

## Storybooks and Scriptures: That's How Love Works

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

At Immanuel Presbyterian Church

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*Mark 4:26-34*

When I first read the story Susan read to the children this morning and its marvelous last two sentences that you can find on the front of the bulletin, I knew exactly what scripture passage I was going to pair it with. The passage falls near the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has been telling the crowds—and his disciples—parables about what the Kingdom of God is like, most of them involving seeds. Seeds that the sower scatters, that take root in good soil. Seeds that grow up into wheat or weeds. He ends his discourse with the following two parables, both of which continue use the metaphor of seeds. I think you'll be able to hear how the seed is like the peanut that the story talked about.

*He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'*

*He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'*

*With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*

A few weeks ago, Judith and I went to go see the documentary, *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, about the children's television icon Fred Rogers, who was also an ordained Presbyterian minister, by the way. Like me, some of you –or your children, at least—grew up watching his show *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. Mr. Rogers had a way of communicating the essence of the gospel—that you are beloved and you are called to love your neighbor who is also beloved, regardless of any differences you may have. He had a way of communicating that never proselytized. It just calmly, simply, and steadily communicated a truth he lived and believed: *"Love is at the root of everything. All learning, all parenting, all relationships. Love or the lack of it. And what we see and hear on the screen is part of who we become."*

In an increasingly materialistic culture that more and more offered people pie in the face humor and manic violence and treated children and adults as cogs in a machine or members of a tribe, Mr. Rogers gave us an alternative. His low-budget, slow-paced, not overly-produced shows planted seeds in his young viewers about what was really important, what really mattered—being kind, welcoming the other, treating people with respect. Some of those seeds took root, though given the sort of animus throughout our society today, it is an open question as to how many of them did.

I am admittedly and demonstrably an easy mark when it comes to being moved to tears, most of you know that, but I have to tell you that my face was wet throughout the film. More than one reviewer comments that what is evoking this sort of viewer response is that the movie stands in

stark contrast to what we are living today. David Brooks wrote in an op-ed a week or two ago: *The power is in Rogers's radical kindness at a time when public kindness is scarce. It's as if the pressure of living in a time such as ours gets released in that theater as we're reminded that, oh yes, **that's** how people can be. Moral elevation, says Brooks, gains strength when it is scarce.*

When public kindness is scarce—and seemingly growing scarcer; when fear of the other and anxiety about the future dominates so many people's minds; when we look at what is on our other screens and it makes us want to scream or retreat further into our camps and tribes; we need communities like this one. We need places where we can come and regularly be reminded of the Gospel truth, the one that Jesus taught. You know, that the Kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that is planted and grows into a tree large enough that the birds of the air—all the birds of the air--can come and make nests in its shade. Or like an old man who shares his peanuts with all sorts of different animals in the park and finds out, when he himself is in need, just how love works. He sees it in action as they use what they have to help him when his chest starts to ache: the mouse unbuttoning his shirt, the beaver elevating his feet, the stork fanning the man with his big wings, the hawk leading the ambulance to him, the other animals each doing their part. The Kingdom of God, which is just another name for love, starts with the tiniest gesture, like sharing a peanut, or a loaf of bread, or a listening ear, or a word of hope and encouragement, or a gesture of forgiveness, and it grows into something that really and truly *can save your life—and not just your life, but your soul.*

How easy it can be to discount those small acts of kindness, those tiny steps in the direction of what is loving and just, in a society that works 24-7 to divide, and deceive, and discourage us, and a world where some people have decried Mr. Rogers for telling children that they were special. Which was not, by the way, promising any of us children who heard that success or glory—it was just saying that no matter what we looked like, no matter how able we were, or how much money we had, we had inherent value. We were loved, just the way we are—and we were called to love others, just the way they are.

As a review in *Variety* put it: *Mr. Rogers' premise was to view children as people of complex feeling who needed to be experienced and treated as the individuals they are. That's what he meant when he said that each child was "special." He wasn't doing some lame run-up to the everyone-gets-a-prize, if-each-of-us-is-special-none-of-us-is-special culture that some people say he created. He was saying: Each child, if you truly listen to him or her, is a universe of thought and feeling, and what we owe every one of them is to hear who, exactly, they are. That's how you build a sane society.*

When we are tempted to downplay small acts of kindness, even little steps towards justice, or the tiniest move towards humbly walking with the God who meets us in the hungry and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned, the vulnerable and the ones we would call other, we need to remember. We need to remember that what Jesus says is that this is how the Kingdom of God, the beloved community, where all understand that they are welcome and important, starts. It starts with something small. It doesn't stop there, of course—it grows into something that makes room for all. But it begins—it always begins—with something small.

Like a baby born in a stable and laid in a humble feed trough.

Like the man he grew into, the Palestinian Jew who walked the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea who healed and touched people and put his message of compassion out to the crowds and was arrested and hung on a cross to die for being a threat to the power of the religious authorities and the empire.

Like his disciples, who didn't seem to grasp his message even though he explained it to them, and yet after his resurrection went on to proclaim it and live it as he encouraged them to do, however imperfectly they tried.

Like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. who one word at a time, one speech at a time, one letter at a time, one meeting at a time, one march at a time, challenged the status quo of injustice towards people of color—not just for their sake, but for the sake of those who were considered “white”, too.

And like Rev. Fred McFeely Rogers, who humbly—one show at a time, making it seem like he was addressing one child at a time--planted seeds in our society that are making some of us long for and work for a world where not just some but all are treated with compassion and justice, where violence decreases and respect for human rights increases. It always starts small, but it can grow into something that can save your life and save your soul.

In the David Brooks op-ed piece I mentioned before, entitled appropriately enough *Fred Rogers and the Loveliness of the Little Good*, he writes: *Children are superior for their instinctive small acts of neighborliness, the small hug, sharing a toy. In 1997 a teenage boy in Kentucky warned classmates that “something big” was going to happen. The next day he took a gun to school and shot eight classmates, killing three. Mister Rogers’ response was, “Oh, wouldn’t the world be a different place if he had said, ‘I’m going to do something really little tomorrow.’” Rogers dedicated a week’s worth of shows to the theme of “Little and Big” on how little things can be done with great care.*

*Rogers was drawing on a long moral tradition, Brooks says, that the last shall be first. It’s a tradition that we have more and more begun to ignore, by believing that winners are better than losers, the successful are better than the weak. That morality got reversed, by an achievement-oriented success culture, by a culture that swung too far from humble and earnest caritas.*

I'd say it wasn't just the idea that the last shall be first that Rogers was drawing on—it was also the notion that love starts from something small as a peanut and grows into something that can save your life.

So what then can we do to take part in how the Kingdom of God grows? How can we do something *really little* tomorrow—or today—or each day, for that matter, that will make a difference for God's kingdom? What peanuts do we have to share?

It may be a word of encouragement for someone who is growing weary in well-doing. It may be a note of thanks for someone who has done something kind for you.

It may be a truly listening ear offered to someone—a chance for that person to tell you what they believe and why without you trying to convert them or coming up with rebuttals to what they are going to tell you, or my ability to never forget that the people with whom or from whom I differ are not caricatures or somehow subhuman, but really and truly children of God. When I say my ability, I need to say my weak ability, an ability that gets stronger every time I hear the Gospel addressed to me.

It may be a note written to a sick person, a smile shared with an immigrant, a phone call placed to your senator or representative on behalf of people in need, families at the border or people who are without health care coverage. It could be any one of a million little things done in the name of love. You choose what you feel led to do if you don't like what you have heard so far, but do *something*.

Let me tell you what I have found over my 26 years of ordained ministry and my 51 years of life. The little things that I have done in the name of love—the visits I’ve made, the extra time I’ve spent with someone, the grateful emails I’ve written, the phone calls I’ve placed, the times I’ve really listened, the times I’ve forgiven someone, the times I’ve shared a meal, the times I’ve shared myself in vulnerability—those things have time and time again grown into something that has come back to save my life in the form of love and support in return, as the people around me used their gifts in response. *They weren’t just peanuts, they were seeds.*

You know as well as I that you don’t have to wear a robe and a stole to experience the kind of love and support that a pastor can give and get. You know as well as I, because you do that. Each and every single person in this room does that. That’s living the gospel.

It starts with something as small as a peanut and it grows into something that can save your life.

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Brooks, David “Fred Rogers and the Loveliness of the Good”. A.G. Sulzberger (July 5, 2018)  
Newyorktimes.com [www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/opinion/mister-fred-rogers-wont-you-be-my-neighbor.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/opinion/mister-fred-rogers-wont-you-be-my-neighbor.html)

*Won't You Be My Neighbor.* Morgan Neville. Fred Rogers, Focus Features, 2018. Documentary.