

10th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 8.12.18
Scripture:

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

John 6:51-58

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This year is the 50th anniversary of the debut of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, which has occasioned all sorts of reflection on that program as a phenomenon, including a feature-length documentary called *Won't You Be My Neighbor*. I haven't seen but do intend to. Every critical conversation and review I've heard or read about it suggests it's the very thing we need right now. *Entertainment Weekly* claimed it's "...a balm of kindness and empathy in divisive times..." and the critics of Slate's Culture Gabfest and NPR all asked one another essentially, "How soon into the documentary did you begin to tear up, and for how long through it did you weep?" (Most answers tended toward "immediately" and "for the whole thing.") I myself haven't been able to make it through the trailer without being overcome by emotion, and I didn't even particularly like the show. I didn't dislike it; it just didn't compel me. After all, my last name as a kid was Rogers, I grew up in a neighborhood that was dominated by kids on bikes playing pretend outside all the time,

my dad kind of looked like Fred Rogers, and my home pastor sort of *acted* like Mr. Rogers. In sum, I *lived* in Mr. Rogers' neighborhood, so I didn't need to watch it on TV.

But it's been a long time since I lived there. It's been a long time for all of us since Mr. Rogers was culturally relevant, even radical—which he was. In the intervening years, we've had spoofs of Mr. Rogers, jokes about him. Irony took him for a spin over these last few decades, his earnest clarity always good for a laugh. But now, apparently, we've stepped off that clever, whirling ride to find ourselves addled and homesick.

There's also a forthcoming book about Mister Rogers. Maxwell King wrote *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers* and a brief article in last month's *Atlantic Monthly*, which focused on one ingredient of Mr. Rogers' secret sauce: the way he spoke, the way he used language. Mr. King writes, “[Fred] insisted that every word, whether spoken by a person or a puppet, be scrutinized closely, because he knew that children—the preschool-age boys and girls who made up the core of his audience—tend to hear things literally.”

In fact, those who worked on the show came up with a name for the language spoken on the show. A former producer told Mr. King, “‘There were no accidents on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.’ [Fred] took great pains not to mislead or confuse children,” using instead a manner of speaking they would come to call *Freddish*.

“*Freddish* anticipated the ways its listeners might misinterpret what was being said. For instance, Greenwald mentioned a scene in a hospital in which a nurse, inflating a blood-pressure cuff, originally said, ‘I’m going to blow this up.’ One producer recalls: ‘Fred made us redub the line, saying, “I’m going to puff this up with some air,” because “blow it up” might sound like there’s an explosion, and he didn’t want the kids to cover their ears and miss what would happen next.’

“Once, Rogers provided new lyrics for the ‘Tomorrow’ song that ended each show to ensure that children watching on Friday wouldn’t expect a show on Saturday, when the show didn’t air. And Rogers’s secretary remembered how, when one script referred to putting a pet ‘to sleep,’ he excised it for fear that children would be worried about the idea of falling asleep themselves.”

The producers even created a pamphlet for translating English into *Freddish*, a “loving parody,” as Mr. King dubs it. A decade into the show’s run, one evening over an open bottle of

scotch, they created and illustrated a manual called “Let’s Talk About Freddish.” It included a nine-step process.

1. “State the idea you wish to express as clearly as possible, and in terms preschoolers can understand.” Example: *It is dangerous to play in the street.*
2. “Rephrase in a positive manner,” as in *It is good to play where it is safe.*
3. “Rephrase the idea, bearing in mind that preschoolers cannot yet make subtle distinctions and need to be redirected to authorities they trust.” As in, *Ask your parents where it is safe to play.*
4. “Rephrase your idea to eliminate all elements that could be considered prescriptive, directive, or instructive.” In the example, that’d mean getting rid of “ask”: *Your parents will tell you where it is safe to play.*
5. “Rephrase any element that suggests certainty.” That’d be “will”: *Your parents can tell you where it is safe to play.*
6. “Rephrase your idea to eliminate any element that may not apply to all children.” Not all children know their parents, so: *Your favorite grown-ups can tell you where it is safe to play.*
7. “Add a simple motivational idea that gives preschoolers a reason to follow your advice.” Perhaps: *Your favorite grown-ups can tell you where it is safe to play. It is good to listen to them.*
8. “Rephrase your new statement, repeating the first step.” “Good” represents a value judgment, so: *Your favorite grown-ups can tell you where it is safe to play. It is important to try to listen to them.*
9. “Rephrase your idea a final time, relating it to some phase of development a preschooler can understand.” Maybe: *Your favorite grown-ups can tell you where it is safe to play. It is important to try to listen to them, and listening is an important part of growing.*

I think it’s interesting that even the adults who worked on the show had to take refuge in a light parody of the milieu. This earnestness, this straightforward show of care: it’s more than most grown-ups can handle.

Maybe that’s why it has us all in tears.

Maybe too this is one quality of children that Jesus was imbuing with value when he claimed we must become as children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Plain speech plainly heard.

If so, Jesus wasn’t providing much of a model in today’s reading. Really, he seems to be trolling the congregants gathered in the synagogue that day—trolling them to get a rise out of them.

And he got it. The teaching ends on this note, which wasn't included in the reading: "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

It's as if he *meant* to turn people off.

Consider, there's the fact that he taught this in a synagogue. He had been out and about, on one side of the lake, then on the other side of the lake, for a time with his disciples, and for a time with just the crowds because his disciples had gone away alone. But now, apparently, he was in synagogue at Capernaum, and this was where you could expect to find people earnestly looking for sound teaching, and appropriate civility, and maybe even kindness and care. What they got from Jesus, then, was something else altogether.

That he was the bread of life, that he *is* bread from heaven: it was a striking assertion, though one he'd been making for some time now. Really, we're on week four of what is a four-week run focusing on John's focus on Jesus' focus on himself as the bread of life—and week five if you include his feeding the five thousand with but five loaves of bread and two fish. John's gospel is more insistent than any of the others that Jesus is the bread of life, and August of Year B really drives that point home. It's actually sort of joke among preachers and lectionary commentators: August, Year B. Here we go with the bread metaphor.

As overwrought and run thin as it might feel to us, though, it would have been a striking assertion, maybe even an unnerving assertion. The stories remember people giving Jesus lots of push back on this point, people around him even beginning to complain about him, "Is this not Jesus, whose mother and father we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" But, strange as it was, startling as it was, this assertion though started out genteel at least. Bread, after all, is quite a bloodless thing. Eating bread is hardly a gory or visceral prospect. The theological claim Jesus was making was, yes, bold, but it wasn't a claim that would have landed people in disgust.

Not until now, that is. Not until the passage we just heard today, the culmination of his chapter-long discourse on bread. Now, Jesus was using a different word for the act of eating. He'd been speaking in terms of *phagein*, but now it was *trogein*.

Trogein only shows up six times in the New Testament. Two of those times, it's in reference to something untoward happening. In one, it describes Judas' manner of eating at the Last Supper, likely said to indict him before the fact of his betrayal, impugn him and set him apart from the

other disciples. In the other, *trogein* has Jesus speaking of the sort of eating people did in the age before Noah—this primitive acting on primitive appetites doubtless contributing to God’s desire to destroy the world with a flood. *Trogein* refers to animals gnawing audibly on their food, calls to mind something crude and animalistic, something shameless and disgusting. Indeed, an ancient title for the devil is “eater [*trogein*] of the flesh,” a phrase that also shows up in the psalms, and always to indicate someone or something that will delight in the destruction or death of someone else. And then it’s here: four times Jesus speaking in terms *trogein* to describe, even dictate, what people should do when it comes his body and his blood—that we should *gnaw* on it, that we smack our lips and crack our knuckles.

And so it is that, “when many of his disciples heard this, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ and “Because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”

And maybe this is why Jesus chose these terms. Maybe he was worried people were getting the wrong idea. Maybe he thought people thought this journey with Jesus would be all about signs and wonders, about feeding crowds of thousands but of five loaves of bread and two fish, about walking across water and calming storms. Maybe, with his mind now turned toward the crucifixion, he was concerned *that* would come as just too great a shock. That this journey was about to tumble from civilized to primitive: maybe he was worried that this, which was entirely predictable to him (was indeed the reason he was sent by the Father) but was totally unforeseen (unimaginable!) by those who’d been following him, was needed now to be introduced.

There’s a meme going around: s***’s about to get real. Maybe Jesus was suggesting this.

As for the crucifixion, as for violent death: when people get frightened, when people get frustrated, when people feel threatened or when they become a mob, they’ll see to that, and it might even feel good. To get it out, for it to find release: that catharsis of feeling now let out can feel so good it might even be mistaken for good, might even be thought to have been God’s will to have it happen. This impulse to scapegoating has, over the course of history and across countless societies, found its way into religious practice, is perhaps a defining feature of religious practice—people convinced on some pre-critical level that, if they kill the right person or people or thing, then God will be pleased and will bless the aggressors and goodness will reign and peace will come and everything will be set to right.

Jesus, of course, would call all that into question. Jesus, who gave himself as a sacrifice unto the scapegoat mechanism that both the religious authorities of his day practiced in the Temple and the civil authorities of his day practiced with countless crosses outside city walls, would call this whole mechanism into question. That it isn't God who wants such bloodletting, that the feeling of cleanliness and calm that comes of violent catharsis isn't indicative of the presence and blessing of the *Holy Spirit* but of a more diabolical spirit, that violence—even formalized, ritualized violence—will not save us from our violence: Jesus' self-offering would call into question all the convictions of people at our most primitive.

It would also reveal some disgusting truths about the human appetite.

It's this disgusting truth that Jesus seems intent here to lay bare—and he's content to offer himself up to that, to succumb to those appetites that no one else ever will again. We're to gnaw on Jesus that might never gnaw on anyone else ever again. No lynching. No driving cars into crowds of protestors, or into the ones who've driven cars into crowds of protestors. No executing political adversaries, or even assaulting them, as happened a few weeks ago at a townhall meeting in Great Barrington, the self-identified "shock" candidate for the Senate getting his own bullhorn shoved into his face. No "holy war." No more.

I'll admit, I'm not thrilled at the notion of Jesus trolling here, of Jesus speaking in such a way as to get a rise out of those listening. I have in the past admired his use here of disturbing language to upset the polite pretense of what might have been gathering around him. This year, though, I'm in a different place when it comes to trolling—because that's already everywhere. What we're suffering these days isn't stifling civility but is an uncorking of any and all civility, largely fueled by social media and on-line communication.

I recently listened to a podcast interview of a linguist who was explaining why it's no mere coincidence that the acrimony in our body politic has grown along with the rise of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and the like. When people are to rely solely on text for interaction, things get barbed quickly, whereas when people are reliant on speaking, the human voice, for communication, there's a tendency toward agreement, or at least avoidance of disagreement. This is why people will Tweet things they'd probably never say in person; this is why our President relies on Twitter for his most bold rhetorical moves, because being tough is a lot harder when Putin is standing there right next to you (I would guess) and firing someone face to face (when the cameras

aren't rolling and it won't make good TV) takes strength and conviction (again, I would guess). Human beings have grown and evolved to respond sociably to the human voice—to hear in it subtly of meaning and nuance of intent, to express in it a desire to connect and be understood rather than just to dominate, humiliate, and win.

Given all this, perhaps you are, as I am, tired of the suggestive, the provocative, the pointed, the ironic, the dog-whistles, the double-speak, the painfully insufficient rhetoric in response to painfully offensive turns of events. This year, or this morning at least, if we can manage it, I say we all talk Freddish—even you, Jesus. So can you please save your *trogen* for some other time, some time when civility is our greatest threat, when following in your way is mistaken as a boring prospect and we all need to be shocked awake to our bold and radical task of loving and peacemaking even when it costs us dear?

It happens every once in a while that Jesus and I aren't in sync, that Jesus and the preaching moment don't quite line up. It's a living faith, so sometimes you tuck away the wrong notes for the right time when they'll harmonize perfectly or when they'll create discord though in just the right way.

As for this morning, the out-of-sync might at least reinforce to us the importance of knowing how best to deploy our power of language, which is in part so powerful because of its plasticity.

I love that spoken language has the capacity to suggest, cajole, tease, provoke, lay bare, confess, and to be plain, to be uncomplicated and *un*-sub-textual, every word holding its plain sense as solid as if each were a brick laid to build up a neighborhood. And, yes, we're called to be as children, as those whose reliance on language is straightforward and plain. But also, yes, as we were reminded in the reading from Ephesians last week, we're no longer to be as children, tossed to and fro, but to grow up into Christ who is our highest head. So, yes, we are to aim to be both—as children relying on the plain speech of those who care for us and about us, while also adults who can detect subtlety in meaning and intent, and who can respond when language becomes abusive or abused, used to deceive or deny that anything has any meaning at all.

So it's a matter of prayerful discernment, as most things are. When it comes to what's called for in what context and by what medium and to what end, it's a matter of discernment.

Because, of course there are times when Freddish simply won't do. But there are also times when it's the very thing we need.

I recently posted something on Facebook that, were I ever to come across our neighbor, Wilbur Ross, out and about in Great Barrington where he's recently bought a home, I will hope to be clear with him in how offensive I find him as a "public servant"—and I got a lot of push-back at the possibility that I'd be loud and rude, not least from my own son, Tobias, who was in tears at the thought of me purposely and publicly shaming someone. "But not just someone," I told him. "Not just anyone. *Him*, a man with tremendous power and no apparent shame." And maybe I'm wrong. Maybe that's wrong—that the language of love is sometimes strident more than sweet, sometimes shaming more than inspiring. I can only say this, I have spent time in discernment about it, time in prayer that I might not just post about him on Facebook, that I might also confront him in person if ever given the chance, though it would probably frighten me quite a lot to do.

Pray that I discern rightly—about this and about all my chances to speak; and I'll do the same for you.

Thanks be to God.