



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -  
October 8, 2017 Sermon

---

## Look for the Helpers

Leviticus: 19:15-18, Matthew 19:15-18

“My mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people 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. . . . Because if you look for the helpers, you’ll know that there is hope.”—Mr. Rogers, *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*

If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.—Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mr. Rogers*

### Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

Today’s Second Scripture Lesson is from the New Testament, and has long been associated with baptism, especially the baptism of infants and children. The reasoning: no one—no matter how old, no matter how learned—truly and fully understands the grace, the blessing, we receive through baptism in the name of Jesus. So we shouldn’t keep little children from receiving it. “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them” Jesus says. or in the old King James translation, “Suffer the little children, and let them come unto me.” That’s an old English meaning of the word “suffer,” that’s almost obsolete now, where “suffer” means not to endure pain, hardship or calamity, but simply to admit, allow or permit.

Today, I’d like to evoke both meanings. It’s especially when we are suffering (in the sense of enduring hardship) that we must all suffer (in the sense of be allowed to) to receive Jesus’ blessing.

Suffer the little children, and let them come unto me. . . .

### The Word of the Lord.

Last Monday night, as I was falling asleep listening to a podcast (podcasts, by the way, are audio shows—in-depth discussions of any and all subjects that you can download “on your device” and then listen to whenever you like (many are a little edgy))—anyway, as I was listening to the *538 Podcast* (538, by the way is a website and a podcast, really an online journalistic enterprise, dedicated to understating the world through the use of *big data*, that is, extremely large data sets analyzed by computers to reveal patterns and trends, especially relating to human behavior and interactions; The 538 journalists and podcasters seek and demand evidence—data—for everything, and they’re especially good at debunking the grandiose and unsupported claims of politicians, sports commentators, and other self-appointed pundits)—anyway, as I was listening to the 538 podcast on my iPad on wifi, using bluetooth, something—something that was said—woke me up, so I went online, googled it, and saw that it had become a meme (a piece of media—a picture, cartoon, video, word phrase, song, or quotation that spreads rapidly, wildly on the internet), a meme that had truly “gone viral”—and was everywhere throughout cyberspace, in the blogosphere and in the twitterverse: on websites, Facebook, YouTube, and instagram, on twitter accounts #lookforthehelpers, it was all over the place—so last Monday night, as I was falling asleep, I woke up again to God’s human kindness. And I needed that.

How much of all that would be familiar to Mr. Rogers—Mr. Rogers of yesteryear’s PBS’ children’s show, *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*; Fred Rogers, Presbyterian minister, if somehow we could time-travel him here today, say, from the year he died, 2003—how much of all that that I just said would be familiar to him? Probably not much, probably just this much: “Last Monday night, as I was falling asleep . . . [nothing familiar, nothing familiar nothing familiar] . . . I woke up again to God’s human kindness and I needed that.” But maybe that’s enough, maybe that’s all that matters.

The irony, of course, is that it was something Mr. Rogers had said that was the meme that had gone viral, that was zinging and ping-ponging at warp speed all over the blogosphere, the twitterverse and the world wide web and that was being quoted by one of the regulars on the 538 podcast. “It may sound corny,” he said, “but at times like this [he was referring to the shootings in Las Vegas], I try to remember what Mr. Rogers said, ‘Look for the helpers.’”

*Look for the helpers*: It’s obviously good advice for young children caught—God forbid—in some kind of dangerous, chaotic situation: look for the police officers, the firefighters, all those we now call “first responders.” Look for them—for your safety. But it’s good advice for us grownups, too (and I think this is how the guy on the podcast meant it): in emotional, moral, and spiritual crisis, look for the helpers—those who give of themselves, no matter how, no matter who, no matter what their occupation: first responders and doctors and nurses, people lining up to give blood, family, friends, strangers holding on to one another, comforting one another, helping others, caring for one another, praying for others—look for them when there’s some horrific act like the one that occurred in Las Vegas, look for them—for your hope: they will help restore your faith in humanity and in God. *Look for the helpers*—that’s what Mr. Rogers said.

Back in the late 80’s and early 90’s, when Fred Rogers was already into his third decade of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, the young Presbyterian ministers and ministers-to-be that I hung out with back then . . . well, we were ambivalent about Mr. Rogers. I mean yes, he was nice, but that was the problem: he was just so nice. Presbyterian ministers were—*are*—supposed to be nice. But we didn’t want to be nice; we wanted to be important. Yes, we wanted to be on public television, but we wanted to be leaning across the table with Charlie Rose at ten o’clock at night talking about a new book—OK, *my* new book (“a provocative, nay, prophetic take on the important issues of our day from a “faith perspective” (of course) from a new young voice who promises to be one of our leading voices—a conscience for this generation”). What we didn’t want was to be putting on a cardigan sweater and blue sneakers at 10:00 in the morning talking to four-year-olds about the importance of their feelings and how each one of them is special, before walking over to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, where red trolley was tooting around, and Mr. McFeely the Delivery Man and Daniel the Striped Tiger (Daniel was a shy tiger) were both waiting.

Back then, many of those young pastors and pastors-to-be had studied under, and admired the work of, Walter Brueggemann, yes, the same Walter Brueggemann who was here, just a few weeks ago, speaking to us. Back then . . . well, back then Walter was doing pretty much the same thing he did for us: looking at how the Bible, particularly the OT, and particularly the OT prophets, challenged the political, social, and economic, wrongs of those days in order to see how it challenges similar wrongs in our day. But one thing was different: since then, in the intervening years, Walter has introduced, and made much more prominent in his work, the theme of neighbor, neighborhood, and neighborliness, contrasting an ethic of neighborliness with one of exploitation. (You heard this if you attended either of his talks.) And this theme (you could even call it a meme) of neighborliness is indeed prominent in the Bible: Old Testament and New alike, just one example being the passage Laurie read, a passage that Jesus quotes when he identifies the second great commandment as “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” But Mr. Rogers—Mr. Rogers was talking—singing—about the importance of being a neighbor from the very beginning, from way back in the 1950’s when he was a young, musically inclined seminary student with a love for pup-

petry, who in the midst of another, earlier communications revolution, the advent of television, was dismayed at the programming for children (mostly people getting pies thrown in their faces; he felt it was demeaning), so he spent years studying child psychology, developing his skills and his show, and (bless the Presbyterian Church and our Book of Order for this!) eventually actually being ordained as a Presbyterian minister whose congregation was young children and whose church was his weekday morning television show. . . . Mr. Rogers was singing about the importance of being a neighbor from the very beginning:

*It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor . . . would you be mine, could you be mine—won't you be my neighbor? . . . please, won't you be my neighbor?*

Being a neighbor is about kindness, human kindness.

As I was surfing the net, chasing all those “look for the helpers” memes, I found an article from *Entertainment Weekly*, by Anthony Breznican. (It took a long time to load because all these banner ads for NBA jerseys kept popping up—I had been shopping online for one for Graham a few days before—Big Data is watching you.) Anyway in the article, Breznican tells of his real-life encounter with Mr. Rogers. He was a student at the University of Pittsburgh, and he was going through a tough time: he wanted to be a writer, but all he got from everyone including his own family, was this: “How are you ever going to get a job doing *that*?” He puts it this way:

*I was having a hard time then. The future seemed hopeless. I wanted to be a writer but had received nothing but discouragement. I was struggling, lonely, dealing with a lot of broken pieces within myself, and not adjusting well. On top of that, I was grappling with a loss that I couldn't talk about because I had no one I could talk to.*

The loss Breznican was grappling with was the death of his beloved grandfather, Pap, who had been his helper his whole life, and now . . . now he was gone. Breznican was, in his own words, “brokenhearted.”

One morning, as he was coming out of his dorm room going to class, Breznican heard a familiar tune: “won't you be my neighbor?” Mr. Rogers was playing on the TV in the empty common room at the end of the hall. He stood there and watched the whole episode, finding, for a moment at least, some comfort, “like a cool hand on a hot head.” And then only a few days later, he was in the elevator, in the Pitt Student Union, going down, and who should be standing there next to him . . . but you guessed it—Mr. Rogers! Breznican did a double-take, a triple-take, in his words “trying not to geek out.” Mr. Rogers, who was wearing a raincoat and holding his satchel in both hands in front of him, just smiled and nodded. But then as they were getting off the elevator . . . well, Breznican couldn't hold it in any longer:

“Mr. Rogers . . . I don't mean to bother you, but I just wanted to say . . . thanks.”

“Did you grow up as one of my television neighbors?”

I felt like crying. Yeah. I did. I was his neighbor.

He opened his arms, lifting his satchel in the air, and beckoning me in. “It's good to see you again, neighbor!”

A hug—a hug from Mr. Rogers!

The pair walked toward the entrance of the Union together, Breznican telling Mr. Rogers everything he remembered about his show, which, when you think about it, Mr. Rogers was probably already pretty familiar with. But then, when they got to the door, Breznican, “blurted out in a kind of rambling gush” that he'd recently stumbled on the show again, at a time when he really needed it, and [pause] . . . “So . . . thanks . . . for that. Again.”

Mr. Rogers listened. Looked down. Undid his scarf. And letting the door close in front of him, motioned to a window, to a ledge where they could sit:

“Do you want to tell me what was upsetting you?”

Ans so Breznican did. And Mr. Rogers listened. And then Mr. Rogers told Anthony about his own grandfather, and how much he meant to him, how much he loved him, and how he felt when he died so many years ago, and how he still felt about him now: “You’ll never stop missing the people you love,” he said.

Breznican closes his piece this way:

*At the end, I just said thank you again — for about the 13th time. And I apologized if I made him late for wherever he was headed. Mr. Rogers just smiled, and said in his slow, gentle voice: “Sometimes you’re right where you need to be.”*

Suffer the little children and let them come unto me.

And as you might have inferred from the quality of the writing, not to mention his writing for Entertainment Weekly, Anthony Breznican not only went on to find a job as a writer but to have a career as one. Pap was not his only helper.

And I know, I know, what some of you are thinking right now; heck, thirty years ago, my younger self would have been thinking the same thing: just another Presbyterian minister up there, being *nice* again, re-telling a nice, sweet story, when what he should be doing is prophetically challenging the political, social, and economic wrongs of our day, starting with the issue of gun control.

But I tell you, nice or not, I am being a prophet. I am doing what prophets do: I am delivering the word of God to you in no uncertain terms, and here it is: Human kindness lies at the heart of the universe, even of the twitterverse, although there are days, many days, and there are weeks, many weeks, like this week, when it doesn’t seem so. And I have data—BIG DATA—to support this. Here it is: God became one of us to show us what human kindness is, to share human kindness with us, so that we might have human kindness, and share it with others and the world. For God so loved the world that . . . the Word became flesh, human flesh . . . and moved into the neighborhood.

*It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor . . . would you be mine, could you be mine—won’t you be my neighbor? . . . please, won’t you be my neighbor?*

So God, to us.

Being a neighbor is about kindness, human kindness.

And one more prophetic word (because prophets always have one more word): none of all those wrongs, not one—political, social, economic, or otherwise—will ever begin to be ameliorated much less eliminated without human kindness, because each of them is an affront to, and an abomination to, human kindness and the God who became humankind for us and for the world.

So we must do what Mr. Rogers said to do, and we must be like Mr. Rogers: we must look for the helpers, because if we look for the helpers, we’ll know that there is hope. And we must look to the one who is *the* helper, the one who moved into—and still lives in—our neighborhood, because he is our hope. And so inspired, we must become helpers ourselves to others, to heal the broken-hearted and to bind up their wounds.

Last Monday night, as I was falling asleep, I woke up again to God’s human kindness, and I needed that.

Thank you again, Mr. Rogers. And thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.