enduring lessons and insights that Mister Rogers lived out – "what it means to be a good person, to be openhearted, to be thoughtful, to be curious, to be compassionate - and why they matter."

There are three lessons, three approaches to life, that reflect Mister Rogers gentle spirit, and I believe can guide us, inspire us, encourage us, during this pandemic and beyond. Each of these approaches are not new, they are as old as the early church that is written about in the first letter of Peter as he described the Christian identity.

Peter encouraged believers to be eager to do what is good, and even in the midst of suffering to not be fearful or intimidated. Peter taught that while we cannot always be of one mind as there will always be differences in thoughts, opinions and beliefs, Christians are called to reflect the image of Christ within our hearts so we must respond with compassion, with empathy, with grace. At the time that Peter wrote his letter to the new Christians, the resident aliens and household slaves in Asia Minor, Christians were being ostracized and persecuted so Peter's goal and encouragement in his letter was that believers follow the example of Jesus Christ with a clear and clean conscience.

Mister Rogers taught us to be kind to strangers, to think of and care for others no matter who they are, whether or not we share the same beliefs. This lesson is especially important for us now that we must maintain physical distance between ourselves and others. The facemasks and the distancing may cause us to see others as a potential threat, as intimidation, as unknown, yet with kindness and gentleness with one another we can break that spell as we go through our day. "Imagine what our real neighborhoods would be like if each of us offered, as a matter of course, just one kind word to another person."

Peter counseled Christians to share their faith with truth, hope and conviction, with kindness and honor, with gentleness and reverence, in ways that are genuine and sincere. To act out of a place of vulnerability and compassion, as Jesus did, was a revelation of God's heart.

Mister Rogers counseled us to tell the truth. As Edwards points out, when Mister Rogers was “communicating with children, he carefully double-checked everything that came out of his mouth to make sure that he wasn’t accidentally misleading them,” and he did this thoughtfully, carefully, calmly. When he had hard, difficult news to share, he handled it with genuine compassion and gentleness for the sake of others’ vulnerability. How we share news and updates, how we tell of the newest guidelines or increase in numbers must be handled with honesty, tenderness and hope to continue to reveal the presence of Christ in all times, all things. "In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers."

Peter emphasized that the life, death and resurrection of Christ was for all people, for “the righteous for the unrighteous.” Jesus connected with all types of people, with the outcast and the prisoner, with authorities and enemies, with his family and friends, trying to reach all of them with his message. Whether or not he was received or rejected, Jesus wanted to, strove to, connect with others.

To connect with other people every way we can is the third way we can live like Mister Rogers did. He tackled difficult topics, even taboo topics, in order to connect with people, with children, who were living through the death of a loved one, the divorce of their parents, bullying at school, facing a serious illness or enduring racial prejudice, and they needed the gentleness, reverence and empathy he respectfully offered for their feelings and their circumstances. This is the time to put ourselves in the dress shoes of the Class of 2020 who have lost all the experiences and celebrations of their senior year. This is the time to support the local businesses as we can so that they will be there on the other side of Covid-19. This is the time to identify with a neighbor who struggles to balance working from home and being their children’s teacher, or to send a note of appreciation to someone on the medical frontlines. We can make connections with other people by empathizing with the specifics of their lives. "All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we're giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world."

Gentleness and reverence. May these words guide us on this journey. Amen.