

SERMON
Epiphany Chapel & Church House — July 1, 2018
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

“Come on over here a minute. I have some ideas I’ve been thinking about for awhile—to help children get through the difficult modulations of life.” This is how the newly released movie, “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood” begins. Fred Rogers sits at the piano—plays a few chords, pointing out which are the easy chords and which ones are more difficult. He offers his core ideas about early childhood development. It’s easy to get the point. “Sometimes, there are difficult modulations” he says. There are very difficult experiences that we all could get some help with as we try to understand and navigate our way through. One of the things that Mr. Rogers says is the most important thing for a child to know is that there is an adult who cares, there is an adult who listens, and there is an adult who will protect them. You might remember that in Mr. Roger’s television living room, there was a picture on the wall. It was the entry way to the “world of make-believe.” This world of make-believe was actually the place where Rogers helped children to see and understand some of the most difficult challenges that face us all.

Picture, picture on the wall

Can you tell us what’s happening?

And inside, through the picture on the wall, the scene changed and a host of puppet characters would talk and learn and work out their problems together. Mr. Rogers taught children that feelings are mentionable and manageable. Something he was not taught as a child. He addressed issues such as grief and divorce, and death. He tackled the racism of the 60’s when swimming pools were segregated by sharing a foot-washing pool with the Mr. Clemmons, the African American police officer on the show. He believed in human dignity. Of course, what most of us remember is the song that Mr. Rogers sang through the television box to each child who was watching in their own living room: There were a few variations of the song, but it goes something like this:

I like you as you are,

Exactly, precisely,

I think you turned out nicely.

I like you just the way you are.

He believed that those who would make you feel less than who you are is the worse evil of all. He believed in the inherent value everyone has. And when he acknowledges the scary parts of life, he speaks to the child in each one of us.

Picture, picture on the wall

Can you tell us what's happening?

What IS happening. That's a good question, here and now.

I suppose that we are all getting ready to celebrate July 4— Independence Day—the biggest national holiday we have. The way it's come down to us is that Independence Day celebrations are all about enjoying the out-of-doors with family and friends. It's all about sharing the bounty symbolized with picnics and neighborhood parties, and the bombs bursting in air are no longer weapons of war but magnificent displays of color and light to fascinate and delight. The once frightening sounds of destruction have turned into exciting entertainment. It is as if we are thumbing our noses at fear and disaster and even death. Most Independence Day celebrations also include time for a speaker who is asked to remember, for a brief moment, the American dream—that we are inheritors of a vision and the beneficiaries of courageous ancestors whose convictions and sacrifices created this country as a safe haven for all. A safe haven. A nation of immigrants yearning to breath free. A safe haven offering peace and prosperity for all.

The Fourth of July festivities in Annapolis this year begin at 10 am with the 11th annual naturalization ceremony—an event symbolic and real—a ceremony making people from around the world, U.S. citizens. Inheritors and beneficiaries just like the rest of us. But as you know, the vision and hope and the reality of peace and prosperity for all—the safe haven—has been shattered this week by unspeakable violence at the Capital/Gazette newsroom on Thursday afternoon. “It looked like a war-zone,” said one reporter. A gunman left five people dead and a whole community in mourning.

Picture picture on the wall

Can you tell us what's happening?

It seems to happen every few weeks. Mass shootings are ravaging American schools, churches, entertainment venues and now a newsroom. It seems that there is no safe haven, no peace and prosperity for all. Explosions are real and deadly.

Wendi Winters was one of the victims on Thursday. Someone called her “the heart of the newspaper” because she connected with so many people through her community news coverage. She was everywhere. Appreciating the extraordinary in the ordinary. Just a month ago she wrote a lead article about Epiphany Church in the Capital/Gazette that filled two full pages—front page and back. She called Epiphany, in bold headlines: “A Safe Haven in Odenton.” Seems ironic now — to look at the article, the way she acknowledged and honored the history of this Chapel calling it a “Safe Haven.” One of the reporters at the crime scene last Thursday said that when the shooting started he heard Wendi say loudly, “NO!” And then she ran toward the gunman. I’m heartbroken, but I’m not surprised to learn this. He wrote, “Wendi went toward the gunman and gave her life probably saving more lives.” Wendi was a take-charge sort of woman, and mother, and community member. Feisty when it came right down to it when something important was at stake or someone was in trouble. Wendi wouldn’t put up with it. No nonsense. For Wendi, there is no-sense in hurting other people. She believed in the dignity of every human being. It was easy to see that about her, in the way she did her work and the way she treated others.

Picture picture on the wall

Can you tell us what's happening?

When peace is shattered and our hopes are crushed and we don’t know what to do, or how to navigate through the experiences and feelings—the scriptures, especially the stories of Jesus seem to open up. They seem to come alive when we need them most. In today’s lesson, when Jesus was pressed by the crowds to do what they would have him do, what is it that he does? He stops and listens to the ones who come to him in need. No matter how the crowd

presses on him, he always seems to hear the one in pain and directs his attention to the one who needs him most. When Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, tells him that his daughter is ill, sick unto death, he agrees to go with him to see the young girl. There is in Jesus, the birth of a new kind of morality—a way of being that holds the individual in high regard, a way of being that listens and addresses the needs of the poor and outcast, and a way of being that first tends the sick and needy above and before the codifications and requirements of the law. In Jesus there is a new moral code—that people matter more.

In case we, his disciples then and now, haven't gotten the point, on his way to see Jairus' daughter Jesus stops a second time to heal a woman who suffered from a bodily illness for 12 years—an illness that is clearly off-limits according to the purity code. He heals her and bids her "Go in Peace."

Go in peace.

What are we to do when it seems that there is no peace? I wonder what Mr. Rogers would say to a young child who hears about shootings in schools, churches, entertainment venues and now a newsroom and watches the coverage on tv. When Senator Kennedy was shot, Mr. Rogers produced a show in which one of his puppets was scared and afraid. There was an image of a balloon losing all its air. "What does a-ssas-si-nation mean?" asked the frightened Daniel, the tiger puppet. In Mr. Roger's world, feelings are important not something to hide or bury. They are mentionable and manageable. He produced a show after the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster. And after 9/11 he was called upon again, after he had retired, to help children again. He was at a loss for words in the wake of 9/11 and relied on music to help express such tremendous feelings.

None of us is exempt from fear and the disappointments and disasters of life. I wonder how many of us feel that our sense of peace has been shattered, lost by the inundation of bad news — of a new crisis everyday, one alarm after another, accosting our sense of decency, with a disregard for the dignity of every human being. It feels to me as if the entrance to our homes and our hearts has been shattered with violent speech and hateful threats. We are battered as if riddled with shotgun pellets. It is as if canon balls are flying over the roof and into the front yard where

we stand. It wouldn't be so bad if there were only one—we could move out of the way. But it is the constancy. The unrelenting daily onslaught. It seems as if there is no relief. A bombardment to our sense of well-being. It wears us out. I've heard it from many people. You only have to listen.

Where are we to find peace? In one episode, Rogers offers a musical duet where “assurance” and “self-doubt” co-exist. Two melodies at the same time—assurance and self-doubt. It's ok, he says, to have co-existing feelings. That's one part of the answer. Fred Rogers asks us, the adults, “What have we done to help someone along?” Perhaps like Jesus, Rogers wants to make goodness attractive. Perhaps like Jesus, he wants love to abound and be shared. Perhaps like Jesus, he calls us each to be repairers of creation. To help someone in need. Helping someone—that's another part of the answer. This is where we find our peace.

I keep thinking about Wendi. It's hard to imagine her not being among us. “Helping someone out” for her meant confronting the gunman and stopping him with her own body. May God grant her peace. Perhaps helping someone out means directly confronting the gunman, the evil in our lives—not by giving evil more ammunition but by absorbing the hurts and letting the anger stop right here, with us, without passing it on. It's the image of Jesus on the cross—taking in all the hate and fear, into himself, and not letting it go any further. Perhaps helping someone out means that when we are at a loss for words, we can offer music, prayer, to be fully present with one another, and to love by listening more than we speak. That's part of the answer. Sometimes it means sharing from the bounty which is already ours. That's another part of the answer. Perhaps helping someone out means we need to trust one another, and we need to live up to that trust—to do the jobs given to us the best we can, and to be a team, a community, who listens and cares and protects those who need it the most. Perhaps helping someone out means offering peace and prosperity—being that “safe haven for all” that Wendi recognized and wrote about. “Being a safe haven for all.” In doing this, we will find peace.

AMEN.