

Who Are We

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Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

Many of you have seen the recently released documentary about Fred Rogers. Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister who had been ordained by his presbytery to be an evangelist in the world of television. His audience became the children of America. Though not identified as a prophet, he was surely a prophetic voice on behalf of God's love for every individual. His weekly message to every child was quite simple: "I love you just the way you are." Every time he appeared on television he asked all the children watching: "Please won't you be, please won't you be, won't you please be my neighbor." There were no qualifications, no membership requirements, just an open-ended invitation.

So, how are today's lectionary passages from *Jeremiah* and the *Gospel of Mark* connected? And where does Mr. Rogers fit in? I would suggest that Jeremiah the prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, and Mr. Rogers are all prophetic voices with a message directed at God's purpose in history and God's expectation for how human beings are to treat each other. If we accept the analogy of sheep and shepherds, which is prominent in both of the passages John and I read, and in the 23rd Psalm—also one of today's lectionary passages—we gain some insight into who we are as the sheep of God's pasture. Like sheep and their shepherd we are dependent on God. We are

also interdependent human beings relying on each other. Human shepherds have arisen among us, and God expects them to leave not one of the flock behind.

Moreover, while God has a special relationship with the covenant people, all people are included in God's flock.

Jeremiah enters history more than 600 years before Jesus' birth. He was not a professional religious person. Indeed, God calls him into service when he is "only a boy." Moreover, and this is very important, God appoints Jeremiah "a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah is commissioned to speak to all people regardless of tribal or national boundaries. This was a time of upheaval. The northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians decades before, leaving the kingdom of Judah. Its king was no more than a puppet of the Assyrians. Its worship did not please God. But more significantly, its political and religious leaders did not try to listen for God's Word. The result was greed and economic oppression. Jeremiah could hear God's Word while most others looked elsewhere for direction. As a result of questioning what others thought to be reality, he was shunned by people, including the townspeople where he lived, and was imprisoned for periods of time.

The Word of God was in Jeremiah, and the message was clear. So, why were Jeremiah's words rejected? He presented a framework for decision making that no one wanted to hear. He looked through a lens that valued every individual. He communicated God's anger that the weak and powerless were being left behind. Through Jeremiah God castigates those who served as shepherds for God's people. Rather than looking after the welfare of the entire community, they "scattered the flock." Furthermore, it is God who takes action to redress the situation. Speaking to

these shepherds of the people, God says, "...you have not attended them. So, I will attend to you for your evil doings" (Jeremiah 23:2). God then makes the Babylonian Empire an agent of his punishment. Judah is conquered, and Jerusalem is destroyed. The people are marched off into exile in Babylon. But there is hope. God promises to raise up a royal branch from the House of David, who will execute justice and righteousness in the land. He will be called, "The LORD is our righteousness."

So, 600 years later Jesus enters history to gather the flock together. He is recognized wherever he goes. Wherever Jesus is, that is where healing can be found. That is where feeding and fellowship can be found. He sees through the same lens as Jeremiah. He is the shepherd who cares for those who have no leader, and he turns no one away. Religious leaders receive his condemnation for caring more about traditions than the obvious needs of the people. Jesus is the shepherd God desires—one who embraces the other and restores people to the community of the Beloved. Now is the time when true worship is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

Fred Rogers was, I believe, a prophetic voice for our time. Like Martin Luther King, Jr. and other prophetic voices in our modern era, Mr. Rogers conveyed a message of inclusion and respect for diversity. God wants every person to know that they are special, regardless of nationality, culture, religion, sexual identity, disability, or worldly condition. Like Jeremiah and Jesus, Fred wanted to gather people together. Jeremiah's anger concerning those leaders who have "scattered the flock" appears to address those who have favored some people over others. In other

words, a leader looks at a period of threat and favors certain tribal groups over others. Alliances are made that further solidify the division of people into tribal factions. At the same time, these divisions lead to desperate demands for uniformity of opinion as to what the truth is.

And we must be clear that God does not desire uniformity. There is ample evidence that God has blessed diversity. Recall the story of Babel that I shared with the children earlier. This allegory goes all the way back to the beginning of human history when God rejects an early desire of people to build a city where all would speak one language, think the same thoughts, and have one common purpose. The story heralds the value of diversity. In his commentary on Babel, Walter Brueggemann describes the city as a “fortress mentality”—a unity grounded in fear and characterized by coercion. God’s action in scattering the people of Babel was a positive action to return the people to a path of blessing. It was to counteract the people’s desired path to power and independence from God’s Word. Who we are meant to be are diverse individuals united by a love that excludes no one.

Fred Rogers understood the value of diversity. He would say to children, “I like you just the way you are.” It was a simple message about God’s love. He believed that every child was good on the inside, though vulnerable to the effects of the environment in which the child lived. Major environmental influences like violence in the media and messages anywhere that conveyed to a child that he or she was of little or lesser value disturbed him greatly. He sought, like Jeremiah and Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr., to gather people together and build them up with the Good News of God’s love. As many of us marched together this weekend in the Pride

Parade, I was reminded that Fred was initially unsure about homosexuality. He came to understand, however, that God's acceptance and love were not restricted to certain people or categories of people. Loving oneself and loving one's neighbor, which means every other person, were his core principles. Leaving no one behind was a critical corollary. At the time of his funeral there were protestors who condemned him for his tolerance of homosexuality. This is a reminder that no prophet of God escapes condemnation—even the compassionate Mr. Rogers. It was wonderful, by the way, to see quotations from Mr. Rogers displayed in the PRIDE parade.

What can we take from today's Scripture? It seems trite, but we must live confidently and hopefully as the beloved children of God, trusting that God is speaking to us and through us to gather all people together. As God promised through Jeremiah, we know the proper model for humanity by looking at the righteousness demonstrated by Christ. In him we find our moral compass. In him we see more clearly the needs of those who have been excluded and left behind. God's Word is found in its activity and purpose to repair what is fractured in our human relationships. This occurs through healing and feeding and building up those who are most vulnerable. Contrary activities violate God's intention for humanity. Who are these vulnerable and excluded ones? Think for a moment about those not being welcomed in America. Consider whether there are any in our own church who feel less than fully welcomed. And consider how one's identity as a beloved child of God keeps other identities from becoming idolatry. We are always much more than our tribal identities like Republican or Democrat or Conservative

or Liberal. Listening to each voice, welcoming every person, is a way to listen for God's Word.

What then must we do to be faithful again to the God of history? We are Americans with particular cultural, religious, social, and sexual identities. But our true family, as children of God, encompasses all mankind, and God holds us accountable for doing our part to love our neighbors wherever they may be and to be the healing presence now that Jesus was in the 1st Century. Some people criticized Mr. Rogers for sending the message that every child is special. They believed that being considered special must be earned. Some argued that a whole generation of children had been misled and that these children would make unreasonable demands on society. Those critics are wrong, and they fail to see the liberating power of recognizing and believing in what God has called into being—your unique, individual self and that of every other person. Believing in God's acceptance and love equips a person to withstand hardship, nurture hope, and love others with the same love we receive from God. The challenge I give to each of us this week is to look at the persons around us in our own families and in our church family--infants, children, and adults--to recognize what is special about each of those persons. It is our task and the task of the church to celebrate what is special in each and every person. Then, we are part of gathering together God's world-wide flock. That is what it means to be the redeemed people of God. That is precisely who we are. Amen.