



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Simple Truths

Mark 6:1-13

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July 15, 2018

“We should have gone to see the Mr. Rogers movie instead,” I told my husband, as we watched the credits roll on the movie we saw last Monday afternoon.

I am a pretty selective movie-goer. I like happy movies. I like dumb movies. I like movies that are an escape from my reality. Every once in a while, I'll go see something more edifying. A year-and-a-half ago, for example, I loved seeing *Hidden Figures*, and I was eager to see Denzel Washington bring the play *Fences* to the screen, because I'm interested in August Wilson's play cycle. So, I'm not completely impervious to serious films. But, most of the time I'm not interested in spending my entertainment time and money on movies that are downers. And I have to tell you, for me at least, the movie *First Reformed* was a major league downer.

Why, you might wonder, did I schlep myself and my husband to the only theater in the area that was still showing it? And, why did I ignore the 95 rotten tomatoes that showed up on the review? This is why: The main character is a minister, and he's a minister in the same Protestant family of churches to which we belong at First United - the Reformed tradition. How many movies can say that? I had understood from the trailers that the film was about this minister wrestling with his personal issues and the challenges of his church, and, I thought, maybe I'd learn something. I also wondered if there was something in the movie that could help me think about our text for this week, which explores the challenges of sharing and proclaiming the gospel in the world around us, a world that is not always super-hospitable to the good news we bring.

The movie *First Reformed* is set in this gorgeous, white clapboard, Dutch colonial church, which is supposedly somewhere near Albany, New York. The movie church advertises itself as the oldest, continually operating church in the country, and it's about to celebrate its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Unhappily, the church is down to about 10 worshipers a week and it stays alive by the minister giving tours of the building and selling t-shirts with pictures of the building on the front. The church is known locally as “the souvenir church.” Ouch.

The other church in the film, which is called *Abundant Life*, is teeming with people and programs and money, and is, in fact, underwriting the smaller congregation.

If we were a seminary class, we could spend hours talking about why one of these congregations is thriving, while the other is dying. To understand and maybe address this situation we could read thousands of pages, many of which - trust me - are full of over-simplified diagnoses and half-baked solutions. We could, like the main character in this movie, beat ourselves up about it.

In our text this morning, Jesus does not seem to spend much time in diagnosis, solution, or self-recrimination. Neither is he wallowing in success. He comes to Nazareth, his home town, and the people, who remember all the awkwardness of his younger years and who hint at having a bit of contempt for his family, are not real impressed. He's sort of hamstrung. He cannot do much in Nazareth.

When he sends the disciples out, he tells them not to expect universal success either. Jesus recognizes that some places simply will not be hospitable to his message; some people will not be open.

Not much has changed in 2000 years. We may not know Jesus like his home town contemporaries did, that is true, but we do live in a culture that finds all sorts of ways to be impervious to the gospel. We live in a noisy culture in which it is hard to hear Jesus, and in which it's hard to believe that he really is the way, the truth, and the life.

At the end of June my husband, Tony, and I were in Ireland on a golf vacation. The group we traveled with advertises itself as "spiritual golf," and, along with golf and good company, the leaders offered daily meditations. One day the meditation leader, whose name is Vin, talked about his experience with meditation and he shared how difficult it had been for him to learn these techniques. He's a Scotsman who has been a practicing Buddhist for over 20 years, and he learned meditation from Easterners - Asians - and they in turn had learned these techniques from other Eastern Asians. Vin said it took him a really long time to acquire the skill of mindfulness and meditation.

He made an interesting observation. He said that the Easterners who had tried to teach meditation to him and other Westerners lacked an appreciation for how burdened people in the U.S. and other Western cultures are by (1) busyness and (2) guilt. Those two things, he said, make it super challenging for Westerners to master meditation.

Busyness and guilt.

That rang true for me. I've spent most of my adult life running from one committee meeting to another, from one outside commitment to another. I've also spent a lot of my adult life being pretty hard on myself, inwardly berating this mistake and that mistake. Do I miss a few mistakes along the way, or find a way to ignore the things I really need to pay attention to? Probably. Nonetheless, even though I have not fully mastered the art of emotional self-flagellation, it is often easier to focus on the messiness of my life than it is to focus on the blessedness.

First Reformed, that movie I went to see, was all about the burden of guilt. "Can God forgive us?" was the question that ran consistently throughout the film. If the minister in the film had a positive answer to that question, if he understood or felt an iota of God's forgiveness, I didn't see it reflected in the movie. For me, the film got more and more disturbing as it went on.

We should have gone to see the Mr. Rogers movie, instead. It was showing at the same theater; so was RBG, the movie about Ruth Bader Ginsburg. But, if I wanted an answer to the question, "Can God forgive us?" First Reformed was the wrong movie. I should have gone to see the Mr. Rogers movie instead.

I'm sure all of you know who I'm talking about when I say the name "Mr. Rogers." But just in case you don't, Fred Rogers had a children's TV show for 30+ years that ran on PBS. It was called Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood and our son Peter, who just turned 31, was a devoted fan, so I saw a great deal of Rogers, as Peter called him. Every weekday, Mr. Rogers donned his sneakers and his sweater and invited us to join him in his neighborhood. It was a place where busyness stopped - Mr. Rogers was never in a hurry. It was also a place where children knew they were valued, loved, and forgiven. "I like you, just the way you are," Mr. Rogers told people again and again.

Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, and this was the way he lived out his calling. For over three decades he preached the good news of the gospel. His text was the parable of the good Samaritan. I think it was the only text he used, and he never veered from it. From the first show to the last he poked and prodded the

question, “Who is my neighbor?” in ways that helped us understand what it means to be a neighbor: what it means to be hospitable, what it means to be welcoming of difference, what it means to forgive and be forgiven, what it means to be in community. Even though he never used explicitly theological language or talked about the Bible, Mr. Rogers helped people understand the content of “mercy,” that quality that Jesus says is baked into neighborliness.

But Mr. Rogers didn’t just teach us how to be neighbors; he was also a neighbor to us. He treated us sometimes as if we were the wounded man who needed help. We, who watched, received his mercy. He walked with us in whatever woundedness we brought with us, when we turned on the TV. He helped us feel better about ourselves, more hopeful about who we can be. With his dorky puppet characters and conversations with celebrities or regular working people, he modeled what it’s like to make mistakes and then try to figure out how to do better. He always affirmed our goodness, our potential, our promise. “I like you, just the way you are,” he said repeatedly. And, I think he meant it.

It’s easy to write off Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood as a kid’s program we’ve all outgrown, or as a program that is out of sync with our times, but we would do so at our peril.

We live in a moment in history that is increasingly rude, callous, stingy, and mean. In our current cultural context, our leaders characterize immigrants as criminals. They demean and threaten people of color with coded language full of racist innuendos and stereotypes. They label as “politically correct” any attempt to curb rude or selfish behavior with decency and tolerance, and they would have us believe that civility and courtesy are just liberal agendas that divert the truth.

I have said this before, but let me say it again, loud and clear: loving my neighbor as myself is not some twenty-first century politically correct posture. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ (Luke 10:27). It is a God-given command that is as old as the Ten Commandments (Leviticus 19: 18, 34). We are called to love one another as God first loved us. We are called to do this not only as individuals; we are also called to embody this in our public life together. That is the gospel. Don’t let anybody tell you differently.

It is no easier to hear and claim this good news today than it was 2000 years ago, when the home town crowd turned a deaf ear to Jesus and the disciples met with mixed success. The meditation guy was right. Sometimes we are in too big a hurry, too busy for spiritual truth to penetrate. And, sometimes God’s good news can’t get through the layers of guilt and responsibility we carry with us. Other stuff gets in the way, too; we could make a long list.

I know Mr. Rogers was just another person like you and me. He’s not THE answer, he’s not Jesus. But Mr. Rogers points us toward Jesus, and he invites us to the radical discipleship of being a neighbor. Mr. Rogers understands something that is really important: The first step in loving others is loving ourselves and letting ourselves be loved. And that may be the toughest part of the whole journey. “I like you, just the way you are.” This part of the gospel is so simple, but in this busy, guilt-laden culture it is difficult for us to hear and believe it. Nonetheless, it’s where the gospel journey of discipleship begins. “I like you. I love you, just the way you are.” This isn’t Mr. Rogers talking; it’s God talking. And God is talking to you. Amen.