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Luke 15:11-32

It's Tough to Be Gentle

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A couple summers ago, I did a sermon series that highlighted the things some of us learned as children from Mister Rogers. It was fun to preach and a lot of you really liked that series. So, as I was choosing the movies for this series, I couldn't resist using *It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. I hope you had an opportunity to watch it this week. The movie is a biographical drama that gives viewers a window into what it was like to be known and loved by Fred Rogers. Aside from Mister Rogers, played by Tom Hanks, the film introduces viewers to Lloyd Vogel, a heavily fictionalized, renamed version of a journalist named Tom Junod who, in real life, met Fred Rogers when he was asked to write a story about him for Esquire magazine.

The film opens with Vogel accepting a National Magazine Award. In his acceptance speech, he mentions that people wonder why journalists do the hard, sometimes thankless work they do. His reason, he says, is "Sometimes we get to change a broken world with our words," but as we get to know Vogel, we wonder if he isn't doing some of the breaking. He has a reputation as a no nonsense, stop at nothing investigative journalist. So, when he was called into his boss's office and told he was going to be writing a piece for an upcoming edition devoted to heroes, Vogel would not have ever, in a million years, guessed that his assignment would be Mister Rogers. He expressed his outrage at the choice and is told that none of the other heroes wanted to be interviewed by him, presumably because of his reputation and attitude. So, off he went to Mister Rogers Neighborhood.

As viewers, our first glimpse into the Neighborhood was of Mister Rogers showing his young audience a board that had little doors attached to it. Behind each door was a picture of someone. One door held a picture of Lady Elaine from the Neighborhood of Make Believe and one was of Mr. McFeely, the mailman. Another was a picture of someone his viewers hadn't met yet, a friend, named Lloyd Vogel. In the picture, Lloyd had a black eye and swollen nose. Mister Rogers explained to his young viewers that his friend was hurt on the outside, as the picture shows and on the inside too.

In the next scene of the movie, Vogel finds his way to the Neighborhood, still cynical, assuming, like most of the people he interviews, Fred Rogers had something to hide. There was no way he was really the guy portrayed in Mister Rogers Neighborhood. Mister Rogers had to be a character and Fred Rogers someone different, someone who needed to be exposed for who he really was.

But it is no surprise to all of us who grew up watching Mister Rogers Neighborhood, he found that Fred Rogers was Mister Rogers. The kind, gentle soul who looked right into the television camera and talked to each child as if they were the most important person in the world, was a real person, not a character. Vogel was not easily convinced. Over and over in the movie, he asked Rogers pointed questions, questions he was sure would be “ah-ha, gotcha” questions. And over and over, he was met, not with anger or aggressions, but with Rogers’ genuine gratitude for the question. “It must have been hard for your children growing up under the very public microscope of your celebrity status,” Vogel said to Rogers with a National Inquirer gleam in his eye. After a short pause, Rogers, never afraid to take his time, said, “Thank you for saying that. It could not have been easy for them.” There would be no “gotcha moment,” in that interview or in the interactions to follow. The journalist’s dogged persistence with be met with gentleness every time.

Little by little Rogers’ gentle spirit chipped away at the wall Vogel had built around himself, a wall made of bitterness over his mother’s death and anger that his father abandoned his family while his mother was actively dying. The wall affected all his relationships perhaps, especially the relationship between him and his newborn son. In the very first scene of the movie, as Vogel and his wife, Andrea, prepare to go to the awards banquet, he asked Andrea why they couldn’t just leave their son with a sitter. And we see Andrea struggle with the idea of leaving her child, not only for a night out, but to return to work following her parental leave. As the movie moves along, Vogel has difficulty connecting to and engaging with his son and the tension in the little family is palpable.

Relationships between parents and children are complicated even under the best circumstances. Today’s text is about two sons and their father. It is a familiar parable, attributed to Jesus. Parables, you will remember, are fictional stories about ordinary situations and people, told to explain something extraordinary. This is Luke 15:11-32:

“There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵“Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

Full disclosure: this is my favorite parable. At different times in my life, I have been able to strongly relate to each of the characters in the story. Maybe you have too. There have been times when I’ve felt like the older brother, doing all

the right things, and feeling unnoticed and unappreciated. And I've felt like the younger brother, wanting to do my own thing, and stepping all over other people's feelings to do whatever the thing was. And I've been the father, anxious and worried about a child. This story is about a lot of us.

But mostly, the story is about the character of God. The original audience would have noticed right away that the father in the story didn't behave like fathers in the 1st century Mediterranean world behaved. In that honor and shame world where the father's role was to uphold the family honor, he would not have allowed his son to bring shame to the family in the way the younger son did. His request to have his part of the family wealth was no better than saying to the father, "I wish you were already dead." Knowing that, it isn't hard to understand that if a son had shamed his father in this way, the father would not have watched the horizon every day, hoping he would come home. That son would have been gone forever.

Additionally, the father would not have gently responded to the whining of the older son when he complained about doing the right, expected thing, especially since he was now the only heir to the family fortune and, according to the story, had the benefit of servants to do most of the work he was whining about. And finally, a wealthy man would not have hiked up his robe and run to welcome his son (or anyone else) when he saw him coming. Men like that did not lower themselves to run like a servant.

This father was different though. This father had a gentle spirit and he allowed that gentleness to guide how he dealt with his sons, even though both, in their own ways, behaved badly. The father was able to see beyond the behavior to the hurt. And instead of continuing the "hurt people hurt people" cycle, he met them where they were and loved them. He loved the younger son enough to watch and wait for him and to celebrate his return. He loved the older enough to beg him to come inside to the party, to help him see that his brother's return didn't diminish his worth. It isn't easy to meet hurt with gentleness and love.

The world is in a place, though, that everywhere we look, there is hurt. We are face to face with it all the time. And we can choose how we respond. In a song, highlighted in the movie, Mister Rogers sings:

What do you do with the mad that you feel
When you feel so mad you could bite?
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...
And nothing you do seems very right?
What do you do? Do you punch a bag?
Do you pound some clay or some dough?
Do you round up friends for a game of tag?
Or see how fast you go?

It's great to be able to stop
When you've planned a thing that's wrong,
And be able to do something else instead
And think this song:
I can stop when I want to
Can stop when I wish
I can stop, stop, stop any time.

We can choose to stop responding to our hurting world by hurting back. We can choose to be gentle. And I will admit, for those of us who are not gentle by nature, it takes work. When I told a member of the church that I was preaching on gentleness this week, her reaction was, "I am not a gentle person." And yet, I have seen this person be gentle with her child and with other people's feelings in meetings. I think a lot of us would say we are not gentle people, but most of us have the capacity to be gentle, it's just not our "go to," unless we are in the company of a baby or a puppy, or a lizard.

In the movie, we watched as Lloyd Vogel changed. He was angry, distant, hurt, and self-absorbed and as he interacted with Mister Rogers, he learned that there was another way to be. He watched as Rogers took his time with each person he met, giving each one his full attention. There was a scene where the entire Mister Rogers Neighborhood crew waited while Rogers interacted with a little boy with autism. At first the boy was so interested in his toy sword that he wouldn't even look up from his sword, but Rogers kept gently talking to the boy and pretty soon, as if someone had waved a magic wand, the boy dropped his sword and hugged Mister Rogers.

It wasn't just children that experienced Mister Rogers' gentleness though. He treated everyone he met as if they were the most important person in the world. He had a way of helping other people access the gentleness within themselves. At the end of the movie, Vogel's dad was very sick and was eventually discharged from the hospital to go home and die. Vogel and his family moved into his father's house to spend time with him and help his wife care for him. One night, everyone was asleep, the house was quiet and dark when the baby awakens. Out of character for Vogel, he got up to tend to his son while Andrea slept. As the bottle was warming up, Vogel held his son and really looked at him, and he began to gently sing:

It's you I like,
It's not the things you wear,
It's not the way you do your hair
But it's you I like

In that moment, his father woke up and the three of them have a lovely moment where Lloyd is the caregiver, and his dad and son are the recipients of his love and newly accessed gentleness. When morning came, Fred Rogers knocked on the door with a pie his wife made. They talk and laugh and pray. Before he left, Mister Rogers insisted on taking a picture of the happy family all together. The movie ends in the next scene, back at the studio where Mister Rogers opens another door on the board and behind that door is the picture of his friend Lloyd with his family, his face healed and his heart on the mend.

I love a story that ends "happily ever after," like this one. The story of the father and his two sons leaves us hanging. Will the older son go inside and enjoy the party, or will he stay on the outside, angry and bitter? What will the sons' relationship be like in the days and weeks to come? I wonder if Jesus left the ending to our imaginations as a reminder that we get to choose. We can choose how we respond to our own feelings and to the feelings of other people. Sometimes, we can choose how the story ends.

Gentleness probably cannot be fully developed in the time it takes to watch a movie, but I think a movie can remind us that sometimes we forget to access the very best parts of ourselves. We can choose to handle each other and the world with care, with the gentleness of a forgiving parent. We don't have to reserve those parts of ourselves only for children or baby animals. Grown-ups like to be

greeted by a gentle spirit as well. Think about how you feel when someone slows down long enough to really listen to what you are saying. Think about how you feel when someone says, "Your feelings matter," or when you sense that someone really sees you for who you are.

As I tried this week to wrap my mind around what gentleness really is, I watched a couple old Mister Rogers Neighborhood episodes. I kept coming back to the idea that gentleness is pausing, taking our time with each other, choosing our words and our actions carefully, treating other people as if they are fragile. Because the truth is, we are fragile, more fragile than we care to admit.

Be gentle with each other, dear ones. Be gentle with yourselves.

Amen.