

The Gospel According to Mr. Rogers
"Mr. Rogers and the Kingdom of God"
Colossians 3:12-17

(put sweater on as the congregation sings... won't you be my neighbor)

In 1992, Fred Rogers was invited to the commencement at Boston University, where he was to give the invocation at the beginning of the ceremony and later receive an honorary degree. But when he was introduced, the graduates – who had all grown up watching him on television – immediately rose to clap and yell and cheer for a solid minute and a half, until he quietly and somewhat sheepishly.... said “would you like to sing a song with me?” The cheering only got louder.

So he invited the entire graduating class to sit, and together they sang the theme song from his television show, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*

And then the kind neighbor they had known so well for decades prayed with them, and for them.

Obviously, there is no way to capture all of who Fred Rogers was and how he lived....So we're going to focus instead on how he lived out what he believed – about God, about humanity, and about how we can better love both of them.

As we gather around this faithful saint and the Scriptures he loved this morning, let us pray:

Guide us, O God, by your Word, and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace; through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Fred Rogers grew up in Latrobe, Pennsylvania – he was an only child until he was in college, when his parents adopted a little girl. Fred was naturally shy, sensitive, and introverted, but he excelled in music, and loved to play the piano. He received a degree in Music Composition from Rollins College, then went to work behind the scenes for children's television as a musician, puppeteer, and producer. **He first worked in front of the camera on a children's show in Canada, which was then adapted to become the first children's show on public television in the US.....Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.**

While he was working, he also studied theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and child development at the University of Pittsburgh. He hosted the Neighborhood, as he called it, from 1968 to 2001, when he hung up his cardigan for the final time. When Fred died in 2003, he had accrued too many awards and honors to mention, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and more than 2700 people attended his memorial in Pittsburgh.

Mr. Rogers is as close to a canonized saint as we can get in the protestant world....Fred was an ordained Presbyterian minister and even though he rarely if ever actually mentioned God on his TV show, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, was his ministry. Actually, that's only half true. **His whole life was his ministry**, because Fred Rogers was the same extraordinary person behind the camera as he was in front of it.

I chose the particular piece of Scripture from Colossians because I think Mister Rogers embodies the character traits Paul describes in this letter, and because Fred personified the actions Paul is talking about. In the earlier verses of Colossians chapter three, the Apostle Paul talks about leaving behind all of the stuff that weighs us down, the things that don't serve us as followers of Jesus like: hatred, jealousy, animosity and greed. Then Paul encourages us to put on Christ – to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, and love.

If you ever watched Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, you'll remember that Fred began each show with the same routine – he would come inside, take off his coat, take off his outdoor shoes, put on his inside shoes or slippers, and put on a cardigan. (**Fun fact: his mother knitted all of the sweaters he wore on the show.**)

Friends, in the same way that Mister Rogers took off what he no longer needed and put on something new, let us clothe ourselves with the cardigan of compassion and kindness, the house shoes of courage and discipline, the eyeglasses of truth and humility, and above all, love for one another. That's what it's all about.... the most important gift we can give one another is the knowledge that we are loved, and capable of loving.

Fred was unique in many, many ways – he woke up at 5 am every day to read the Bible and pray for an hour, followed by an hour of swimming laps at the local pool. He never quite grew out of his natural shyness and sensitivity, but rather used that to his advantage as he cultivated loving relationships with children and adults alike.

What made Fred most unique....was his intense and unwavering kindness, and his deep-seated belief that each and every person, no matter how young or old, no matter their abilities, no matter their status – is a gift from God, to be treasured and cared for.

Fred said it this way: "The older I get, the more I seem to be able to appreciate my 'neighbor,' (whomever I happen to be with at the moment). Oh, sure, I've always tried to love my neighbor as myself; however, the more experiences I've had, the more chances I've had to see the uniqueness of each person...as well as each tree, and plant, and shell, and cloud...the more I find myself delighting every day in the lavish gifts of God, whom I've come to believe is the greatest appreciator of all."^[1]

On camera, Fred was known for saying: "**I like you just the way you are.**" Off camera, he didn't need to say it – he just lived it. Mr. Rogers had this remarkable ability, cultivated over many years, to laser-focus all of his attention and love on a single person – even someone he didn't know.

One of his friends, after his death, told this story to a group of graduating college students:

"One time Nancy Curry, who was a professor at the University of Pittsburgh and who worked with Fred on the Neighborhood... was having dinner with Fred and his family at the Saxonburg Inn outside of Pittsburgh. Fred liked to go there because it was quiet. He'd get a table in the corner where he could have a peaceful meal. They had ordered their dinner and were sitting there waiting for it, when Fred noticed that just below the edge of the table was the blonde head of a little boy. Fred looked down, and the little boy looked up and said, "Mr. Rogers, my dog died." And Fred was on the floor of the restaurant of the Saxonburg Inn talking to the little boy about his dog, what had happened, how the little boy felt. And then, Fred was telling the little boy about when he was seven years old and his dog Mitzie died, and how he wanted to keep Mitzie. His father had to explain to little Fred what death was. So, there was Fred Rogers on the floor of the restaurant explaining death to this little 5-year-old boy."[2]

Mr. Rogers cared deeply about children – not just entertaining them or teaching them, but meeting them exactly where they were while at the same time helping them develop in healthy and loving ways into healthy and loving adults. He knew full well that his show would reach people and families who had real issues, and so his show dealt with the things that no one wanted to talk about: things like death, tragedy, friendships, conflict, and even some of the hot-button issues of the day, like race and class. He did this not in a way that belittled or demanded anything of his viewers, but always in that same calm, even-keeled, unassuming way .

Over the next four Sundays, we'll be talking together about how some of the main ideas that Fred Rogers communicated are also some of the main ideas of the Christian faith. The more I think about it and study the life of Fred Rogers, the more I believe that Mister Rogers' Neighborhood is what Fred Rogers believed the Kingdom of God is intended to be—a place of kindness, caring, and acceptance. So in the weeks to come we will be delving into God's kingdom from the perspective of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood.

It seems right to let Fred have the last word for the day:

"You don't ever have to do anything sensational for people to love you. When I say "it's you I like," I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch...that deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive: love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war, and justice that proves more powerful than greed. So in all that you do, in all of your life, I wish you the strength and the grace to make those choices which will allow you and your neighbor to become the best of whoever you are."^[4] AMEN Let us pray

[1] *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things To Remember*, p. 143

[2] <http://www.stvincent.edu/community-events/newsroom/2018/05/21/commencement-address-by-maxwell-king-president-and-chief-executive-officer-of-the-pittsburgh-foundation> (Commencement Address by Maxwell King, 2018)

[4] [4] *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things To Remember*, p. 189. (From his 2002 Commencement Address at Dartmouth College.)