

AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE: THE REV. MR. FRED ROGERS

Mark 12:28-34

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Parents learn early on to pay attention to their children's nutrition. It's a common fact that children grow and develop if they're given enough protein, fruits and vegetables. And that there are negative consequences to too much sugar and junk food. What children take in through their eyes and ears is just as important. The images and words and messages that children receive through media shape their minds and hearts and souls like food shapes their bodies.

When my children were young, Mr. Rogers' programs were available on television and on video tape. My son was not quite four when we allowed him to wake up and get out of bed on his own some mornings and he knew how to push the videotape into the VCR and watch Mr. Rogers. I was extremely careful about how much and what TV my children watched, but they could binge on Mr. Rogers. In fact, I wanted them to soak up as much of his goodness and kindness as they possibly could.

There was a time when it was in vogue to make fun of Mr. Rogers, most popularly by Eddie Murphy on Saturday Night Live. One day, Fred Rogers showed up on the set of Saturday Night Live, knocked on Eddie Murphy's dressing room door and waited. Eddie Murphy opened the door, did a double-take and then said, "The Real Mr. Rogers!" and gave him a big hug. Many of the people who parodied Mr. Rogers admitted that they truly loved and admired him. And he did not change one iota because of his detractors and a few critics. He was entirely genuine and authentic, the same way

around all people, his entire life. He was comfortable with who he was and in his own skin. Whether he was talking to a child with a severe disability or testifying before the U.S. Senate, or accepting an Emmy award in Hollywood, or at home with his family, he was 100% himself.

He grew up in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and graduated from Latrobe High School in 1946. 50 years later, he delivered the baccalaureate address at Latrobe High School. Our church member, Rob Flannery, was in that graduating class; he secured a copy of the speech for me. Fred Rogers said this to that group of high school graduates contemplating their futures and their vocations, "What do you think is the truth about you - right now? If we're really honest with ourselves, there are probably times we think, 'What possible use can I be in this world? What need is there for someone like me?' That's one of the deeper mysteries, and then God's grace comes to us in the form of another person who tells us we have been of help, and what a blessing that is...I can see how all the interests I had as I was growing up served me well in the work I finally chose to do. In fact, I think it's very important - no matter what you may do professionally - to keep alive some of the healthy interests of your youth. What are some of your healthiest ways of showing and telling how you are and how you're feeling? Whatever they may be...keep on embracing them, love them, give them room to grow inside yourself because those gifts of expression which are so unique to you are gifts to you from God who created you. Can you believe that? Are you able to believe in a loving presence who desires the best for you and the whole universe? With all the sadness and destruction, negativity and rage expressed throughout the world, it's tough not to won-

der where the loving presence is. Well, we don't have to look very far. Deep within each of us is a spark of the divine just waiting to be used to light up a dark place.”

Fred received his undergraduate degree in music composition at Rollins College, where he met his wife Joanne and then began seminary. But he wouldn't complete his seminary degree for eight years, because he discovered a particular calling. “I got into television,” he said, “because I saw people throwing pies at each other's faces, and that to me was demeaning behavior. And if there's anything that bothers me, it's one person demeaning another.” He wanted to make a different kind of television program for children, and he saw it as a ministry. He was ordained by the Presbyterian church as an evangelist with a unique charge to serve children and families through the mass media.

He didn't need to wear his faith on his sleeve, though; in fact, he deliberately chose not to. During the report of Fred's death on the Nightly News program on NBC, the network where Fred got his start in television, reporter Bob Saw said, ‘The real Mr. Rogers never preached, never even mentioned God on his show. He never had to.’ Indeed, Fred Rogers and his gentle care of children seemed to embody the words credited to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.”

He was a pastor on television in the golden era of televangelism, but unlike televangelists, Rogers's focus wasn't on eternal life, but our own interior lives. Christian evangelists were making a name for themselves preaching about the wickedness of humanity, but Rogers was more interested in his viewers' inherent value and worth. Evangelists were finding ways the human race didn't measure up to God's moral standard. But Rogers said over and over again: “You've made this day a special day by just

your being you. There is no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are.”

If this sounds like an easy, shallow talking point, consider these words: “Love isn’t a perfect state of caring; it’s an active noun like ‘struggle.’ To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.” Rogers wasn’t telling children that they were so perfect that there was no room for them ever to improve as people; just that he loved them as they were, regardless of who they were or what they had done.

Rogers’s theological messages could be traced to the biblical notion of “neighbor” and Jesus’ parable about the good Samaritan. As Jesus tells it, a Jewish man was mugged and left for dead, and his body was ignored by the religious elite who passed by. But then a man from the despised country of Samaria stopped and showed kindness. This was Jesus’ roundabout way of answering the question “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus’ point — that the Samaritan and the Jewish man were neighbors in a spiritual sense, if not a physical one — feels right at home on “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” where Rogers greeted you with a daily “Hi, neighbor!” as if the whole world lived in the same close-knit community.

It might be tempting to think Mister Rogers’s message came from a simpler time, but his show debuted just a few months after the Cuban missile crisis, and the world remained on tenterhooks. Rogers’s notion of a worldwide neighborhood upended a few apple carts in his own time, and it frankly remains countercultural today.

After a girl named Amy Melder became a Christian at the age of six, she set out to evangelize everyone she cared about. One of the names on the top of her list was a

person whom she'd never actually met: Fred Rogers. Amy was a frequent viewer of PBS's "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" and had formed a deep connection to the gentle host who made her feel "safe and accepted in his tiny staged living room." So she penned Rogers a letter to "make sure he knew he was going to heaven." Within weeks, she received a lengthy response from a man who personally answered every piece of fan mail he received.

He thanked her for the colorful drawing she sent him, which "is special because you made it for me." And then he addressed the matter that most concerned Amy: You told me that you have accepted Jesus as your Savior. It means a lot to me to know that. And, I appreciated the scripture verse that you sent. I am an ordained Presbyterian minister, and I want you to know that Jesus is important to me, too. I hope that God's love and peace come through my work on MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD.

Fred Rogers was an ordained minister, but he was no televangelist, and he never tried to impose his beliefs on anyone. Behind the cardigans, though, was a man of deep faith. Using puppets rather than a pulpit, he preached a message of inherent worth and unconditional lovability to young viewers, encouraging them to express their emotions with honesty.

I spend a lot of time thinking about the polarized divisiveness in our country today and how the church might be a force for good. It has long occurred to me that trying to change things by shouting at people is counterproductive. I doubt that even civil debates do much to change people's minds. But when we are in relationship with one another, when we SHOW our faith through our genuine actions, then I think we're beginning to make a difference. So my favorite scene in the Mr. Rogers' movie (which we're

showing here on December 1) is one which addresses the issue of racism. In 1968, Mr. Rogers cast an African-American, Francois Clemmons, to play the role of a police officer in the Neighborhood of Make Believe. One of the many ways in which racism was a factor in American communities had to do with the segregation of swimming pools. Long after Jim Crow laws had legally been defeated, the practice of discrimination remained. Mr. Rogers could have preached about the subject. He could have lectured about it. But he knew that there was power in action, and in the visual image. So one day when it is very hot in the neighborhood, Officer Clemmons comes by and sits down next to Mr. Rogers. They are both sitting on lawn chairs outside, and they both take their shoes and socks off and cool off by putting their feet in the wading pool. The camera slowly pans to the pool where two black feet and two white feet are sharing that same space. No words necessary.

Fred's faith surfaced in subtle, indirect ways that most viewers might miss, but it infused all he did. He believed "the space between the television set and the viewer is holy ground," but he trusted God to do the heavy lifting. The wall of his office featured a framed picture of the Greek word for "grace," a constant reminder of his belief that he could use television "for the broadcasting of grace through the land." Before entering that office each day, Rogers would pray, "Dear God, let some word that is heard be yours."

Rogers told children they mattered, that they were worthy of love, and that emotions were to be embraced, not buried. He spoke to children like grown-ups, and helped them tackle topics such as anger, trust, honesty, courage, and sadness. "The world is not always a kind place," Rogers once said. "That's something all children learn for

themselves, whether we want them to or not, but it's something they really need our help to understand."

"Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" helped young viewers process stress incurred during intense periods of cultural upheaval. When it would have been easy to demonize villains, Rogers instead forced viewers to tussle with a question Jesus himself was asked in the gospel of Luke: "Who is my neighbor?" While the question felt different depending on the circumstances, Rogers' answer never wavered.

His definition of 'neighbor' was whomever you happen to be with at the moment, especially if they are in need. "The underlying message of the Neighborhood," Rogers once said, "is that if somebody cares about you, it's possible that you'll care about others. 'You are special, and so is your neighbor'—that part is essential: that you're not the only special person in the world. The person you happen to be with at the moment is loved, too."

Mr. Rogers died in 2003, but he made the news again this fall, because the horrific synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh took place in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood where he lived his adult life. At the first Sabbath service after the shootings, Rabbi Aaron Bisno summoned the peaceful spirit of Fred Rogers by donning a cardigan sweater and inviting Joanne Rogers, Fred's widow, to speak.

The Rev. Mr. Fred Rogers was right, of course, that everyone is special. But so was he. There was also no person in the world like Fred Rogers, and given the current state of American television, there might never be again. For nearly 40 years, he entered homes to bandage broken psyches, mend fences of division, and preach peace. Mister Rogers was not just special; to many people, he was a saint. He'll never be offi-

cially offered that title, and he'd probably want it that way. Instead, he has been canonized in the hearts of his viewers—Saint Fred, the patron saint of neighborliness.

I close with the prayer he gave at that Latrobe High School baccalaureate: “May God bless you and may the truth growing within you help you to light up your world and to set you free all the days of your life.”

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