

Sermon – 9/9/18 – Rally Day
Life Lessons from Jesus and Mr. Rogers
Luke 2:22-40
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
John Ryan

Today's scripture, while may be familiar to many of you, might feel a little out of context when read during the heat of September. Our text most often called "Jesus presented at the Temple," is normally read the first Sunday after Christmas. But today is Rally Day, the day when we start our fall faith formation classes and this text, one of the few boyhood stories we have about Jesus, is especially important to us today.

Over the summer, I had the opportunity to see the movie "*Won't You Be My Neighbor?*" It takes an intimate look at America's favorite neighbor: Mister Fred Rogers. A portrait of a man whom we all think we know, this emotional and moving film takes us beyond the zip-up cardigans and the land of make-believe, and into the heart of a creative genius who inspired generations of children with compassion and limitless imagination. Born in 1928 in Latrobe, PA, Rogers graduated from college in Florida in 1951. During his senior year of college, he visited his parents and was awed by the family's newest household addition: a television set. He could see a fantastic future for the medium and, as he would later recall, Rogers immediately decided he wanted to be a part of it.

In 1953, he was invited by WQED in Pittsburgh, the nation's first community-supported public television station, to co-produce a daily program called *The Children's Corner*. The experience convinced him he had a future in children's television. In the 1950's he began taking classes at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and graduate courses in child development at the University of Pittsburgh, largely during his lunch breaks. He earned a Master of Divinity degree in 1963 and was ordained in that year by the Pittsburgh Presbytery with the unusual charge to continue his ministry with children and their families through the media. While he never served in the traditional role of pastor of a brick-and-mortar church, his ministry to children reached millions.

I, like many of you, am of the right age to have grown up watching Mister Roger's Neighborhood in the 1970's. But while watching the movie, I had no idea of the emotional connection it would have with me. Growing up near Pittsburgh, WQED was our local PBS channel. The movie showed Pittsburgh as I remember it from my childhood and Mr. Rogers as I remember him too. What I failed to remember were other connections, while far removed, I had with Mr. Rogers. His nephew was a college classmate and Mr. Rogers was the commencement speaker my freshman year of college. Of course, we all stayed for graduation, just so we could sing "*It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*" when he took the stage to speak.

Here is a little-known fact about me – I am not much of a crier, but there was something about this movie that caused me to weep throughout much of the screening. But I took solace that I was not alone in crying in the theater. Maybe it was the remembrance of childhood innocence.

Maybe it was, for the first time recognizing the sheer genius of Fred Rogers and his simple, yet profound message. Perhaps it was the longing for someone like Mr. Rogers to appear during this contentious time in our county and unite us with his timeless message. Regardless, through *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* Fred Rogers taught generations of children the quintessentially Christian but profoundly universal message of "Love yourself, love others." This message of love self and others is at the core and foundation of what we do here at DCPC.

Today is Rally Day, the day when Sunday School classes start, fall youth programming begins, and mid-week children's activities start. Last year, thanks to the good work of Jenny Alexander, our staff associate for Children's Ministry, we started a new program called "Kid's Club." We use a curriculum called "*The Way of the Child*," which focuses on the spiritual formation of children. It facilitates children learning and experiencing spiritual practices that will lead them into a deeper awareness of God's presence in their lives. This program should not work! It goes against everything you see pre-teens doing these days. I, along with Kaylor Kaemba taught our 3rd - 5th graders and for an hour each week we gazed, we journaled, we prayed, and we reflected. We walked the labyrinth on campus. We were quiet. We lite candles. We kneeled in silence. We learned about ourselves and God. There were no electronics, no iPads, no computers, no TV's. We were not alone in doing this – there was a class of kindergartens through 2nd graders right next door engaged in the same work. And believe it or not, they were just as quiet as we were, and no, they were not in time out!

Etta Dixon Deering, a 4th grader at the Community School of Davidson participated in Kid's Club and she is going to share with you her experience.

"As soon as we got started with the first lesson, I felt more connected to God. I never knew there were so many ways to pray. For example, you can do a breath prayer, silent prayer, or group prayer. You can even walk a labyrinth. I always started Kid's Club with a smile and ended with a smile, and I never lost my smile! Kid's Club always made me smile."

Turning our attention back to our text this morning, we know it is about forty days after Jesus' birth. His parents are taking Jesus to the Temple to consecrate him to the Lord. They must have been in a solemn mood that day, full of reverence and expectancy, the way many young parents are when their first child is to be baptized. It is not hard to imagine, therefore, the quiet procession they must have made to the great Temple, their awe at entering its holy courts, their nervousness as they prepared to sacrifice according to the law.

Nor is it difficult to imagine their reaction as an old man comes forward out of the shadows to scoop up their child into his arms and prophesy about him. Startled at first, perhaps, even a bit frightened by the old man's ecstatic face, Mary and Joseph yield to him because they sense the Lord's Spirit upon him. Yet Simeon is not alone. Anna, who Luke names a prophet, affirms the arrival of the one who will set the people free.¹

The passage ends by telling us that Jesus grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him. While we do not exactly know how this happened, I like to think that Jesus learned from right and wrong and the traditions of his faith from those

¹ The Oddest Christmas Carol, Craft of Preaching, 12/25/2011

around him. From his parents, aunts, uncles, his neighbors. A group of caring individuals who invested their time into helping Jesus grow into a person of faith.

This reminds me of what is happening in our youth program under the leadership of Matt Wiggins and a faithful group of sixty-five college students and adults who are helping our teenagers learn about themselves and about their faith. How to love God, love others and love life. For some of you, your confirmation experience might have been memorizing the Westminster Shorter Catechism. That is not how we do confirmation these days. Our 8th graders spend a period of time exploring what they believe, wrestling with their faith and then putting into words what they believe now. They have small group leaders who work with them weekly to help process new information and how to make sense of it all. They have confirmation guides who walk along side with them on their journey. In all of this, they are supported and nurtured by parents, who are their primary teachers of faith.

Mark Muchane, a freshman at North Meck High School went through our confirmation program last year and will share how he grew in his faith:

"In November 2017 I started on my confirmation journey. It was really a collective and personal journey of learning and faith. Throughout the confirmation process I learned what it truly means to be a Christian, to follow Jesus. But more personally, I made a huge journey in my faith, helping to find my faith and what it means to me and being able to express it in my faith statement. The confirmation retreat was a really moving event, helping me and I feel many of my fellow confirmands start the confirmation process by finding how they want to approach this with God without any distractions while finding him in nature. We also got guides that we choose from the church congregation, Mr. Snyder and I were able to help both shape my faith statement and my personal faith through a one-on-one deeply personal conversation. Since confirmation I have been more able to pick up on God's active force in my life. In the confirmation process with the guidance of our pastors and our small group leaders, Mr. Orlando and Mr. Harris, I participated in thoughtful and moving confirmation sessions that helped me find my place with God by opening myself up to him."

We in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition have always valued education. The "father" of Presbyterianism, John Calvin, started Europe's first public school in 1559 in Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin believed that educating young people was a necessity for society at large, not just for the wealthy as it was in those days. That emphasis on education was a hallmark of our Presbyterian missionaries around the world and in our own country.

In the United States, the Presbyterian emphasis on higher education dates to the early 1700's and the founding of the College of New Jersey, later to become Princeton University. By 1860 Presbyterians had founded over a fourth of all the colleges in the United States. Whenever a Presbyterian missionary arrived, usually two things happened: a church was started, and a school was founded. That is the case right here, both our church and Davidson College were founded in 1837.

But education does not stop when you receive your degree. We believe that faith formation is a life long journey. Just as our faith continues to grow, so does our desire to learn more about

who God is in our lives. In the 1940's and 1950's the Board of the Christian Education of The United Presbyterian Church said, "The Church must teach or die."² Let that sink in. While I am not saying that if you're not attending Sunday school or a mid-week Bible study class, you might meet an untimely death, but as your faith formation pastor, it does give me a certain leverage into getting you into in new learning opportunity. Hey, I am only looking out for your health!

DCPC, through the adult faith formation committee offers five Sunday school classes, four here and one at the Pines, seven mid-week Bible studies and small groups, and our Presbyterian Women have seven groups and one is coed! Believe it or not, there is a faith formation opportunity for you here.

Susan Manning will be teaching a study this fall called Jesus and the Gospels, and it is not too late to sign up. It is a yearlong look at Jesus' life told through the four Gospels. Let's hear from Susan on why teaching is so important to her.

"Unlike many in this congregation, I am not a trained educator. I never even considered teaching as something I would enjoy doing until I took my first Disciple class 20 years ago. Teaching was identified by my Disciple classmates as one of my gifts, and I was encouraged to consider teaching a Disciple class in the future. The next year, I was asked to lead a Disciple I class, and in one way, shape or form, I've been teaching ever since.

So, why do I teach?

- *Teaching helps nourish and strengthen my own faith. Bible study is a spiritual discipline, and I've learned that I don't do it well on my own. I need the discipline of learning with a group. Participating and teaching the Bible is a spiritual rewarding and nourishing experience for my personal faith journey.*
- *I love to learn, and I learn more when I am teaching. I'm better prepared, I dig a little deeper, I spend more time on it, and I get more out of it.*
- *Finally, I teach because I enjoy the fellowship of learning with other Christians—we learn so much from each as we study God's Word together. I get different insights from others and their experience, and it often opens a whole new perspective on the lesson for me. We study, learn, and pray together, and that Christian fellowship is so nurturing and supportive during the ups and downs of our daily life.*

Teaching nourishes me personally, and it's a way I can give back to all the wonderful teachers in my life that have guided me on my faith journey."

Faith Formation does not stop there. We cannot forget about the important work that Claire George Drumheller is doing on the Davidson campus through UKirk, our ministry with Davidson students. We are fortunate, through grants from Union Presbyterian Seminary and the D. Thomason Foundation, Claire can work full time during the school year. DCPC also has eight theological students under care of this congregation preparing for ministry.

² The United Presbyterian Church and Christian Education – an Historical Overview. Journal of Presbyterian History. 59: 3 (Fall 1981)

Did you know during the week our preschool is home to 145 students, representing 110 families? Led by Kristen Clark and Hunter Busse, twenty-eight teachers call this place home and the first person to greet every child when they come to school is our beloved crossing guard, Bill Edminston. Some say he is the face of the preschool. Thanks to the wonderful working relationship between the preschool and the church, the new welcome center at the ramp entrance was made possible by the preschool and if you venture into the lower level of the church, you will find new flooring in the hallway and classrooms too!

Great things are happening in faith formation here at DCPC. We have a long history of providing quality education for all age levels. Just as Jesus grew in wisdom, we too must do likewise. My challenge to you is to find a place, whether on Sunday morning, at youth group, UKirk, or during mid-week where you too can grow in wisdom, where you can have your childhood love of learning reignited. A place where you can grow in your love of Jesus as Lord and Savior and in turn, share that love with others.

And remember, I am really looking out for your long-term health!

Amen.