The Ripple Effect

Mark 5:21-43

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On Thursday, a group of 14 of us went to see “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” It’s the documentary of Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian clergyman who created and starred in Mister Roger’s Neighborhood.

During the many years of his show, many thought of him as a sort of odd duck. He was quiet, and deliberate and too sugary sweet for many adults. But not for children. His belief that children deserve honest, open, age-appropriate communication around issues of inclusion, death, disability, divorce, bullying and many other topics provided a generation of little viewers and their families with healing from some of life’s greatest pains. His simple…”You are loved, just because you are you” message may sound so corny to those of us who have grown accustomed feel assaulted by the words and ideas of our modern day society, particularly nowadays. Perhaps that’s precisely why this movie is stroking such a chord with people.

Rogers also normalized relationships across racial lines, during a time in the early 60’s when white people were not wanting to swim in the same swimming pools as people of color. Rogers’ sidekick was an African American man who played a police officer. On the show, Rogers invites his friend to sit and dangle their feet in a wading pool together. A gentle but powerful lesson for the day.

For me, the most poignant scene was an interaction between Rogers and a little boy in a wheelchair. Rogers asks him, “Tell me how you came to need this chair.” The little boy very matter-of-factly told him he had a tumor and went on to describe his illness. At the end of their talk, Mister Rogers told him in a very straight-forward way that he liked him and that he was precious. The little boy wasn’t embarrassed. He just took it right in as water and said thank you.

This morning we’re going to talk about healing. The Gospel lesson contains two of my favorite stories which show the loving and healing work of Jesus. They are the stories of Jairus’ daughter and the woman with the flow of blood. The stories tell us three things about healing:

1. Healing requires consent, either by us or someone else on our behalf. In other words we have to know we need it and we have to want it.

 In the 12 year old girl’s case, her father acted as an advocate for her. She was too ill to ask for herself. And so, a man who had prestige and power in the community. A leader of the synagogue humbled himself and asked this strange man to come and heal his daughter. Desperate measures for desperate times.

In the woman’s case, she risked everything to go and to merely touch the hem of Jesus’ garment. Jesus says, it was the faith of that act itself, the boldness and courage she showed, that healed her.

We participate in our healing when we realize and ask for help…whether it be from God, a professional health provider, a therapist, or some other sort of healer.

1. Healing is individual and it’s communal

On one level, we may read these stories and understand them as they are stated. The lives of two people were changed as a result of interactions with Jesus. But their lives weren’t the only ones changed. In Jairus’ daughter’s case, her parents and Peter, James and John all witnessed this bringing to life. She was restored to life, and she was restored to her family unit.

In the story of the woman with the flow of blood, it is even more nuanced. The Laws of purification demanded that a woman be separated during her monthly cycle. That means for 12 years, this woman would have been considered ritually unclean and unable to be in contact with her family, her community, her life. As a result, the community was different because she was not a part of it. Imagine, for example, if her role in the community had been that of baker. If all of a sudden, she went MIA, the community would be at a loss. They would feel the tangible effects of her absence.

Then, imagine the thrust of energy and courage it must of taken for her to get up the nerve to first physically re-enter the community, then to push her way through the crowd which would have violated religious rules, and then to have the audacity to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment. Her yearning for wholeness was so intense, that none of the repercussions mattered. That’s how much she wanted life. Healing. Wholeness. Restoration. And Jesus felt it…right there in the midst of the crowd. When he asked…”who was it that touched my garment?” because he had felt power go out of him, all of the layers of wound, of shame, of illness, of protectiveness, of isolation, of pain, of fear peeled away in a moment. She laid herself bare in front of him, and told him everything. And, he responded…”Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

And with that, not only was she healed physically and emotionally, but spiritually she was called daughter. She was claimed as God’s very own. Just that alone is wonderful, but there’s more. The community was restored as well. It had not been right without her in it. Perhaps there had been people who had advocated on her behalf. Perhaps there had been people who had prayed for her in the temple for the 12 long years. Maybe there had been people who had blamed her for her distress…saying that she had done something? She was unclean, and it was her fault? All of that would have made the community out of balance, distorted and dis-eased.

Our country is reeling from the effects of what is now over 2000 children who have been separated from their parents at our boarders. We are not functioning as normal. Our communities have been distorted and need healing. No matter where you stand politically, or even what your stance is on immigration, we can all rally around the fact that we cannot treat children in this way. We are not this. And so we run to plead for Jesus to come and raise us from the inevitable death of the soul of our nation, and to provide healing. A raising from the dead, a way forward to see families reunited and a healing of their spirits which surely have been traumatized. God help us.

1. Healing can be provided by an individual and by communities

Obviously, we have the example of Jesus’ healing of all sorts of people. It’s what he did. It was in his very nature. But his healings were always in the interest of something greater. People witnessed them, and he told them they could do even greater works by faith. Healing can also be bestowed by communities.

At the recent gathering of General Assembly of the PCUSA, participants had been notified that the offering from the opening worship would be used in a life-giving way for justice and healing. $47,000 was collected. A few days later, after much research, the assembly filled the streets of St. Louis and marched to the city courthouse. They used the money to pay the cash bail for over 3 dozen non-violent people who were being held in prison. People who were detained only because they couldn’t afford the bail of say, $3000 or under. Poor people. It was an earnest display of enacting Jesus words, “when you do this for the least of these, you do it for me.”

At the end of GA and as the former co-moderator departed, she shared this conversation she had with the Lyft driver, named Kevin.

 *Lyft Driver Kevin: Were you here for a conference?*

*Me: Yes, the Presbyterian Church USA. You might have seen us on the news Tuesday night. We were on the local Fox channel.*

*LDK: Why were you on the news?*

*Me: We marched from the Convention Center to the Courthouse with $47,000 to bail out some people who couldn’t pay their cash bail. It was our worship offering from Saturday.*

*LDK: Your church did that?*

*Me: Well, it’s not just my church. But yes, we did that. We paid the bail to release about 3 dozen non-violent offenders. It was pretty great.*

*We got to the airport, pulled over, and when we went to his trunk to retrieve my luggage, Kevin said, “I feel like I’ve met a friend today. That’s the best thing the Church has ever done.” And he hugged me good-bye. (from achurchforstarvingartists.org)*

Acts of healing and kindness, done out of love, affect not only the person, but they heal the community around them as well.

Just like a stone when dropped into a pool of water causes a ripple effect, so does the effect of healing have on the multiple levels of life beyond the person receiving it. That’s why it’s so important to be conscious of everything we put out into the world…our words, our actions, our even our internet postings. What is in our hearts and minds can have either a negative ripple effect or a positive one. Which do we want? That does not mean we have to have a Pollyanna mindset. We need to be truthful in what we say and do, and we need to be in community to know how our actions affect others, which is not always evident if left to our own ways of thinking. We need to say our truth in love, and ask for forgiveness when we mess up. Restoration of relationship is part of healing too.

So maybe we all need a little more Jesus. Maybe we all need a little more Fred Rogers. Maybe we need a little more healing. Ask and you shall receive.

(A service of prayer and healing will follow)