

“Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

How many of you have seen the recent documentary about Fred Rogers—entitled, appropriately, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

Fred Rogers, as much as anyone I have observed, embodied the Spirit of Christ. New York Times columnist, David Brooks, wrote in his July 5 column:

“The documentary demonstrates how Rogers’s children’s show got started and how he used it over 30 years to teach and accompany children. It describes the famous opening sequence. It describes how he gently gave children obvious and nonobvious advice:

- You are special just the way you are;
- No, children can’t fall down the drains in the bathtub.”

Mr. Rogers was a rare voice that called for affirming the feelings of children. In a culture in which feelings have become an out-of-control standard for good, he said, “If we don’t let children know it’s okay to feel sad and scared, they may try to hide those feelings or think something is wrong with them whenever they do feel that way. ... If we can help them accept their own feelings as natural and normal, their feelings will be much more manageable for them.”

One of my favorite moments on his show was when he said, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping’, she said. And I’ve found that that’s true. In fact, it’s one of the best things about our wonderful world.”

David Brooks wrote, “Sometimes he would slow down time, be silent for long periods as he fed his fish. Occasionally ‘Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood’ touched politics. During the civil rights era, when black kids were being thrown out of swimming pools, Rogers and a black character bathed their feet together in a tub. After Bobby Kennedy was killed, Rogers gently explained what an assassination was.”

And, I think Brooks most fully identifies Fred Rogers’ Christlikeness when he says, “The power is in Rogers’s radical kindness at a time when public kindness is scarce. Moral elevation gains strength when it is scarce.

It’s as if the pressure of living in a time such as ours gets released (when Mr. Rogers is relating to children, and) we’re reminded, oh yeah, that’s how people should be; that’s how people can be.” “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood.”

Let us listen together for the Word of God as I read the text from Luke 10:

LUKE 10:25-37 (NRSV) <i>Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”</i> ²⁶ <i>He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you</i>	<i>read there?”</i> ²⁷ <i>He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as</i>
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yourself.” ²⁸And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” ³⁷He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Had Jesus come in our lifetime—in pressure-cooker culture, the Samaritan would have been, in the tumultuous 60s, a Black man; in the 70s he would have been a “Hippy”; in the 80s and 90s, an Iranian. At the turn of this century, the Samaritan would have been a Muslim. Jesus intentionally told the parable so that the hero was one of those his listeners most feared and hated.

It’s been said that the 21st century church is closer to the 1st century than to the 20th. Several things undergird that statement: (1) the church no longer represents the majority in our culture. (2) The church was then and is now more likely to be criticized and ridiculed than to be embraced and followed. (3) When it is most like Jesus of Nazareth, the church identifies with the poor, the suffering and those who are treated unjustly and pushed to the outside edges of a society controlled by an establishment that uses religion to justify those injustices.

Princeton Religious Historian, Elaine Pagels, writes, “It always is the winners who write history—their way. No wonder, then, that the viewpoint of the successful majority has dominated all traditional accounts of the origin of Christianity.”

The church most closely follows and mirrors Jesus of Nazareth is when it most closely identifies with, and stands in solidarity with the losers of society—“*...just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*” (MATTHEW 25:40 NRSV)

All of this is going on in Mr. Rogers’ conversations with children: radical kindness; but there’s something even more radical going on. In Tom Junod’s profile on Fred Rogers in *Esquire*, Rogers met a 14-year-old boy whose cerebral palsy left him sometimes unable to walk or talk. Rogers asked the boy to pray for him.

The boy was thunderstruck. He had been the object of prayers many times, but nobody had asked him to pray for another. He said he would try since Mister Rogers must be close to God and if Mister Rogers liked him he must be O.K.

Junod complimented Rogers on cleverly boosting the boy’s self-esteem, but Rogers didn’t look at the situation that way at all: “Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn’t

ask him for his prayers for him; I asked for me. I asked him because I think anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his intercession."

Radical kindness, paired with radical humility: that's the radicalism that infused Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood: that the child is closer to God than the adult; that the sick are closer than the healthy; that the poor are closer than the rich and the marginalized closer than the famous. "*...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*" (MATTHEW 19:24). "*The last shall be first, and the first shall be last*" (MATTHEW 20:16).

In the gospel according to Fred Rogers, children are our superiors in the way they trust each person they meet, the way they lack deceitfulness, the way they can admit simple vulnerability.

Children are superior for their instinctive small acts of neighborliness, the small hug, sharing a toy.

In 1997 a teenage boy in Kentucky warned classmates that "something big" was going to happen. The next day he took a gun to school and shot eight classmates, killing three. Mister Rogers's response was, "Oh, wouldn't the world be a different place if he had said, 'I'm going to do something really little tomorrow.'" Rogers dedicated a week's worth of shows to the theme of "Little and Big" on how little things can be done with great care.

Rogers drew on that 2,000-year-old tradition: "last-shall-be-first". It wasn't just today's politicians who reversed that morality, though they do represent a cartoonish version of the idea that winners are better than losers, the successful are better than the weak. But, the "last-shall-be-first" morality got reversed several generations ago by an achievement-oriented success culture that has moved far away from radical kindness and radical humility: "*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 (NRSV)