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START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:00]**

The following is a message from Wellspring's congregation.

[00:00:05]

Love is an active noun.

[00:00:09]

Very excited to be here with you today. For by first preaching. I have to admit, when I agreed to this date, way back when I never expected to be doing it in this fashion remotely from this tiny little space here in my house. But here we are, Covid 19, the 20 20 edition. And I think the most Cringey part of this situation might be that since it is being done remotely and I'm filming this a couple of days before Sunday, I will be watching myself on the couch, perhaps when it airs. Maybe I'll step away from the computer screen for that point in time. Anyhow, I'm very happy to be here with you. I'm going to say up front that my words are my own. They're not representative of any organization that I'm affiliated with. I know that's probably unusual to say in these in this setting, but I feel compelled to do that because of my work with the local school district. And I'm a fan of clear boundaries in these things. So this message series is entitled Love the Hell Out of This World, and it's based on the universalist belief that the whole world and everyone in it is worth saving. No exceptions. We talk about our beloved community here at Wellspring's and how this beloved community extends beyond our four walls, whether they're virtual or real, and really encompasses all of those with whom we come into contact. And it's far too easy to see the opposite of this type of love, to see the demagogues who want to divide us into tribal groups who prey upon our fears. Our faith tells us that each of us is beloved, regardless of what you look like, where you come from or even who you vote for.

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The core of that belief, though, is a challenge. How do we live out this faith with each other today? Right now. So I've been pondering what it is that drew me to want to preach about this series and what's emerged from year two aspects of my life that resonated deeply with universalism. First, my chosen profession in special education. And second, my love for Mr. Rogers. And like many of you, I watched Mr. Rogers growing up and I was lucky enough to have family around me that reinforced his ways of thinking and feeling and caring for others. I don't think I realized, though, until later in life how much of his message of I like you just the way you are had sunk so deep inside of me. This was brought home to me when I listen to a podcast series called Finding Fred, hosted by another southwestern P.A. native author, Carvelle Wallace. Mr. Wallace is a best author of The Sixth Man and Other Works and is a lot to like about this podcast. And I highly recommend it might be the first podcast series where I listen to every single episode and the Atlantic magazine named it the best podcast of Twenty Nineteen. So this podcast is a deep examination of the radical compassion presented by Mr.

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Rogers neighborhood. The TV show host talks openly in the first episode about exploring why there's been a resurgence in interest in Fred Rogers in recent years. And what does this show teach us about being in this world which feels more divided than ever? He interviews writers, comedians, activists, those involved in making the show researchers, people like Angel, Kyoto, Williams, Kamahl Bell, Ashley C. Ford and David Bianculli. Calls Fred Rogers a genius of empathy. There's a rich appreciation of how the show helped children understand their feelings. Naming those feelings and helping youngsters recognize that you could have all sorts of different kinds of feelings. And what matters is what you do with those feelings. But he also places the show as being progressive and almost subversive and makes compassionate, makes some connection between Mr. Rogers Christianity and how that shaped his work. For example, he does an in-depth examination of a famous episode involving the character Officer Francois Clemmons. Now, Officer Clemmons is a police officer who is African-American, and Mr. Rogers offers to share a footbath. When Officer Clemmons stops by on his tour of the neighborhood. Now, this is the late 1960s.

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So think about how deeply radical and subversive that is for the time. First, simply to pick depicting as normal the existence of a black police officer is noteworthy.

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Second, while other communities were barring African-Americans from swimming in pools frequently by whites, here was someone who showed no concern for those practices. Officer Clemmons is making the rounds in the neighborhood. It's a hot day. Mr. Rogers is sitting outside his feet in a nice little pool, soaking his feet, and they share this together. And at the end, Mr. Rogers shares his towel with Officer Clemmons. Wallace interviews Clemmons and what that scene meant to him. He stated that there were maybe 10 white people in the country at that time who would have done what Fred Rogers did on that day. But they also discussed the limits of Mr. Rogers subversiveness, pointing out that while Rogers knew that Clemmons was gay on the show, he remained closeted. And how Clemmons makes sense that years later, in the last episode entitled I Like You, as you are there talking about the importance of understanding feelings and the complexity that is love. Who says something like, I thought love was just a stronger version of, like, not just liking somebody, but really, really liking them. So I get that because when you're raised on a bunch of bad 80s movies, you can be forgiven for thinking that love means being Lloyd Dobler holding up a boombox for your love until her father comes out to kick you away. Maybe it was teen hormones and angst, or maybe Lloyd Dobler really, really liked her. I don't know if it was love. Loving others is a deeper act than this. That's what universalism is. Mr. Rogers and the Buddha and maybe others ask us to do. In that last episode, the host distills it down to this. Fred Rogers said that love is an active down like the word struggle. Love is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is to accept ourselves as we are right now.

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And that's the hard part. Love has nothing to do with liking other people.

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So I was running while listening to this podcast. And that sense maybe stop to pause. I wanted to note where it was so I could come back to it. Because this is the part where I was reminded of universalism, our faith asks us to operate on the assumption that we have a love so special. You don't have to be special to be loved. We're born whole. We're born with original blessing. As some say it's here. I recognize the connection between universalism and Mister Rogers. Before it was one of those ideas that was maybe a faint path in the woods. But now this is a clear pathway between Mr. Rogers and universalism, regardless of the person he was talking to. He was always showing us a way to listen deeply and fully to them, recognizing their common humanity, signifying the worth of each person. This is hard to do. And in fact, the host and guests on the podcast wrestle with this idea of accepting others as they are while still being troubled by what those people might do or say. They frequently ask, how do you balance this out? How do you make peace with this? How do we explain this to our children? It's easy to talk about unconditional love of your child, for example. Well, what of others? What if there is someone whose behaviors or statements are upsetting? How do we see that person? Do we offer them the same type of compassion that we offer our own child? What if they've hurt us over time? Maybe we start to dislike them, dislike the person they have become, perhaps maybe even hate them.

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Then we may feel guilt over those feelings. I know I've had these experiences and thoughts, but loving also means accountability, being accountable for your own actions and statements and also being with the other person and loving kindness to help them notice when their behavior is broken. Some boundary. Anyone who's raised a child or been around children may recognize this. You might recall a situation in which your child violated some norm. Maybe it was in public and you tell them, you know, I love you, but don't ever do that again. And here's why it's not OK. You still love them, but you have to hold them accountable for their actions so they grow. And this is where I started this sense, that connection with the other aspect of my life that resonated deeply with universalism, my profession and special education. A foundational idea is that all children deserve to be educated to the fullness of their capacity, regardless of ability. And I want to point out, disability covers a very broad range of needs and abilities from students with detention issues to dyslexia to severe cognitive impairments to physical impairments. It's a big range. Now I was a special education teacher before becoming a Unitarian Universalist. And what drew me to the field was a desire to help students who struggled in school. Well, there was academic or behavioral when I found myself working with those students. I recognize this was what I was meant to do. People have a lot of different reasons for going into teaching, but I think a necessary one is a love of working with young people. After some years of experience or aging, you realize that you've likely met the full range of humanity and their children, regardless of what kind of school you work in.

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So how is this related to the idea of loving even those who are unlikable? I struggle with this. It's hard for me to consider a youngster as being unlikable. And I want to respect the experience of students by being choosy as to how or even if I share experiences that I've had over the years. However, if you have kids, you're aware they can make some decisions from time to time that are poor decisions. They press your buttons, things of that nature. I started to think about some of the challenging situations I faced even before being where I am now. I thought at the time when one of my students had been convinced by others to say something unlikable and disrespectful to a

police officer. He was a student who struggled socially and I don't think he recognized the impact his words would have. But what happened was we had to work through that situation with the student, diffuse it and identify what would be an appropriate way to respond. Was the behavior unlikable? Yes. Does the student deserve less love or to be exiled? No, because the challenges in situations arise when our children don't yet have the words to name the feelings they're experiencing. So they might act out with behaviors. And if you operate on the assumption that all behavior communicates, then you know that they're trying to tell you something. They're trying to tell themselves something. They're trying to make sense out of the situation.

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This could be an adult or a child. They still deserve our love. So when I talk with our special education teachers about a student, they might smile and say something like always being a little naughty today. And I know they mean the kid is pushing the boundaries a bit, but they're loving him up to get it back on track. And I'm pretty certain most or not UUs, but in that moment, they're feeling that universalist vibe of what it means to be a special education teacher. And this brings it back to the core that our universalist faith has a hefty request of us how to love people when it can be hard to do so, being accountable to them and asking them to be accountable to us and their actions and words while recognizing their worth as another person, despite our differences, despite their tribe or our tribes by who they voted for, who we voted for. Because the easy way out is to push them aside, to demean them, just resign them to some endless other of which we don't belong. Universalism. And Mr. Rogers asked us to listen fully, see fully the other person, because we're all in this together. So how do we do this? We start with ourselves. I know many of us have some sort of mindfulness or meditation practice. The practice of metta or loving kindness fits well in this need. The idea being that you first provide your own self compassion and then expand it outwards and widen vision to be concentric circles of loving kindness as you meditate.

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You can repeat a short phrase, I'd be safe, I'd be happy and I'd be healthy. Mean, I'd be peaceful entities.

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And then you expanded outwards, may all beings be safe, may all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be peaceful. And that is.

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So what I'd like to do today is take a moment to practice this with you right now. Place yourself into a comfortable position straight in your spine and in breath.

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And out breath.

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If you feel comfortable saying the mantra out loud, do so.

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May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be peaceful? And at ease.

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And then we turn our focus to others, may all beings be safe, may all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be peaceful and at ease. May all beings be safe. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be peaceful entities.

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And so today, my friends, my wish for you is to have and feel this loving kindness, to see our common, common humanity. That is the core of our universalism.

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You live in blessing, Amen. Would you pray with me?

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God of our understanding. Let us strive to see the humanity of others as we go about our day to day lives. Let us strive to listen deeply when given the chance. Let us strive to ask skillfull questions so that we may understand even those with whom we disagree or even dislike. Let us know we are all in this together and that the breadth of our human experience is a vast tapestry in which we all have a place for the prayers spoken and the prayers on the hearts of all those listening today. I say amen.

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