

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
 The Third Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2021  
 Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21  
 “Living So God Can Use Us” by Rev. Sue Trigger

HEBREW SCRIPTURE LESSON      Numbers 21: 4–9      (CEB)

They marched from Mount Hor on the Reed Sea road around the land of Edom. The people became impatient on the road. The people spoke against God and Moses: “Why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill us in the desert, where there is no food or water. And we detest this miserable bread!” So the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people and they bit the people. Many of the Israelites died. The people went to Moses and said, “We’ve sinned, for we spoke against the LORD and you. Pray to the LORD so that he will send the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous snake and place it on a pole. Whoever is bitten can look at it and live.” Moses made a bronze snake and placed it on a pole. If a snake bit someone, that person could look at the bronze snake and live.

NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE LESSON      John 3:14-21      (CEB)

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so must the Human One be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life. God didn’t send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him isn’t judged; whoever doesn’t believe in him is already judged, because they don’t believe in the name of God’s only Son. “This is the basis for judgment: The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. All who do wicked things hate the light and don’t come to the light for fear that their actions will be exposed to the light. Whoever does the truth comes to the light so that it can be seen that their actions were done in God.”

The light came into the world, and people loved darkness more than the light, for their actions are evil. The last few weeks have certainly revealed a lot of darkness and evil in the world haven’t they? I heard someone this week say that they couldn’t believe we were seeing what’s happening in Ukraine in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They had hoped that we had learned our lesson with World War II. I only wish that were true.

This week I have had the privilege of listening to the reports of 193 nations to the UN Commission on the Status of Women. It took four days just to receive the reports. I’ve seen

and heard a lot this week. Nothing more painful than the report of the minister from Ukraine. You hear things in a UN meeting that you probably won't hear on the news. The report from Afghanistan was equally disturbing.

At the same time, I have been privileged to hear how nations are working hard to save the environment. Many nations have taken important steps to reduce their carbon footprint in order to lower climate change. While I was observing all of this, I was also thinking about Mr. Rogers Day. I couldn't help but think of the earth as one big global neighborhood. As much as we like to celebrate our national identities, we are all part of one planet and the behavior of one country impacts others.

I think that until recently, Fred Rogers was largely under appreciated. He was far more than an entertainer of children; he was a mentor for generations. If all the world lived by the principles of Mr. Roger's neighborhood, the planet would be a very different place. Mr. Roger's Neighborhood was a place of unconditional love that modeled for children how we can care for each other. He showed what life was like for people in different communities, dealing with different challenges and sharing different gifts.

One of the characteristics of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was that Fred Rogers didn't steer away from difficult topics. He created shows that dealt with death, with competition, divorce, and even war. He was sometimes perceived as controversial. In 1968 he cast François Clemmons to portray officer Clemmons. In this clip from the documentary, "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," Clemmons shows us just what it meant to him. *(show video)* Clemmons was the first African American man to be cast in a regular role on a children's show.

The scene we just saw with Rogers and Officer Clemmons putting their feet in the pool together was met with a lot of criticism. It was 1968, near the end of the civil rights movement, but certainly not the end of racism. Rogers was criticized for putting his feet in the same water with a black man, white people don't do that. Some believed it was an explicit gesture against

racism during the difficult period of integration. According to Clemmons, it was carefully planned and intentional. In the eyes of François Clemmons, it was love.

In each episode of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, the audience would get to know someone's story. Rogers understood that we need to listen to each other's stories to appreciate each person's uniqueness. So I am going to apply a bit of Fred Roger's practices and step into a difficult topic by listening to some stories.

Each Sunday we have been singing African American Spirituals. There are multiple reasons we chose this theme for Lent. Spirituals have become woven into the music of the Church. We sing them as congregational hymns, choral anthems, solos and instrumental pieces. They are beautiful and we love them, but rarely do we stop to think about the stories behind these hymns. Until I read an article recently, I hadn't even thought about the fact that the composers of these songs were never paid. The songs became part of the public domain because we couldn't attribute them to a particular person. I never took the time to think about the problem with this. Without taking the time to think about these songs and where they came from, we were guilty of cultural appropriation. The spirituals were created and passed on through communities of slaves. It is impossible for most of us here today to understand the stories behind the spirituals we are singing today. They are anthems that tell stories of suffering and hope.

Those of you who attended the Ash Wednesday service had the opportunity to dig more deeply into the texts of several spirituals so that we might better understand what they meant to the community they came from, and so we might learn from them. The one that really struck me was the story of Kum Ba Yah. I grew up singing this song and as I grew older, I remember not wanting to sing it anymore because it was a kid's song. It was too juvenile. When I read about the song for Ash Wednesday, I realized that I didn't understand the song. I will never be able to sing it again without imagining a slave who has been whipped and beaten singing, "Someone's crying Lord, Come by here." Or someone who has been ridiculed because of the color of their skin singing, "Someone's laughing, Lord. Come by here." This was a song of

pain crying out for God to come and save them from their suffering. It is a beautiful expression of faith and trust in a God who they appealed to for help in their sorrow. “Someone’s praying, Lord. Come by here.” Here me Lord, Come and help me Lord. My ignorance allowed me to disrespect the song and dismiss it as childish. Listening to the story helped me see its depth.

I ask you to try to imagine what it may have been like for an enslaved person, taken away from their homeland and their family singing “I’m gonna live so God can use me.” What an expression of faith and the desire to be faithful. The original singer had every reason to be angry and want to fight against oppression. They had every right to want to lash out at their oppressors. Imagine the enslaved person, forced to pick cotton in the heat of the day singing, “I’m gonna work so God can use me.” It is a song of faith, and a song of courage. The message is encouragement for a hurting soul, and an expression of the desire to be faithful to God, even in their suffering.

I began this season of Lent worried that this could be an exercise in cultural misappropriation. I was concerned that we could misrepresent these songs or sing them without a willingness to engage in the struggles or pain that may lie behind the custom.

That is why today, on this Mr. Roger’s Day, I wanted to follow his lead and spend some time with a difficult topic, learning about the stories behind these songs that we have co-opted into our hymnody. Sadly, marginalized people have been exploited by white musicians (and other artists) who made thousands of dollars from their music while not sharing the history, credit or economic rewards. The church has been complicit in doing this too. Our hymnal has a number of Spirituals that cannot be attributed to the author and composer. **Caryl Tipton, a director of music who wrote about this. She said,** “The music of indigenous people, African Americans, and other marginalized people is fraught with pain, resistance, sorrow and history of centuries of bigotry, violence and oppression. The music is also full of hope, joy, spirituality and faith. I can’t begin to fathom what it is to walk in the shoes of someone who is being oppressed.”

Tipton shared the words of an African American songwriter and storyteller Courtney

Ariel wrote a piece entitled, “How Not to appropriate: A Guide for White People” for Sojourners magazine. Her last suggestion is:

“Listen. Lead with empathy, always. Be mindful of when appropriation becomes misappropriation and exploitation. You are human, lovely and amazing. You did not create these constructs and systems. But you might likely be in a position to affect positive change through awareness, greater understanding and meaningful action. I pray you choose to do so, knowing that I thank you in advance.” She asks us to remember to hold these experiences recognizing that they are not our own. Hold them very carefully and lovingly, acknowledging that we are visitors within that space. Being a visitor is not only a great honor. It comes with a great responsibility.”<sup>i</sup> It is a responsibility I take very seriously.

That is why throughout Lent, whenever we sing a spiritual, we want to honor the enslaved people who wrote them. A very small way we can affect some positive change is to give a donation each week when we sing a spiritual. The act of making a donation is a way of saying we recognize those who gave us these gifts. At the end of Lent, your donations will be given to the A-Flat Music Studio. The founder, Darryl Chamberlain, is committed to bringing the gift of music to children who cannot afford an instrument or lessons. We can help give these kids an opportunity to discover their talent and all of the benefits that music can contribute to education and mental health.

The kids we give our donations to are our neighbors. In the words of Fred Rogers, “There are many ways to show and tell people you love them.” May our donation to A-Flat music studio be just one way we show we love them.

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<sup>i</sup> Tipton, Caryl, Music and Cultural Mis/appropriation, <https://www.uucwc.org/music-and-cultural-mis-appropriation/>, April 6, 2019