

A Child's World

Rev. John Allen

Mark 10:13-16

Welcome to week two in the neighborhood!

If you missed it last week, I am taking the next few Sundays to preach about the life and work of Mr. Rogers and his pioneering television show Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. A show, that was a big part of my growing up, and a man who I think has something important to remind us in this moment.

Mr. Rogers was not only a television performer. He also devoted an extraordinary amount of time and energy to understanding child development and psychology, and he worked directly with children constantly throughout his career.

And Mr. Rogers took the lives and experience of children seriously.

He did not believe that children were simply people who were in the process of becoming adults, he believed that the feelings they have right now are real and worthy of attention.

He believed, in step with the best work in child development that was being done at the time, that one of the most important things adults could do for children is to show them that their feelings are meaningful and manageable.

In an early interview, Mr. Rogers recounted working with a room full of children when a young boy came up to him and said: "My doggy's ear fell off in the automatic washer." And with that the children just stared at him. He says that he could tell he was being tested. They were trying to suss out if he was reliable. And so he took a breath and said to them: "that happens sometimes, to toys doesn't it. But it never happens to us. Our ears don't fall off." And without going any further than that, he says the kids opened right up, and started talking about what they were afraid of, what made them angry, or sad, because he showed them, that he understood them, and was not going to belittle their inner life.

So this is, of course, good guidance for all of us in our interactions with children. Take their experiences seriously. And listen for the bigger feelings behind their words. Help them learn that it is ok to feel those feelings and that it is ok to share those feelings by taking them seriously.

But I think it is good advice when we talk to grown-ups too. Part of what made Mr. Rogers a powerful communicator was that he knew how to speak respectfully to people in a way that honored what was best in them, but that also challenged them, and encouraged their growth.

In 1969, congress was getting ready to pass a budget that would have cut funding for PBS in half, from \$20 million to \$10 million. And Mr. Rogers went to Washington to testify. Listen to the way he speaks.

[video]

That is what emotionally mature communication looks like. And it matters just the same whether you are talking to a 3 year old, or a sitting United States Senator. Deep down we all want to be seen and heard.

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A moment ago we heard this image from scripture of Christ with children. The world in which Jesus lived was one in which children were offered very little in the way of attention and affection, there was very little sense of childhood, and they were mostly just seen as adults-in-the-making.

And so when Jesus was sitting, and children were gathering around him, drawn to him, the disciples first instinct was to shoo them all away, to get these children out of the way so that they would not distract from the serious grown up things that Jesus was about.

No, Jesus said. Let the children come. Whoever does not receive the realm of God like a child does, will not receive it at all.

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If you have ever seen an episode of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, you might remember his fish. There was a fish tank near the middle of his set and he would stop and feed the fish just about every episode.

Usually, it was a quick and wordless transition, walking from one side to another, he would shake a few flakes of food into the tank, perhaps accompanied by a little chiming noise from the musicians, as he crossed to the next segment of the show.

Once Mr. Rogers received a letter from a 5-year old child named Katie which read:

Dear Mister Rogers,

Please *say* when you are feeding your fish, because I worry about them. I can't see if you are feeding them, so please say you are feeding them out loud.

On the bottom was added a note from Katie's father. "Katie is blind, and she does worry if you don't say that you have fed the fish."

The very next episode they filmed Mr. Rogers came into the home in his customary way, donning his signature sneakers and cardigan, and then he stood up and said:

“Before we do anything else today, I need to feed the fish.” He walked briskly to the tank, and narrated himself giving them their food.

He went on to say, "I have some friends who get very concerned when I forget the fish during our visits. And I wanted you to know that even if I forget to feed them when we are together, I come back and feed them later, so they are always taken care of.”

Now that is a beautiful way of responding to a child’s concern. And it is sweet that he thought to take her concern seriously enough to devote some airtime to it.

Only, he didn’t stop there. He put down the fish food, and looked right into the camera and said:

“Isn’t it is good to know that fish, and animals, and children are taken care of by those who can.”

That was his brilliance. He somehow never lost his innate sense of the child’s world. He knew, almost instinctively, that consciously or not, Katie wasn’t just worried about the fish in the tank at Mr. Rogers house.

She was trying to find out whether people are reliable. Somewhere deep down she was wondering what would happens if there is no one to take care of her. She is bumping up against the deep sense of anxiety that can accompany the early childhood realization of how completely you are dependent on people who you cannot control.

That is what Mr. Rogers knew, that made him such an effective communicator with children. He still remembered how to experience their world the way it really was to them, to take their experiences seriously.

He heard not just the words of her letter, but the feelings beneath them. And he responded to both.

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Jesus told us that if we do not encounter the realm of God the way a child does, we will not encounter it at all.

Some people take that teaching as an encouragement of a sort of simplified faith, that doesn’t question or doubt, that takes everything at face value, and is uncomplicated by adult concerns.

To naively accept the surface of a truth without plumbing its depths.

But that is not what childhood is like. How many kids do you know who take everything at face value without asking questions?

Perhaps what Jesus meant when he taught his followers to seek faith like a child, was to let the veil between their inner and outer lives become thin again.

Perhaps what Jesus meant is that our hearts are open to true faith when we take our feelings, and the feelings of others seriously. When we don't callous over everything with practicality and logic, but feel deeply how vulnerable, unique, and beautiful we each are.

To resist the sort of dull certainty that can be so tempting in adulthood, and remain ever open to growing and being changed by our experiences. And to remain in touch with even our most challenging feelings, to not hide them away, and to speak as plainly to one another about our fears and our dreams, as we do about the weather.

Children are extraordinary teachers.

Let's see what we can learn.