

WALKING IN LOVE, Part 4: RELATIONSHIPS THAT NURTURE

Luke 13:10-21; Philemon

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Beth was five years old when she started having seizures, as many as a hundred in a day. They came on her at random times during the day, except when she was watching *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*. It would seem that something about Fred Rogers' voice helped her to remain calm.

After a couple of years the family finally got an accurate diagnosis and it was determined that brain surgery could correct the problem. Understandably they were nervous about this. During this time, mom contacted the WQED studios where the show was filmed hoping that they would send a signed picture or a note to encourage her daughter. What they got instead was a phone call from Fred Rogers. He spent over an hour talking with Beth.

After the surgery, Beth slipped into a coma. When Fred was unable to reach the family at home he called the hospital and talked to Beth and then he called every day to get updates. Two weeks later, he flew from Pittsburgh to Baltimore and visited with the still comatose Beth for about an hour. He had brought with him and left replicas of the puppets from the neighborhood of make-believe. Three weeks later Beth woke up surrounded by these puppets. [This story is told on pages 153 to 157 of Gavin Edwards' book].

Gavin Edwards tells dozens of stories just like this one in his biography of Mister Rogers. A chance encounter in an elevator often led to an hour long conversation with a complete stranger. Letters were answered personally. Phone calls were made. At one event in which he was being honored, he noticed a child standing alone and found a way to make him feel included and special. He had a gift in working with children, but he supplemented it with reading the best literature in child development and consulted weekly with an expert in the field. Those who watched his show felt like they had a relationship with him. Edwards writes in his book: "Mister Rogers built his life around the notion that human connection would lead to understanding, and from there to kindness and generosity" (p. 233).

The story in Luke doesn't carry the same emotional impact as one about Mister Rogers. I must admit that reading Edwards' book last week left me teary-eyed at times not just because the stories were so touching, but also from the memories of having watched his show growing up and again when my children were younger. His ministry conducted through television nurtured millions of children.

The Bible, however, was not written with children in mind. It is a book with very old stories, many of which do not relate well to our own time and place. It can read like an inside joke that we are not privileged to be included in. And yet it does offer guidance for "walking in love" and teaches us about "relationships that nurture."

The facts in this story are simple. Jesus is teaching. A woman appears who has been bent over for eighteen years. Jesus heals her. The leader of the synagogue makes an objection. Jesus replies. His opponents are embarrassed. From the facts, we might conclude that Jesus can heal people and that this is evidence that God is with him. We would certainly conclude that he is smarter than his opponents. But to say more, we need to put more of ourselves into the story. We need to engage it at a deeper level.

For example, who is this woman? What must it have been like for her to be afflicted this way for eighteen years? If you've suffered from some chronic pain or disease, you may have a sense of what she is feeling. The text tells us that this crippling was the result of some spirit at work within her. How is it possible that a spirit has this hold on her for so long? Is it possible that she has been coming to the synagogue every Sabbath only to go unnoticed, to have no one actually attending to her need? Could it be that the disabling spirit's strength grew in proportion to the negligence of the faith community? Could she be bent over from the weight of the community's negligence?

But Jesus sees her. He sees the one person in the room that nobody else sees. And he interrupts the lesson in order to tend to her need. If you missed it, this is a Mister Roger's move. When he saw a child that he wanted to make a connection with, he'd get down on their level and only then begin talking. If it was a shy child, he'd ask yes/no questions that could be answered with a nod or shake of the head. He didn't just notice children, but he understood something about them. On the show, he always looked straight into the camera, so that the children watching knew he was talking to them, to each one of them. Jesus saw this woman in that way.

And when his opponents, those who had failed to nurture this woman, objected, he explained to them that this is not about your rules, but about her need. Walking in love sometimes means breaking the rules. It was more important to Jesus, that he relate to this woman in a way that nurtured her than it was to finish the lesson.

But he does finish the lesson. Maybe he even changes the point to fit the situation. "What is the kingdom of God like?" Or we might paraphrase: "What does it look like when God's people gather?" Well, it look this: A seed grows into a great big tree that provides a home for the birds. A woman adds enough yeast to leaven the whole loaf. What is the seed if not the Spirit of God making room for all to find a home? And what is the yeast if not the love of God that sustains and enriches the children of God. Both of these metaphors presume relationships that nurture. Both encourage Jesus' followers to walk in love.

Philemon is an owner of slaves and a spiritual brother to Paul. They both have a relationship with the slave, Onesimus. This is the only book in the New Testament that is completely about the relationships. There are stories behind the relationships, but what matters most are the relationships themselves.

Commentators have tried to flesh out the stories for, but it's likely that they have gotten the story wrong. And more disturbing, they have gotten the wrong message by focusing on the story. They story as most see it is that Onesimus is a runaway slave who has met Paul in prison because he has been caught. Paul converts him and sends him back, urging Philemon to welcome the slave as a brother. The text doesn't actually say that he

had run away. We don't know how he came to be with Paul in prison. These assumptions do more to obscure the character of the persons involved than to flesh it out. But the most harmful "fact" lifted from the story is that Paul does not in clear language tell Philemon to free his slave. In some circles this has led to the justification of slavery which we reject today. Some still maintain that the book suggests that Christians should not engage in activism of any kind.

As I said earlier, the Bible is a complicated book. It is helpful in many instances to fill in the background of a text, but in this case we don't need the assumptions to understand the text. In fact sometime assumptions have led to misunderstanding the message.

So, what if we focused only on what we do know from the text, and more specifically what we know about the relationships between these three people. We know that Philemon was disappointed in his slave. In a play on his name, Paul refers to Onesimus as previously "useless" to his owner. We know that Onesimus has been helpful to Paul and that Paul is responsible for bringing him to the faith. We know that Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon in the hope that he will be welcomed as a brother, as he himself would be welcomed.

These are the facts, but we are also told about some feelings. We know that Paul has a great deal of respect for Philemon who has repeatedly demonstrated love and support for the faith community. This feeling is so deep that Paul feels that there is no reason to remind Philemon of his duty. Clearly, he thinks that Philemon will act out of love. In fact Paul feels that Philemon will do even more than could be expected of him. Paul's love for Onesimus is evident in his reference to Onesimus as "his own heart."

If we think about the relationships as described in the text, we would have to conclude that Philemon freed Onesimus. And he would have done so based on who he saw. When you see a brother, you cannot hold him as a slave. There were masters prior to the Civil War who freed slaves that they had come to love, freed slaves who they had come to really see for the first time. And there were masters who thought they loved their slaves that did not free them, because they loved the benefits of slavery more. These never truly saw the people that the slaves were. There is nothing loving about regarding people as property.

There is a lesson for us today as we attempt to address racism as well. We need to put on the lenses that enable us truly see people as they are. We need to "form the human connections that lead to understanding, that lead to kindness and generosity." We need to walk in love and build relationships that nurture. This is what Paul encouraged in Philemon. It's what Jesus was doing when he saw the bent over woman. It's what Mister Rogers did in his ministry with children. Amen.