

Fred Rogers: The Good Neighbor*

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 22:34–40

*Title is borrowed from the book by Maxwell King: *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers*. Abrams Press, NY, 2019.

Prayer: Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence any voice but your own, so that hearing, we may be the neighbors you created us to be. And as Mister Rogers used to say prior to going onto the set of his show, may some of my words be yours, O God. AMEN

In this morning's scripture, Jesus is in Jerusalem teaching and telling stories. Just before the passage we'll read, some Sadducees approach him to ask him about resurrection life and Jesus responds with a word of grace and truth and they are quieted. So now, the Pharisees, who are well aware of religious laws and commandments try their hand at him. A lawyer attempts to draw Jesus into a debate about which law of the 613 that were kept in ancient time by the faithful might be the most important. Though rabbinical teachers could indulge in giving summaries of the laws, there was a view that all laws were equal, that ranking them was human presumption. The lawyer in our scene may be attempting to draw Jesus into this debate to get him to say something that would disparage God's law. So the tone of this text begins with antagonism, yet Jesus answers simply and beautifully, disarming them.

Matthew 22: 34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and

with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ AMEN

Had he lived, Fred Rogers would have been 94 today. His legacy of courage, love and kindness continue to inspire and teach us 19 years after this death. In the PCUSA, today is officially Mister Rogers Day, and churches around the country will honor his life and the impact he had on the world.

As you know, Fred was raised in the Presbyterian church and became an ordained Presbyterian Minister, the first to be ordained to a ministry of mass media. While growing up, his mother offered him an example of the rewards, the deep joy of serving others. She was known in their town for her selfless giving.

As a college student, Fred was planning for seminary, but when he was home on a break he saw some television, which was a new medium at the time. He was appalled at the violence, stupidity and demeaning nature of programming for children, and thought that they deserved better. The belittlement of another was one thing that made Fred Rogers angry. So he put seminary aside and started a television show for children, later completing his Master of Divinity in between tapings of the show in Pittsburgh.

After his death, Bob Faw of NBC noted that “The real Mister Rogers never preached, never even mentioned God [on his show]. He never had to.” Rogers television ministry seemed to embody the words of St. Francis of Assisi – “Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.”ⁱ

The person that Mister Rogers was in his later years came out of growth and struggle in his early life, wrote his wife Joanne Rogers in the forward to the book, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important*

*things to Remember*ⁱⁱ. Fred was a heavy child, and teased mercilessly. He was a lonely child, often ill, and spent many hours alone, lost in a world of puppets and make believe. But he was loved by his family and given the opportunity for independence – his grandpa McFeely let him climb the stone wall behind his house, and elderly neighbor Mama Bell encouraged little Freddy by inviting him to make his own snacks when he'd visit.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is noted that Fred Rogers' often-cited, favorite quote, which he kept framed on his wall near the desk in his office is from *The Little Prince*, that sweet story by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. The English translation of the full passage is “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly: what is essential is invisible to the eye.” Rogers became convinced that what's on the surface - the day to day pain, frustrations, joys of life - is not what is essential. What is essential is what is found in depth and introspection, the search for meaning – that truth comes from the heart and not from over-intellectualization of life^{iv}.

In our text today, Jesus names the most essential commandment – love. Loving neighbor is an expression of how we love God – the two cannot be separated.

Jesus wants us to be good neighbors, to look to the heart – and not get wrapped up in the externals - someone's looks, social status, abilities, political affiliation. As a composer, Rogers wrote and performed music for his show, and one of my favorites is a song I used to sing to my kids. I won't sing it now, well maybe just a bit...It's called “It's You I like.” It's you I like, it's not the things you wear. It's not the way you do your hair... the way you are right now, the way down deep inside you, not the things that hide you...not your toys they're just beside you. It's you I like!

Fred Rogers offers us an authentic example of Jesus' words put into action.

An intern of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood tells a story that illustrates his caring nature to others. She remembers going with Fred on a trip to Boston to have dinner at the home of a big executive for WGBH, the public TV station there. A limo was hired to take them to the executive's home. When they got there, the limo driver asked Fred when he should pick them up after dinner. Instead of answering, Fred invited the driver in, to the astonishment of the hostess. After dinner Fred sat up in the front of the limo with the driver, a man named Billy, to get to know him. Later, Fred and the intern went to Billy's house in West Roxbury to meet his parents. Fred came in and played the piano, and people came in from the neighborhood to listen. Years later, when Fred found out that Billy was in the hospital dying, he called to talk with him and say goodbye^v.

This care and attention to individuals was not unusual. Matthew's text of the Pharisee trying to test Jesus reminded me, actually, of the article that Tom Junod wrote for Esquire in 1998. Junod was assigned to interview Fred for a piece the magazine was doing on modern heroes. Junod was not at all like Fred, and he could not believe that the kind, gentle, quiet persona he presented on his show could actually be real. To his amazement, Junod wound up forming a friendship that became the source of the movie with Tom Hanks that was released in 2019 – A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood. Rogers had disarmed him.

The concept of neighborhood was central to Rogers and was an expression of the Kingdom of God. The show, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, was the very enactment of the kingdom, where every person was respected and welcome, every age, color, creed, ability, where all ages felt safe to share their feelings, and where curiosity, honesty and beauty were held in high esteem.

At an academic conference in 1972 at Yale, Rogers said, "Please think of the children first. If you ever have anything to do with their entertainment, their food, their toys, their custody, their day care, their

health, their education – please listen to the children, learn about them, learn from them”^{vi}.

He was committed to truth-telling, and doing so through honest sharing about difficult subjects. He told the truth, helping young people distinguish reality and pretend – affirming and teaching. When four year old Rebecca asked in a letter, “Does it ever rain in your neighborhood?” Mister Rogers wrote her, saying, “Dear Rebecca, our Television Neighborhood is set up inside, in a big room called a studio. Of course it doesn’t rain inside, but sometimes we make it look like it’s raining. As it takes a lot of work to make it look like it is raining in the studio, we don’t do it very often. I like to talk to my television neighbors about different kinds of weather. I know it’s not always a beautiful day outside, but I like to think that we can make it a beautiful day inside because we enjoy having a television visit together.”^{vii}

These last few years, I’ve wondered what Mister Rogers might say about the world today. I imagine that Fred’s heart would be troubled for our children and he would come out of retirement to talk with them, much like he did after September 11th. Tom Junod raised this very question in an article in the Atlantic in 2019. He writes, “I am often asked what Fred would have made of our time—what he would have made of Donald Trump (goings on in Washington), what he would have made of Twitter, what he would have made of what is generally called our “polarization” but is in fact the discovery that we don’t like our neighbors very much once we encounter them proclaiming their political opinions on social media.”^{viii}

Junod posits that what Rogers would do is look for the helpers, and he would try to be a helper, too. He would implore adults to remember the children, and get in touch with the children they once were, for if we can remember what it was like to be a child, we might remember that we are children of God.

Fred’s vision was that our public life – filled with strangers, might be transformed by love and kindness into a neighborhood. As he said, “Frankly, there isn’t anyone you couldn’t learn to love once you’ve heard their story.”

Learning to love God, others, and self, is an on-going process. Lent is a perfect time to grow the practice of daily prayer, small acts of kindness, and deep listening. To courageously tell others that you care, to speak out on behalf of those whose voices have been silenced and to remember what it was like to be a child.

The choice is ours. May we recommit to building the neighborhood of tomorrow by loving people today.

AMEN

ⁱ Hollingsworth, Amy, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World’s most beloved Neighbor*. Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 2005, pg. xxv)

ⁱⁱ *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important things to Remember* (Peter Pauper Press, Inc, NY, 2006, pg.6)

ⁱⁱⁱ Hollingsworth, pg. xxxii

^{iv} Maxwell King: *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers*. Abrams Press, NY, 2019, pg. 50-51

^v King, pg. 19

^{vi} King, 242

^{vii} King, 251

^{viii} <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/what-would-mister-rogers-do/600772/>