

Open Wide; or, Three Dead Freds

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

12th Sunday after Pentecost - August 28, 2022

Texts: Psalm 81, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14: 7-14

Psalm 81:10, 13, 16

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.

Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.

O that my people would listen to me and walk in my ways!

Then I would quickly subdue their enemies.

I would feed you with the finest of the wheat,

and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.”

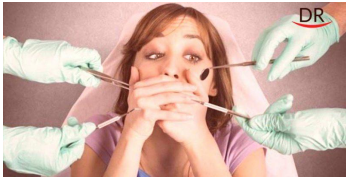
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Luke 14:7-14

When Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Your word, our light; your grace, our hope; your love, our life. TBTG



Let me draw your attention to the title of my musings today: Open wide. I realized belatedly that for many of you this may bring up painful or frightening memories of trips to the dentist. If so, I apologize. That was not my intention. In fact, I took the title from a verse of our psalm, where God says, “Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.” He is not talking about filling cavities but about good things to eat and good things to drink, and by extension, all the things that make life good: safety, security, love, companionship, a chance to flourish and enjoy life. This is what God wants for everyone. This is what I want for everyone. Don’t you?

Sometimes I think we treat church, faith, religion, whatever, as something disagreeable we have to endure, like dental work, before we can smile. Toe the line, write the check, obey the rules, do the committee work. First appease the old man keeping score in the sky, and then maybe he’ll let us have a little fun.¹ If God were not infinitely patient, she might get awfully frustrated with this point of view. Just open up! God says. I have something good to give you!



Opening up to God’s promise is what faith is all about. As we read in Hebrews, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?” Or, as I read elsewhere this week, faith is “confidence that *God is good, God can be trusted, and God is actively involved in my life....* Faith-filled people are, quite simply, usable for larger purposes.”² Note that “open your mouth wide and I will fill it” has two meanings. The promise is not only that good things will flow *into* you; but that good things will flow *out* of you. This is as true today as ever. I want to talk about some people who were wide open to being used for larger purposes. So the subtitle of my musings this morning is “Three dead Freds.”



The first Fred you all probably know: Fred Rogers, the creator and star of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood. Honestly, I never watched that show as a child. I was just a little too old, maybe; I was more familiar with Eddie Murphy’s SNL knock-off, Mr. Robinson, who was pretty funny whether or not you knew the original. Mr. Rogers has recently experienced a resurgence of popularity: a 2019 movie, “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,” which actually gave me my first true glimpse of this good, gentle man. Though a Presbyterian pastor, he never served a church; his pulpit was his TV show, and his congregation the thousands of kids who learned from him what it means to be a good person: to be open-hearted, to be thoughtful, to be curious, to be compassionate. And - more of my reading this past week – a biography called *Kindness and Wonder: Why Mr. Rogers Matters*

¹ Just for fun, I searched the Web for images of one word: “God.” This was the first image to pop up. Uh-huh!!

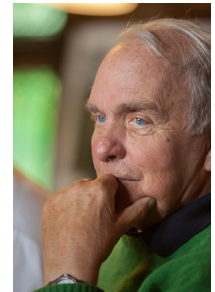
² Richard Rohr, August 22. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/we-are-being-guided-2022-08-21/>

*Now More than Ever.*³ When tragedies happen, people tend to remember Mr. Rogers' words, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." To this day, especially in times of "disaster", I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world." Shy and lonely as a child, Fred Rogers found that when he opened his mouth to and through his puppets, God filled it - and used him for a larger purpose.

The second Fred was not so helpful. He was a pastor who traveled the country with his followers, protesting. I encountered him in 2003, in Pittsburgh, where his people were marching with signs like, "God hates gays" (though he used a different, hateful word). They were protesting at a Presbyterian church where the funeral of Fred Rogers was being held. Mr. Rogers wasn't gay himself, but famously said to everyone, "I like you just the way you are." Fred Phelps extended the protest to the Episcopal church around the corner, where I attended that day, because the priest was female. Apparently, "God hates woman priests," too. That congregation brought the protestors juice and muffins. I don't know if they opened their mouths wide to be filled with muffins or not; but I can guarantee you this: if your mouth is filled with hateful words, it was not God who filled it. I cannot help but feel that *that* Fred must have been a fearful, damaged man, clenched tight. I can only believe that when he died in 2014, he found God to be different from the bully he had tried so hard to please. I hope and trust God healed him.



The third Fred died just a few weeks ago; Fred Buechner. Although you may not have read any of his novels, memoirs, or essays, my guess is you have heard the saying, "God calls you to the place where "your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." I've heard it phrased so many ways I'm not sure which is the original. But the intent is always the same: What God wants *from* you is what God wants *for* you: to fill you with peace, joy, contentment, so you may fill others as well. Open your mouth wide!



Like Fred Rogers, Fred Buechner was a sensitive child, with a somewhat troubled childhood; his father was a drifter who completed suicide when Fred was only 10. Also like Fred Rogers, he was an ordained Presbyterian pastor who never served a church, but whose congregation was his wide range of readers: Christians who loved him despite his unorthodox theology, and people of no faith at all, who received from him good tidings of the grace that surfaces in ordinary life. He believed that God doesn't move us around like little stick figures, that, in fact, chance largely rules the universe, but also that "through the chance things that happen, God opens up

³ Gavin Edwards, *Kindness and Wonder*, 2019.

possibilities of redemptive human change in the inner selves, even of people who wouldn't be caught dead believing in Him [sic].”⁴

It's easy to be cynical about people like Fred Rogers and Fred Buechner, people so giving of themselves, so convinced of God's goodness that they hardly seem real. It's easy to mock that kind of faith. But, you know my motto: Jesus came to save us from our cynicism. So gently, in



our gospel, Jesus named the errors of pride, of thinking too highly of ourselves, of putting ourselves first. We have no shortage of prominent people who live the opposite of this, and who have no shortage of followers! We don't need to be among them. The kind of deal Jesus promoted was not *quid pro quo*, this for that, scratch my back and I'll scratch yours; but rather, to invite those who couldn't repay you, or do you any favors in return.⁵ He taught people to show generosity and kindness to “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the

blind.” Remember, in his day those qualities were popularly believed to be proof of God's disfavor, punishment, or rejection. “Open your mouth wide, and God will fill it” - even if you think you have nothing to give back to God. You can be a helper. You can be a neighbor. You can be used for a larger purpose. And that can be your gladness and joy.

One final word on the three Freds, all dead now: Fred Buechner imagined a conversation with his own wise grandmother. He asks her about death: “You've already set sail. What can you tell me about it?” She responds that she considers it misleading to speak of people as having passed away. ‘It is the world that passes away,’ she says.⁶ For these Freds, the world has passed away, as it will for all of us. In the world that is eternally real, where they are eternally and finally themselves, I dare to hope that, all differences and all hurts healed, they are filled together at the fountain of life.

Breath prayer: Open/wide

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/15/books/frederick-buechner-dead.html>

⁵ Image: JESUS MAFA. The poor invited to the feast, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48397> [retrieved August 27, 2022].

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/15/books/frederick-buechner-dead.html>

Prayers

God of bounty, we your people, we your church, we your *straight, white, American Christian children*, have failed you too often. We have falsely magnified our own righteousness, and amplified the failings of every other faith, every other race, every person we deemed unsuited for your kingdom. Forgive us for forgetting they are the very people your Son chose to be with, those are the ones he told us to invite. Forgive us. Help us do better.

God our maker, we long for days when divisiveness will cease, when hate-filled words will disappear from our politics and our media, when people remember that we are made in your image, and made to love one another, *each* other. We pray for those of every color who continue to experience brutality at the hands of those tasked with protecting and serving them. Give us strength and will to let our prayers bear fruit in action.

We give thanks for the heroes of goodness and understanding for whom the world has passed away; for all the loved ones we remember and mourn today. May we someday drink at your fountain of life with them.

Remember them, as well as all we name in our hearts. Bring us all to your realm of justice and peace and teach us to pray:

Beloved, Center and Source of our living, whose presence is heaven, your holy love fills Creation. May your delight be fulfilled and your Realm unfold among us, the visible world blossoming out of the unseen. We turn to you alone for our sustenance, the bread of life each day. Set us free from our failings, as we set free all who have failed us. Lead us beyond our desires and save us from the grip of evil. For the world is within you; all power is from you, and all glory is about you in eternity, which is the present moment. Amen