

Just the Way You Are

Rev. John Allen

In 1951, a 22-year-old Fred McFeely Rogers graduated from college and had only one thing on his mind. He was headed to Seminary to become a pastor.

It was a fateful trip home in the days following his graduation when he, for the first time, saw a television. The technology had been around for a while, but the medium was only just coming into its own.

The man who we would all come to know as Mr. Rogers, recalled later in an interview that the first thing he ever saw on television was someone getting a pie thrown in their face.

And in that moment he thought to himself what a waste it was for such a powerful new technology to be used for nothing more than cheap laughs and advertising.

And so, in what I would say was a newfound calling from God, he decided to postpone seminary and go into television.

And for more than 30 years from that moment, he became a fixture of American television, his odd and quirky, but unquestionably pioneering classic Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, became a staple for a generation of children, including me. The show was simple, Mr. Rogers would sit and speak and sing to children watching at home about just about every topic you might imagine, and interwoven into these discourses and songs were scenes acted out by puppets in the land of make believe, where imaginative play explored the topics even deeper.

For the next three weeks, my sermons will explore the life and work of Mr. Rogers, to discover what he has to teach us about the life of faith and our responsibilities toward each other.

My interest in this is not motivated by mere nostalgia for the sweater clad star of my childhood. But I think that Mr. Rogers has something very important to teach us in this moment.

Mr. Rogers was often lampooned as a wimpy, goofy, and silly man, without much serious to say, a peddler of good feelings and self-appreciation to children.

But returning to his work it is clear to me that he met some of the most dramatic moments of our nation's history with the full serious weight of the best our faith has to offer. He was a teacher and communicator who almost never sidestepped the difficult and controversial issues of his time, but neither did he turn them into soapboxes.

He spoke plainly, truthfully, and honestly, to the hopes and hurts of children, and by extension their parents and grandparents too. He was, for me, a model of a type of maturity and courage

that would serve us well in this moment: the ability to remain relentlessly committed to principle without resorting to condescension and self-righteousness.

One of the most memorable recurring characters on Mr. Rogers Neighborhood was Officer Clemmons, the neighborhood police officer.

Officer Clemmons was played by Francois Clemmons, who initially found his way onto the show after Mr. Rogers heard him sing at church.

He agreed to be on the show, but only as a way to pay the bills while he pursued a career as a professional singer, but ended up finding the defining role of his career and remained on the show for 25 years.

He first appeared on the show in 1968 and was the first Black person to have a recurring role on a children's television show in the United States.

Clemmons admits that he was reluctant to play a police officer on the show, saying "where I grew up the police officer was the most dangerous person in the neighborhood, they were the ones sic-ing dogs and turning fire hoses on people"

But he would later remember, "there was something about Fred that made me say, ok."

Officer Clemmons arrived in the neighborhood during the height of the civil rights movement. Among many of the iconic protests that defined that era, one was the so called "wade-ins." A sister action to the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, wade-ins involved black and white people together swimming in an otherwise segregated pool.

(bring up video paused on opening image)

I expect that most of you have seen video or photographs from one of the most famous wade-ins in St. Augustine Florida which ended when the white hotel manager James Brock began pouring large bottles of acid into the water in an effort to force the swimmers out.

It remains an enduring image of the violence that marked the dying gasps of legalized segregation in America.

And it was that image that was on Mr. Rogers mind when he wrote perhaps the most famous scene in which Officer Clemmons would ever appear. ***(play video)***

It was Mr. Rogers way, which some found too radical, and others found too timid. But it was his way of making clear the values of the neighborhood, in contrast to what was going on in the world around.

It was his way of showing us what love looked like. The neighborhood was a place where people lived the way we hope the world will be. It offered us a glimpse of what was possible.

Mr. Rogers believed that his part in changing the world was to make goodness attractive, to simply show how beautiful and free a world of justice and peace could be.

In a gesture as simple as two sets of feet, beside each other in the water.

It was his way of embodying the lesson he surely knew from the heart of his faith, stated so beautifully by the Apostle Paul in our reading today, that once we are united with one another in God, there is no longer slave nor free, male nor female, Jew or gentile, but all of us are first and foremost one with each other.

Yet, even the moral imagination of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood had its limits. Because, Francois Clemmons was also gay. And Fred Rogers was not ready to accept that.

Fred Rogers once confronted Francois during a rehearsal, he had heard that he had been at a gay club the night before, someone had seen him there.

“You cannot do as long as you are on this show,” Rogers told him.

Fred Rogers even suggested that Francois marry a woman as a way to deal with his feelings, a suggestion that he took, and a marriage which —not surprisingly— broke up after only a few years.

Remembering this time in his life later, Clemmons would remember how hard it was to feel that this man whom he otherwise so admired, was not able to really love him, just the way he was.

For 20 years, Francois Clemmons performed on Mr. Rogers neighborhood, living in a closet forced upon him by the shows star.

Although Francois said, as the years went by, it started to feel a little different.

He noticed Fred growing, in subtle ways, but he seemed more open than before.

Clemmons has since told this story, that during a taping of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood in the late 80’s, Mr. Rogers was singing one of his famous songs, and got to this line.

“I love you, just the way you are.”

Clemmons remembers the moment because Fred, who ordinarily was looking into the camera, directly into the eyes of the children watching his show, looked past the camera to where he was standing off stage.

Mr. Rogers looked right at Francois Clemmons as he sang those closing words.

“I love you just the way you are.”

“Where you talking to me?” Clemmons asked him after they wrapped for the day.

“I was talking to you, Francios” Mr. Rogers said, “I love you, just the way you are.”

And Clemmons says, for the first time I knew he meant it, and "I collapsed into his arms and wept. No man had ever told me he loved me like that, I had needed to hear it all my life. My father never told me, my step-father never told me, so from them on he became my surrogate father.”

As much as the love that Mr. Rogers offered through his program changed the hearts and lives of millions of people around the world.

Ultimately, it also changed his heart. It changed his life.

There came a moment when the love he felt for, not just Francois, but the other same-gender loving people whom he came to know through his career in the entertainment industry, eventually that love was strong enough.

Strong enough to change his mind.

Love can be a source of divine revelation. It might just be the way that God is tugging at our hearts, the way that the Spirit is trying to change the world.

Love is strong like that. It has a way of ultimately eroding every resistance we build in our hearts, in our communities, in our laws.

In the end, that might be the highest praise we can offer Mr. Rogers. That the man who was widely known as the person who loved us all just the way we are, learned himself to love even better.

That the love he offered to change the world, changed him too.