

Let me speak first to the children out there. There was a man named Mr. Rogers. He was on television a long time ago, and they recently made a movie about him. Do you know that he was a follower of Jesus? Not only was he a follower of Jesus, but he was also a minister in the Presbyterian church. He spoke kindly to children on television, and his family said that he was the same at home. He was gentle and patient with everyone. One of his favorite sayings was “you are special.” It's hard to believe how many children do not feel that they are worth much. They don't feel special, and don't feel loved. Mr. Rogers knew that Jesus taught that we are all special, and loved by the God, the Creator of the world. Sometimes you may feel that you don't get enough love, or maybe feel that you are not loved. This is usually a temporary feeling: there are always people around that can let you know you are special and loved ... maybe it is parents, maybe aunts, uncles or grandparents, or a nice teacher.

Another thing Mr. Rogers said was “I like you just the way you are.” (Maybe he took that phrase from singer Billy Joel!) What does that mean? It means that you do not have to try to be someone else! You don't have to please other people, or be the way they want you to be. There is no specific way that you have to be. Another thing that Mr. Rogers said and sang all the time was “Won't you be my neighbor?” Jesus was very clear that we are to love God and love our neighbor. Mr. Rogers loved every neighbor. Jesus went even further, and said that we should love our enemies too. His point was we should show love and goodness to everybody!

Maybe you have heard the Christmas song called “A Holly Jolly Christmas” ... “When you walk down the street, say hello to friends you know, and everyone you meet!” It means: Greet everyone you meet like a friend. Jesus was like that, and Mr. Rogers was like that and we can be like that! ... Thank you for listening, children who are here, and those who are watching at home.

Now I want to speak to the adults. We light our advent candles for hope, peace, joy and love. Love and peace are perhaps the hardest things for us to achieve in this world! Hope and joy may be a bit easier to realize. HOPE is the spirit in children, that is still in each of us, and accessible to each of us. Since every day can have a new adventure, we can be hopeful about every day! The Bible tells us and Jesus reminds us that with God's spirit, there is always "new life!"

Now about the candle of joy. JOY may also come fairly easily to us. If there is music with a lively beat, almost anyone will start tapping the feet! We might even start clapping our hands or dancing! We can also access joy with humor... a good joke can tickle our funny bone. For those of you who were not here for the joy candle a few weeks ago, I told a few seasonal jokes. Here are three silly jokes about Santa that stick in my memory. The first one you probably all know is: "What does Santa say walking backwards? OH, OH, OH! The next one, is new for 2020: "How do the elves clean Santa's sleigh? ... with Santatizer of course! And the third one, also timely for 2020, is "What does Santa say during a pandemic? "Stay HO HO HOME!" (Yes, I know, "Keep my day job!")

So HOPE and JOY are accessible. What about PEACE? What about peace with neighbors, or world peace? What about LOVE? Loving neighbors, or even loving family when conflicts arise? What about loving enemies? (One of our elders likes to say, "Love your enemies: it'll drive 'em nuts!") Making peace and showing love can be hard work! Love can involve suffering and sacrifice. Peace involves understanding, and we know it takes real effort to truly understand another, especially someone different from ourselves. I am very interfaith oriented, as you might know. I relish the fact that we learn something from other people, and we learn from other religions. Krister Stendahl, a Lutheran bishop and professor at Harvard Divinity School, once said that we need to have a little "holy envy" when we relate to people of other religions. For example, some religions

“require” certain times of day for pausing and praying. Some religions “require” observances of fasting. “Holy envy” reminds me that such practices can improve mental discipline. As Christians we can “strongly encourage” regular practices or disciplines that can strengthen our spiritual muscles, so we are ready to face whatever tough times arise, even making peace through understanding.

But we are here Christmas Eve with a focus on Jesus, so we can ask, “what in his life might bring some envy from people of other religions?” Why is Jesus called the “Prince Of Peace?” Jesus said continually, “Peace be with you.” It was clear that Jesus Christ was a peacemaker, that he was looking to be a “neighbor” to all. Often the heroes in Jesus’ stories were people of different tribes or religions. The Good Samaritan was a hero, praised for acting like a neighbor to the wounded man. A Roman centurion was a hero, about whom Jesus said: “Not even in Israel have I found such faith.” Jesus was always crossing boundaries, seeing real faith in all kinds of people.

And now for Jesus’ deepest gift of all, FORGIVENESS. How was Jesus so loving and forgiving to all neighbors? Often when Jesus did healings with people, he would say “Your sins are forgiven!” Note that Jesus did not say “I forgive your sins.” He said “Your sins ARE forgiven.” This implies that forgiveness is universal experience. There is a posture of receiving: receiving his healing touch, receiving grace. Jesus was basically saying, “Let go” of your guilt. You have been walking around with guilt your whole life! “Let go” of your bad self-esteem. And “Let go” of the regrets that you are holding onto. Can we say, “This is forgiven, this is in the past. Life really can be made new.” Jesus was pointing to a God who is incredibly forgiving. We remember that he called on God when he was on the cross, “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” God is the great giver of grace and forgiveness. Paul put it very well: “All have fallen short of the glory of God.” In other words, all have sinned and need forgiveness.

Krister Stendahl, whom I quoted earlier, had a great saying: "We are all bound together... by our limitations" (one great way to emphasize our oneness and interdependence). Limitations are so universal, that they can bind us together. So obvious in pandemic times, we know that we are very limited. We know that against this invading virus we all have become sick in some way, physically or mentally; there is depression everywhere. So I think we can say with another follower of Jesus, (MLK), "we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters, or perish together as fools!" Interdependence, peacemaking, love and forgiveness for all is the only way to survive.

It is truly a time to work together in this world, with new love and deeper understanding..... understanding for our neighbors, understanding towards all others in their "otherness," and understanding even for our enemies. In conclusion, and this goes back to the children's message, we all have the image of God in us, goodness in us, light in us, love in us. (We are special and loved). But we also all have a self-centeredness and faults, ("sin"). So we remember that "God so loved the world..." The Divine came into the world, as Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, and loved the entire world, in spite of any failings or shortcomings we have, a love that we also call "Grace." And then..... Jesus said, not only has he come as Light and Love, but "YOU are the light!" WE can shine a similar light as did the Lord Jesus himself! Our light may not be as bright as Jesus' light, but we can surely shine some light into some corner of the world where we are. We can light one candle. We can start with loving ourselves and forgiving ourselves. Jesus said, "The Father is in me, and I am in you." So truly we have the same light and spirit that was in Jesus. We just have to access it a little more often(!), to bring the Christ Light of Christmas into the world every day. May it be so. Amen.