

Elizabeth L. Windsor, DMin.  
November 4, 2018  
All Saints Sunday  
Isaiah 25:6-8  
Mark 12-28-34

## **“The Neighborhood of Saints”**

As some of you know, All Saints is my favorite feast day of the Christian year. Here’s why: the major feasts of the Church – Christmas, Easter, Pentecost – reveal what God has lovingly done for us in Jesus. All Saints Sunday celebrates the goodness and grace of our response to that love.

All Saints Day brings to mind the ancestors of faith who have gone before us. These tend to be “upper case” Saints– St. Matthew for whom our community is named; St. Paul and the other apostles; maybe St. Augustine, St. Francis, or Mother Teresa. We give thanks for their examples and we do celebrate the gift of their faith on this day.

But All Saints a celebration of ALL the baptized including us - the “lower case” saints. It can be hard to see ourselves as such. After all, the hymn reminds us that *“we feebly struggle, they in glory shine.”* The idea of “perfection” as our society understands it – never making a mistake, having our stuff together– can make us feel unworthy and nowhere close to sainthood. John Wesley, as Methodist a saint as there is, taught that God’s grace moves us “on to perfection.” Understood this way, perfection is a process of walking with the Holy Spirit so that we become the people God created us to be. It’s awfully hard to do this alone. We need a neighborhood of saints to grow into the love God will for us, for our neighbors and for the Creation.

Jesus teaches us the practice of sainthood in the example of his life and in the words of today’s Gospel: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* Saints –both “upper” and “lower case”- are people who love God, love neighbors and love ourselves. Most of us will not be called to death, prison, circuit riding or other practices of “upper case” Sainthood. But whether we are aware of it or not, each one of us is a “lower-case” saint.

I carry in my heart the examples of particular “lower case” saints; people who exemplify love of God and neighbor, and inspire me to practice my faith more deeply. You too may hold particular “lower case” saints in yours. Some of “my personal saints” –both living and dead- are members of the St. Matthew’s community. But one practiced his “lower case” sainthood in public.

I had already decided to explore his practice of “lower case” sainthood with you, when the news of the murder of our siblings at the Tree of Life Synagogue broke. I felt even more deeply called to share his witness to God’s love this morning -especially because this massacre happened in his neighborhood.

Whenever there is a mass casualty event, the message Mister Rogers gave to children as the United States invaded Grenada in 1983, appears on

Face Book, message boards and in news commentary. No doubt, you have seen it somewhere this past week:

*"My mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers — so many caring people in this world."*

Fred Rogers intended these words for children. Rather than take comfort from his words, he expected adults to use our power and grace to peacefully challenge, imagine, change, and model better ways of living together. Best known for his love of and work with children –and often dismissed because of it – Fred Rogers was grounded in a mature practice of Jesus' radical call to love God, neighbor and self.

In a recent book entitled *Peaceful Neighbor*, author Michael Long delves into the theology of Mister Rogers and the Land of Make Believe. He describes Fred Rogers' life and work this way:

*"[He] was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and although he rarely shared his religious convictions on his program, he fervently believed in a God who accepts us as we are and loves us without condition, who is present in each person and all of creation, and who desires a world marked by peace and wholeness . . . [he] invited us to make the world into a countercultural neighborhood of love – a place where there would be no wars, no racial discrimination, no hunger, no gender-based discrimination, no killing of animals for food, and no pillaging of the earth's precious resources."*

For Fred Rogers, the phrase *"I like you just the way you are"* was a theological declaration. In a 2001 newspaper interview, Fred shared, *"I am convinced that, for me, God is the Great Appreciator . . . and we are the greatly appreciated."* **We are the greatly appreciated.** Our acceptance of God's unceasing appreciation for the best in us grounds our ability to love ourselves and love our neighbors the same way. Jesus meets us where we are, or as Fred put it in a sermon *"Be who you are. We'll grow from there."*

Fred gets to the root of why accepting ourselves as saints is so very difficult, *"When we hear the word that we are not loveable, we are **not** hearing the Word of God. No matter how unlovely, how impure or weak or false we may feel ourselves to be, all through the ages God has sill called us loveable."* If we cannot experience God's love for us -if we cannot accept that God *"likes us just the way we are"* - it becomes impossible for us to love God or our neighbor.

False perceptions of God, neighbor and self lead to the breakdown of community, and the rise of hostility, hatred and violence we are confronted with all around us. Fred was clear-eyed about the destruction human beings can and do inflict upon each other, but he refused to believe that anyone was beyond God's loving acceptance. He did not ignore human evil. He insisted it be talked about, often quoting this aphorism *"Anything that's human is mentionable and anything that is mentionable is manageable."*

Fred Rogers knew in his soul that managing our helpful, loving response to racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, hunger, poverty, violence

and evil is the work of “lowercase” sainthood. Loving God, neighbor and self, requires community, imagination and constant practice.

The Land of Make Believe was Mister Rogers’ laboratory. Together with other adults and a team of puppets, they imagined and created peaceful, gentle, loving responses to everything from war to racism, hunger to hurting, fear to bad behavior, and everything in between and beyond. Fred shared with his neighbors outside the Land of Make Believe the lessons learned and practiced in its community. I call the following five principles “Fred’s Commentary on the Great Commandment”:

1. *“Everyone longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is capable of loving. All people, no matter what they believe or do, have this longing – this deep desire to love and be loved. After all, where there is God, there is love, and God is in everyone.”*
2. *God appreciates us and our neighbor – no matter what any of us may have done. We must identify with and understand those who intentionally hurt us or damage our lives . . . Seeing ourselves not merely accepted and appreciated but also just like those we imagine as outside of God’s care – the sinners of sinners.*
3. *We must forgive those who do not accept us as we are or, more generally, anyone who has made wrongful or unwise choices.*
4. *We consistently choose attitudes and actions that reflect the love of God revealed in Jesus; a love that does not give up on others, but accepts and advocates for all just as they are (good, valuable, and loveable) even when they do bad things.*
5. *Peace is possible because each of us is equipped with a powerful moral imagination – the ability to see goodness in moments of crisis and danger. People can imagine bad things, hurtful things, angry war like things, but people can also imagine good things, helpful things, happy, peaceful things.*

Michael Long sums up Fred Rogers’ practice of “lower case” sainthood, “As a model of being peace. . . he shows us how to practice deep listening, deep thinking and deep understanding – each of them antidotes to violence in any form.”

Fred’s “lower-case” sainthood speaks to me every time human action overwhelms me with fear and despair. But like Fred, I cannot practice “lower case” sainthood alone – none of us can. We need our neighborhood of saints.

Like the Land of Make Believe, St. Matthew’s is our laboratory– our community of practice. Worshipping together, serving together, and appreciating each other as we will do at our celebration after the service, forms us to accept that God loves us and appreciates us – “*just the way we are.*” Together, we practice “lower-case” sainthood, and we encourage each other to reach out with God’s love and appreciation to the neighborhoods around us, both near and far. Following Mister Rogers’ examples, “*we allow the peace of God to emanate from our hearts by **advocating** for people – by affirming all others as good, valuable, and loveable; by accepting all others just as they are*

*and offering forgiveness to anyone, whether or not he or she seeks it; by continuing to care for all others, even when they no longer serve our needs; and by seeing God in between, and beside all people; and advocating for ourselves the in the exact same ways. By loving others as God loves us, we become peace, and being peace is the first step to creating peace. “*

Practicing “lower-case” sainthood together here at St. Matthew’s, we fulfill Jesus’ commandment to love God, our neighbors and ourselves. As God’s “greatly appreciated,” we are the neighborhood of saints. And this is worth celebrating – not just on All Saints Day, but every day. May it always be so.