

The Gospel According to Mister Rogers

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James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a and Mark 9:30-37

Along with Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Fred McFeely Rogers was an unlikely film star this summer. A deserving one, to be sure, but very unlikely. Perhaps you saw the documentary “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” It was a very moving experience for me to watch, with equal parts nostalgia, wistfulness and hope.

I was a Mister Rogers viewer early on, being 6 or 7 when his national show premiered. My memory is that I watched many, many episodes after school.

That’s the nostalgia, but it is more than that. Fred Rogers was an only child, born to privilege. He was a music major (the music, his and his musician colleagues, is a great hero of his show, I believe). He worked in TV first, in Pittsburgh and New York City. Then, in one of the greatest decisions the Presbyterian church EVER made, he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in order to do the work to which he was so clearly and powerfully called. Though they were not close – each doing much different things in their time there – Fred Rogers was a seminary classmate of my dad’s, who had a few memories of his interaction with Fred. So that’s cool!

His show, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” was an attempt to counter the children’s programming of that era – loud, physical, often demeaning. There was that jazz music, the zip-up sweater and the blue Keds, the fish, the trolley, the Neighborhood of Make Believe with all those characters. It was an unlikely, low-tech hit, a combination of child development theory and entertainment and cultural engagement.

And theology. Yes, theology. “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” was obviously not a religious show, in any sense of the word – nor should it have been. Yet my nostalgia is superseded by both wistfulness and hope when I think about the

theological implications of his work and witness, how he lived out the story of his own calling, and how – most importantly – the enduring messages of Mister Rogers reflect at very deep levels our core faith commitments, beliefs and practices. There are many points to be made. They are all theological, with ethical implications about how we view our lives and live our lives.

The first point is the most obvious ethical one, but needs to be affirmed. His audience...**children**. “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” was a children’s show, broadcast at a children’s hour. Though its messages were universal, his audience was children. He took them seriously, very seriously, with integrity as children, as humans. He didn’t pander or stoop to their level. He raised them up in order to meet them where they were. For Mister Rogers, children should be seen *and* heard *and* valued – as children.

This morning in Mark’s gospel, Jesus continues to argue with his disciples about his impending death. He catches them in a discussion about how they perceive their own greatness. He turns the discussion on its head. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” The debate about greatness is now over.

Then something extraordinary happened. He took a little child from the crowd and “put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...’” Our call is to welcome the child, the children, to take them seriously, to treat them respectfully, to offer them a place of prominence in our religious and political and cultural and economic universe.

That will be reflected in how we interact with our own children and grandchildren, or the young people in this place, and the children of our city and world. There are personal moral implications to this, including our parenting and grand-parenting. And there are broader ones when we consider things like education, hunger, poverty, gun violence, immigration. *Welcome the children. Jesus commanded it and Mister Rogers showed us what that looks like.*

Mister Rogers' audience was children, to be sure. Yet in deeper ways, he communicated a universal vision, a set of values and approaches broadcast in the medium of secular entertainment but formed, I would argue, by his calling, his calling not only as a Presbyterian minister, but as a person of faith.

>**Beauty.** He chose to sing "It's a *beautiful* day..." The movie used the word "eccentric" about him, and I think that's right. But sometimes I think what came across as eccentricity and naivete was really wonder, awe and wonder, at the beauty of things. People. Nature. How things were made, on his frequent field trips to factories. Music. It seemed quaint and out-of-touch, in a medium defined by cynicism and a world tainted by ugliness. But it wasn't quaint, or out-of-touch. It was a conscious stance, formed, I would argue, by faith, that sought to see the beauty in all of creation and express joy and awe.

>**Life is a good and gracious gift,** a gift to be celebrated and cherished. At the conclusion of every show, he sang "It's such a good feeling to know you're alive." He believed that. Our faith teaches that. Your life, his life, my life, the life of every child watching, has intrinsic value and worth. Life is good. Name that and claim it as an affirmation of faith.

>And because of that affirmation, **all have value and worth.** He didn't use this language, but what he was affirming was that all children, all of us, are created in the image of God, and therefore fearfully and wonderfully made. When he sang "It's you that I like and you're special," he meant that as well. I wonder how many children watching, and how many adults eavesdropping, heard that affirmation only through their TV set. But if nowhere else, they heard it from him.

>Life was good, and **life could also be hard.** Mister Rogers pulled no punches when talking about personal challenges, like death and divorce and losing, and broader ones, like racism and assassination. Bad things happened "out there," in the world, and bad things happened "in here," in our own hearts and spirits. He did not pretend otherwise. And rather than suppressing our feelings, he honored them – even sadness and anger.

>“Who is my *neighbor*?” When Jesus was asked that question, he responded with the Good Samaritan parable. I believe it no accident that Fred Rogers lifted up and embraced the concept of “neighborhood” for his audience and for his generation. Whether it was the neighborhood in which his TV house was situated, with a wide variety of neighbors and friends, or the Neighborhood of Make Believe that the trolley took us to, King Friday the Thirteenth and Lady Elaine Fairchild and X the Owl and Lady Aberlin and all of them, this breadth of diversity was no PC crusade, but a true and honest effort to reflect – even given his own limitations – who we are and who we aspire to be.

That broadens the understanding of neighborhood, not to just those who live near us and look and believe like us, but all of us. How extraordinary. Black policemen and little boys in wheelchairs and artists of color – all of us. Not the neighbor as same and familiar, as we would be conditioned, but the neighbor as diverse and unique, living in a neighborhood where we share so much and are enriched as we connect with the other.

Beauty. Goodness. Worth. Honesty. Neighborliness. These were not faith commitments explicitly –the Bible says this so I will find a sneaky way to get this onto my show. Rather, these values infused and permeated who Fred Rogers was, and what he believed, and therefore infused and permeated his work.

There is more, of course. *Times* columnist David Brooks wrote that “The power is in Rogers’s radical kindness at a time when public kindness is scarce,” drawing, Brooks says, “on a long moral tradition, that he last shall be first.” It *is* a long moral tradition, but, again, it’s no accident that those very words precede Jesus’ word about children this morning. The last shall be first. Welcome the children. Kindness, loving-kindness.

The writer Cara Meredith summarized it this way:

As a child who watched the show for years, I think about how he taught me to love others unconditionally.

As a parent, I think about what it means to treat our children as the humans they truly are and to choose slowness for them.

As a woman who is passionate about raising the voices of those who have been marginalized and oppressed, I think about how he broke through barriers...when no one else on television was doing it.

And as a Christian," Meredith says, "I think about how ever single episode centered on loving others and loving ourselves, that we are liked just as we are – that we are loved for who we've always been and who we are becoming."

Inevitably, as I spoke with those of you who saw the movie and as I read piece after piece in print and online, three things came out:

1. You loved the movie and were, at some point, moved to tears. I did and I was.
2. You said "We won't see another Mister Rogers." And we won't – TV was different (only 4 channels), the world was different and he was given a very unique set of gifts that he nurtured fully in his moment. And that's OK.
3. You said "We need Mister Rogers right now." Well, yes, perhaps. But what we need even more so is all of us claiming our gifts, embracing that vision and those values for our moment – welcoming the children, finding beauty, accepting ourselves and accepting others, loving unconditionally, celebrating a vision of neighborhood that is expansive and welcoming and diverse.

But rather than me talking about it anymore, let's sing of it, that it may be so. The words, if you need them, are printed in your bulletins.

"It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, / A beautiful day for a neighbor, / Would you be mine? / Could you be mine?"

It's a neighborly day in this beautywood, / A neighborly day for a beauty, / Would you be mine? / Could you be mine?"

I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you, / I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

So let's make the most of this beautiful day, / Since we're together, we might as well say, / Would you be mine? / Could you be mine? / Won't you be my neighbor?

Won't you please?/Won't you please./Please won't you be my neighbor?"

Amen.