

## Teach Us to Be Neighbors

Rev. Dorothy Boulton

Mr. Rogers Sunday

March 20, 2022

Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:6-9

I had just finished paying for my groceries at the self-checkout at Whole Foods when I saw a mother and her four-year old struggle as they were heading outside. One of the paper grocery bags in their cart had torn completely apart and the contents were strewn all over. She tried to wrap them up again in the bag, but we could all see that this was a lost cause.

I rushed over and took one of my cloth shopping bags that I hadn't needed and helped her put her broken paper bag and groceries inside. "Take this," I said, "we've got lots of them at home." She was grateful and I was happy, too. I was thankful that there would be less stress and more peace in her life as she put her supplies in the car, as she would negotiate herself and her child and her groceries back into the house when they would arrive.

And I was thankful, most of all, that the child would see that people around them cared --that people are kind, and thoughtful; that we would rush over to help one another... and smile (even through a mask); that we wish each other well. I wanted that child to know that we can be good neighbors.

These past few weeks, I've spent a lot of time reading about, learning about the person who did so much to teach us all to be good neighbors – Fred Rogers – and I want to say this about him first of all: his witness and work was so faithful to Christ that I am beginning to feel that there is – or should be – a Gospel According to Mr. Rogers. He was ordained by the Presbyterian Church as an evangelist for children's television, which, was pretty way out there for the Presbyterians in those days. And though he never mentioned God or Jesus or preached a sermon in those shows, nevertheless every message he conveyed was one of love and acceptance, of the value of human dignity, of the worth of every single person – a very Christian expression of the vision of peace.

I have pages of notes filled with quotes from him, from his television shows, and I have to say the man is a missionary marvel. I commend to you, by the way, the 2018 documentary, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" – feel welcome to cry. In that show, his message of love is so profound that it opens your heart – breaks it open – and leaves you wanting to live that way too. Even through the screen, when one encounters Fred Rogers, I can imagine that this is what it was like for people to have an encounter with Jesus – to be fully seen, fully known, fully accepted, fully loved. It's transformative. It's a blessing. It's wonderful. It is joy.

"I like you as you are. Exactly as you are." was the message Fred Rogers said over and over again. It was his conviction, based on his theology and on deep and careful study of child development, that children need to hear that. "I don't think children can grow," he said, "unless (they) are accepted for exactly who (they are.)"

His goal was to help children find peace within themselves so that they can live peacefully with their neighbors.

“Love is at the root of everything,” he said. “All learning, all parenting, all relationships... love or the lack of it.” “Love your neighbor,” he said, “and love yourself.”

One could preach on Mr. Roger’s gospel for many, many weeks. I could share his quotes with you all day. In his words, in his television shows, he offers a visible and accessible expression of what Christian love looks like.

But, where my study of Fred Rogers and the intersection of the text today led me, was to a difficult and, frankly, sad place. Because Mr. Rogers cared so deeply and fully about the emotional lives of children, and saw it as one of his main jobs in life to help children through the challenges and changes of life, I couldn’t help but experience some heart break as I see what is happening to children in our neighborhood – here, and around the world.

First: a Fred story. Fred Rogers knew what was to feel bullied and afraid. When he was a child, he was shy and overweight. He was scared to death to go to school each day. Neighborhood boys would yell mean things at him. One day a whole group of them chased him down the street yelling “Hey, Fat Freddy! We’re going to get you, Freddy.” Racing madly to the home of Mrs. Stewart, a neighbor, she welcomed him into her home, giving him refuge. “The teasing boys went on their way,” he says, “but I resented the teasing. I resented the pain. I resented those kids for not seeing me beyond my fatness or shyness.”<sup>1</sup>

Fred Rogers envisioned the neighborhood as a place that should offer care and safety. A place that offered growth and support and nurture and wholeness. And yet there are so many children who are not safe and not cared for. All of our hearts are broken as we see – daily – of the suffering of children in Ukraine. Children dying. Children who are experiencing trauma of all kinds; children who are fleeing as refugees, separated from family. Children who are totally unsheltered from the horrors of war.

Our hearts break for them. God’s heart is breaking too. When – oh when – will the wolf lie down with the lamb?

“Look for the helpers,” Mr. Rogers told us. It was a lesson learned from his mother, and from his own experience, and he shared it with the nation after the devastation of 9 -11. In yesterday’s Washington Post was an article about mental health experts who were organizing workshops to help traumatized children in Ukraine. They are mobilizing volunteers, putting together resources and networks to help heal these terrible psychic wounds.<sup>2</sup>

I am so grateful for the work of these people who are using their gifts to offer care and relief and hope. I am thankful for all who are investing their time and energy and skills into making peace instead of war.

As we sang in our earlier hymn:

*Jesus, teach us to be neighbors – giving, serving those in need.  
Making peace and doing justice, showing faith by word and deed.*

We may not, at present, be able to do as much as we would like for children who are far away. But there are children – our neighbors a little closer to home – there are children in our own country who need our care and support.

Fred Rogers gave an expression of care to each child to help (them) realize (they) are unique.” He ended his program by saying, “You made this a special day, just by being you. There’s no person in the whole world like you. And I like you just the way you are.” Every child – every person needs to hear and know this and experience it in their lives in real and practical and systemic ways.

Another Fred Story:

In 1969, racism was rampant throughout the country. For example, White people didn’t want Black people in their swimming pools. In his Mister Roger’s Neighborhood television program, ([May 9, 1969](#)) Fred Rogers quietly and calmly addressed these cruel and callous – and stupid - rules and attitudes and showed instead what welcome and affirmation looked like. He was sitting outside with his pants legs rolled up and his feet soaking in the water of a children’s wading pool on a hot, hot day. As Officer Clemmons walked up, Mr. Rogers invited this neighbor, an African-American man to take off his shoes and cool his feet in the wading pool along side him. American TV viewers saw what peace looks like as brown feet and white feet – side by side – chilled and relaxed in that little blue pool. There was even a Christ-like reference - – but you had to know it, and you had to recognize it – when at the close of the scene, Mr. Rogers takes a towel from his shoulder, and gently and tenderly dries Officer Clemmons’ feet.

There are still laws and rules and attitudes that do not make for peace. Currently, there is transphobic and homophobic legislation that is being introduced and passed across the United States. This directly affects the lives of children and their families. In Florida, there is a “Don’t Say Gay” initiative that would impact teachers and schools for young children up to grade 3. Imagine being a second grade child who is told that their family isn’t included, isn’t acceptable, isn’t mentionable because they have two daddies. Furthermore, in Texas, there’s legal action being taken against families who are providing gender-affirming health care for their children. Medically accepted care is being labeled as “child abuse” and people are terrified their children will be taken away from them, or that a parent will be put in jail.

Fred Rogers said, "I think that those who try to make you feel less than you are, that's the greatest evil." The mental health of our children is at stake. We know that LGBTQ+ youth are four times more likely to consider, plan, and attempt suicide. If we care for these children, if we proclaim that "each person is a unique and beautiful reflection of the image of our Creator," then we need to speak out and speak up for these children, these youth, these families in our neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>

*Jesus, teach us to be neighbors, living, loving side by side,  
Hands for helping one another, arms of welcome, open wide.*

At Fred Rogers funeral, protestors from Westboro Baptist Church, the followers of another Fred, Fred Phelps, were gathered outside. They held up the usual homophobic signs, with nasty words about who God hates and who was going to hell. When asked why they were there, noting that Fred Rogers wasn't gay, they countered, "But he accepted them!" Gathered among them were their children, someone noted, looking incredibly unhappy. Fred's heart would have broken for them, he said.

For Fred Rogers, it was always the children. From the moment he saw his first television and noticed what was being considered as children's programming – the jokes and pranks and antics of pies being thrown in people's faces – he said that children deserved better. He believed that this new medium could be a source of healing, of helping children navigate their feelings, and helping them grow. Television programming could leave them feeling welcomed, loved and special. "Children have very deep feelings, just the way parents do, just the way everybody does, and our striving to understand those feelings, and to better respond to them is what I feel," he said, "is the most important task in our world."

Fred Rogers shared the vision of the ancient prophets of what a peaceable world could look like. And he used all his gifts to try to help us get there. His passion for the well-being of children, his music, his creativity, his knowledge of child development, his careful research and study, his imagination and wonder.... helped all of us become better neighbors.

He knew that it was always going to be an ongoing struggle against evil. He had no Pollyannish ideals. "We are all called to be *tikkun olam*, repairers of creation," he said. "Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy and light and hope and faith and pardon and love to your neighbors and to yourself."

Before we leave our little neighborhood – our small community here at Catonsville Presbyterian Church – I want to invite you to help children become peace-filled people, and peace-making people. The children and youth of this congregation need you – adults with the gifts of patience and care, people who care deeply about them and want them to know that they are good, that they are valued, that they are beloved by God just for being who they are. After two years of pandemic, our Christian formation ministry will, of course, be changing. We will need your

help, your love, your time and energy and good will and guidance to be part of that new, evolving effort and vision.

Fred Rogers said this about that song: Won't you be my neighbor?

"I suppose it's an invitation." "It's an invitation for somebody to be close to you. I think that everybody longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is lovable and consequently the greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they're loved and capable of loving."

*Jesus, teach us to be neighbors, working, praying for the day  
When the Lamb will be the Shepherd, when our tears are washed away.  
Ever learning, ever growing, Jesus, teach us all to be  
Children of the new creation, singing praise in harmony.*

(from "Jesus, Teach Us to Be Neighbors", text David Gambrell, music Wil Smith, 2022. Presbyterian Church USA)

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<sup>1</sup> Michael G. Long, *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers*, p. 34

<sup>2</sup> Frances Stead Sellers, "[Mental health experts turn to video conferencing to provide psychological support for Ukrainians](#)", Washington Post March 18, 2022

<sup>3</sup> Standing with and celebrating transgender and nonbinary youth, PCUSA Presbyterian Mission, Advocacy and Social Justice, March 11, 2022, Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns and Presbyterian Women, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/standing-with-and-celebrating-transgender-and-nonbinary-youth/>).