

Where do I even start this week? I am not usually at a loss for words but this week quite literally knocked the wind out of me. Every day last week we learned of new pipe bombs. It almost started to feel normal to turn on the news and wonder “who got a pipe bomb this time?” In addition to that news, other news stories this week seemed to put into full focus life and death consequences of encouraging people to hate those who are different. A leaked memo from the Department of Health and Human Services that threatened to make being transgender or having a non-binary gender identity illegal. Or the white man who killed two black people at a grocery store in Kentucky and then spared the lives of white folks saying, “whites don’t kill whites.” Or the way refugees fleeing violence and poverty in Honduras and El Salvador have been vilified and painted as invaders. Racism, xenophobia and extreme partisan hatred were all over the news. So, when my mom suggested watching the Mister Rogers documentary on Friday night, it felt like a breath of fresh air.

Fred Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian Minister who hosted Mister Roger’s Neighborhood for 31 seasons and 912 episodes, went on television with the purpose of reminding children that they are special and loved just as they are. The show debuted at the national level the height of the Vietnam war, the first war to ever be televised, was being broadcast into homes. As we watched the movie, Mr. Roger’s message of loving your neighbor and loving yourself cast a stark contrast to what was coming across the news channels all week. I found myself feeling both sad that his kindness and gentleness is such a rarity and a renewed sense of being called to be a bearer of that kind of hope and love in the world.

Then Saturday came and with it the news of the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. The more I learned about it the more my heart broke. The shooting happened during worship. They were celebrating a bris – a ritual that I am not personally a fan of, but is a time of welcoming new life into the wider Jewish community – a happy occasion full of celebration and joy. Family and friends gathered together to worship God, to celebrate life, a joyful and holy time shattered by bullets. And it seems like an inconsequential detail, but I learned that the congregation is located less than a

mile and a half from the studio where Mister Roger's Neighborhood was filmed. It felt as if someone literally shot up Mister Roger's Neighborhood.

All day yesterday, I thought to myself, what would Fred Rogers say? He never shied away from talking about difficult things. He addressed the war in Vietnam, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy, segregation of public pools, he even came out of retirement to film a public service announcement after the attacks on 9-11. He knew the importance of talking about scary things. Not talking about them doesn't make them go away and in some ways, gives them more power. I wondered what he would say to the children of this church and to the child inside each of us who is sad and afraid and worried? The word that kept coming back to me was love. Love is always the answer.

It can be really easy and even tempting, to allow anger and fear to guide our actions. But what ever we give energy to is what will grow. If we sow seeds of anger and rage, more anger and rage is the result. If we sow seeds of love and hope, more love and hope will be the result. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King knew this to be true when he said "Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love."¹ He also said "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."² This response was echoed in a statement yesterday by the United Church of Christ National Officers. I would like to share that statement with you in its entirety:

This morning, during Shabbat prayers, the sanctity of a temple was violated. This morning, as babies were named and people gathered with love, hate invaded their joy. This morning a lone gunman, armed with an assault weapon, several guns, and hate, entered the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Penn., and opened fire on a gathered community who had every right to expect they were safe in the temple. But they were not. We are not.

¹ <https://mlk.wsu.edu/about-dr-king/famous-quotes/>

² Martin Luther King Jr. (1967). Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?. p. 67.

This morning, eleven people were killed, six more were physically wounded, and a community has been changed forever. Hate takes a lot from us. Whether that is hateful rhetoric, or hateful policies, or hateful actions, hate demands a high price. And when hate enters our sacred worship spaces as it did today, and as it did at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church two years ago, and as it did earlier this year at The Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City, hatred never compromises and always consumes.

In moments like these, when we are grieving so deeply the lives that have been taken and the people who have been wounded, we realize how we have all been made to feel a little less safe. In moments like these, when anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and racism and xenophobia and transphobia are on the rise, sanctioned by policies and political and religious rhetoric designed to instill fear of one another in our hearts and minds, we must remember that God has not given us a spirit of fear; but of power and of love and of a sound mind. And as difficult as it may be in this moment to see beyond our loss, our collective strength is in what remains. “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

Not love simply as an emotional response, but love as a collective resolve. Love that refuses to be consumed by hate. Love that removes the barriers between our faiths and our fears. Love that causes us to see the Divine in one another and, having seen what is holy in the other, refuses to let hate win. Love that demands accountable and respectful speech from those in authority. Love that demands sensible gun control in a country that has lost its way. Love that says when one hurts we all hurt, when one grieves, we all grieve, when one is unsafe, we all are unsafe. Love that gives life and refuses to let hate breathe.

The United Church of Christ stands with our Jewish siblings today in that love as we mourn this terrible tragedy in our midst. And we will not run. We will not hide. We will not shy away from confronting the toxic, white Christian supremacy that is masquerading as faith. We are here with you. We are praying with you. We are mourning with you. And we are loving with you until every street and every synagogue and every mosque and every sanctuary is free of hate. We are with you until love wins, and this is a just world for all. This is our collective faith. This is our collective hope. This is our collective love. And the greatest of these is love.

Faithfully yours,

The National Officers of the United Church of Christ

The Rev. John C. Dorhauer, General Minister and President

The Rev. Traci Blackmon, Executive Minister, Justice & Local Church Ministries

The Rev. James Moos, Executive Minister, Global Engagement and Operations

The Council of Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ

How will you reach out in love this week? When King Solomon was faced with leading the people of Israel at a relatively young age, he turned to God and prayed for wisdom. Let us now take a minute of silent prayer to seek God's wisdom in this moment. How would God have each of us respond to the events of this week. How might we be sowers of love and hope? If something comes to you, I invite you to write it down on the piece of paper you received with your bulletin. This is yours to keep so you can put it somewhere that you will see it throughout the week as a reminder. Then after worship, I invite you to write your intention on the large piece of paper in the lobby so we can share with one another the ways God is calling us to love our neighbor.

Let us pray.

A silence is kept.

Close with song "Goodness is Stronger Than Evil." Lyrics © 1995 Desmond Tutu, Adapted by Leslie Moughty, (Admin. Doubleday, a div. of Random House, Inc.), tune by John L. Bell © 1996, Iona Community.

Goodness Is Stronger Than Evil

Good-ness is strong-er than e - vil; love is strong-er than
 hate; light is strong-er than dark - ness;
 life is strong-er than death. We will be love, we will be
 hope bring - ing forth God's love. We will be
 love, we will be hope bring - ing forth God's love.