

Jesus, Mister Rogers and the Gift of Children

"Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.'" Matthew 19:14

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This morning we're going to take a respite from all of the drama surrounding the election and its ongoing aftermath, and instead we're going to celebrate the gift of children in our midst. We do this in part because raising up our family ministry is one important theme of our Stewardship season. But there is a more important reason we celebrate children today; and that is because Jesus tells us to. As our gospel lesson today reminds us, when Jesus is in the company of children, he always sets aside what he is doing, and gives them his full attention. So, unless we want to be like his clueless disciples in today's reading, who think they have more important things to tend to than children, we should follow Jesus' lead and listen to what the children have to teach us.

For many years I had the privilege of serving as a chaplain in an Episcopal elementary school just outside of Washington, DC. It was not, in candor, a ministry for which I was especially well-prepared. Yes, I am the father of two daughters, but other than that, I had no real training in working with little people. I remember well how I floundered when I first began my work. "How on earth can I engage these little ones in the good news of the gospel?" I asked myself. Fortunately, I had a wise mentor who took my aside and suggested, "You might start by taking a look at some old reruns of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*." That advice turned out to be spot on.

An ordained Presbyterian minister, Fred Rogers was one of the first pioneers in using the new medium of television as a means for reaching children. Although ostensibly secular, his tv show, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, was in truth a digital community built around gospel values, and the format of each program had the rhythmic grace of good liturgy. The show always opens with Mister Rogers shedding his suit jacket for a cardigan and trading his loafers for sneakers. Yet Fred Rogers is not by any means casual, as his necktie stays knotted, and his warmth, though welcoming, also conveys an aura of gentle formality. It is obvious that he takes the responsibilities of being an adult role model seriously.

Defying all conventions of TV personalities at the time, Mister Rogers' charisma comes from a quiet and unassuming place: a lack of pretense, a willingness to be himself, goofy as that sometimes seems. Mister Rogers was "old school" before we even knew what the phrase meant. The most radical thing about him is an unwavering commitment to kindness and decency in the face of a world cynically intent on devising new ways to be mean.

"Let's make the most of this beautiful day," he sings at the start of each episode. He makes it sound simple, yet we can tell behind his smiling face that he knows just how hard it can be. What we now know from his biographers is that Fred Rogers reservoir of endless empathy came in part from his own experience as a sickly and overweight child, one who was frequently bullied in school. The adult Mister Rogers' answer to those bullies was to construct a reality for children in which meanness is banished and no episode ever ends before each child knows she is unconditionally loved for exactly who she is.

What makes Mister Rogers' story all the more remarkable is that it happens during the craziness of the late 1960s and 1970s. While everyone else is smoking pot, listening to Led Zeppelin and the Grateful Dead, and rebelling

against every form of institutional authority, Mister Rogers changes not a whit, an anchor of goodness in an era of Nixonian deceit, Woodstock excess, the decline of the church, and every manner of social upheaval.

Yet, it is not as if Mister Rogers is naively oblivious to what was happening around him. When the front-page story was about white communities refusing to let people of color swim in public pools, Mister Rogers brings a kiddie pool on to his set, takes his socks and shoes off to cool his feet in the pool, and then invites the black police officer Mr. Clemmons to join him in the water. Mister Rogers didn't sanctimoniously preach civil rights, so much as he modeled love of diverse neighbors in a visual image that carried more power than any speech could. And to leave no doubt about the matter, Mister Rogers concluded that episode by bending down and gently drying off Officer Clemmons' feet with a warm towel, like a modern-day Jesus humbly showing his disciples what real love for the other looks like.

And so too did Mister Rogers teach children about death in the wake of the tragic assassinations of 1968; about the pain of divorce that was ripping too many families apart; and about the tragedy of a senseless war that was taking too many young people's lives. He confronted all of these issues of the day directly, openly, and with a simple wisdom that transcended politics.

But the story that I think captures Mister Rogers' character best is one from the end of his television career, when Mister Rogers received a letter from a young man in California with cerebral palsy. The boy had experienced abuse as a child in institutional settings, and had a distressing habit of hitting himself out of a sense of self-loathing. He often told his mother he saw no point in living, for he was sure that God didn't like what was inside him any more than he did. He had always loved Mister Rogers, though, and now, even as a fourteen year old, he watched *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* whenever reruns were on the air.

When Mister Rogers learned of the child's story, he agreed to see the boy the next time he was in California. And he kept his promise. Rogers' biographer Tom Junod writes that the boy was incredibly nervous when Mister Rogers arrived, so much so that he panicked and reverted to the behavior of hitting himself, to the point that his mother had to take him to another room to calm him. When the boy finally settled down and returned, Mister Rogers greeted him, and said that he had a favor to ask. "I would like you to do something for me," Mister Rogers said to the boy. "Would you be willing to do something for me?"

The boy couldn't talk, but communicated only with the assistance of a computer; and so, on his computer, the boy typed "Yes, of course, I would do *anything* for Mister Rogers." And so Mister Rogers said, "I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?" And the boy just looked at Mister Rogers with amazement in his eyes, not knowing how to respond. Nobody had ever *asked* the boy for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed *for*. He had always been the *object* of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mister Rogers.

At first the boy balked, not knowing if he could do it; but then he said he would, or at least he would try. And so he did. And ever since then, Junod writes, the boy, now a man, keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn't talk about wanting to die anymore. He tells his mother that because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, if Mister Rogers likes him, then that must mean God likes him, too.

But that is not the end of the story. After Mister Rogers related this incident to his biographer Junod in his interview, Junod turned to him and complimented Mister Rogers for being so savvy—for knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself. Junod writes that when he said this, Mister Rogers looked at him with puzzlement. "Oh,

heavens no, Tom! I didn't ask the boy for his prayers for *his sake*; I asked for *mine*. I asked him because I'm sure that anyone who has gone through challenges like his must be very close to God indeed. I asked the boy to pray for me because I wanted and needed his prayers."

Mister Rogers cherished children because he saw them with the eyes of Jesus, as innocent and vulnerable creatures filled with God's possibilities. And the astonishing thing is that there wasn't anything *heroic* about what Mister Rogers did. His faith was a simple one. Everything he ever taught, a child could do, by design. And so can we. God knows that kindness and decency are in short supply these days, but it's not because these things are hard. It's because we've become hard.

Let us follow Mister Rogers' lead and learn to love and protect our children; and not only our own, but all the world's children. But more than that, let us become children again, let us become the gentle, wondrous, open-hearted spirits God created us to be. Let's do Mister Rogers proud, and wake up every morning with a song in our heart, willing to sing, "Let's make the most of this beautiful day"; and *mean* it.

Amen.