

Mister Rogers: A Life of Ministry

Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman

Channing Memorial Church

August 26, 2007

It was never cool to admit it, but Mister Rogers is one of my favorite TV shows. Growing up, my friends insisted that Sesame Street was better or the more fast-paced Electric Company. However, I watched Mister Rogers faithfully even when I grew older than his target audience of three to eight year olds.

The half-hour show fit nicely into the rhythm of my day as it was broadcast on channel 2 weekdays at 5 o'clock and my family always sat down for dinner together at 5:30. There was something comforting about the simple songs and the presence of Mister Rogers himself, my television neighbor and friend.

Each show began with the song that Terry just sang for us, "*Won't You Be My Neighbor?*" Singing all the while, Mister Rogers would open the front door, enter his living room, and change from a sports coat and loafers to sneakers and a cardigan. A red zippered cardigan hand-knit by his mother is now exhibited in the Smithsonian Museum. Why would the august Smithsonian exhibit a sweater? In his own words, Fred Rogers wore a sweater "to make it seem like a comfortable time. It's a symbol of staying a while, of settling down for some quiet time together."

Now, you must know up front that even as an adult I have a keen interest in children's programs. Before becoming a minister, I was a preschool teacher. My husband Peter also taught preschool in Providence for many years. Today, Peter works on two nationally syndicated children's television shows "Peep and the Big Wide World" and "Curious George". Some kids from our church have appeared in the live segments for which Peter is the Associate Producer. The children explore basic science concepts through play. For example, finding sea creatures on Second Beach or making kites to fly at Brenton Point. The two shows which Peter works on are very popular and make learning fun. However, in order to fit into a tight schedule, the live segments are short. I am astounded that from an afternoon of filming, the live segments are edited down to only two minutes to fit between the related cartoons.

Mister Rogers by contrast has a much slower pace, exploring themes over the course of a whole week in many different ways from music to projects, field trips, the Land of Make Believe, and heart-to-heart talks. Mister Rogers looks out from the set, posing questions, encouraging you to think, feel, pretend, try new things, care for others, and most of all to be yourself.

It was not until his death in 2003 that I learned Fred Rogers was in fact an ordained Presbyterian minister. He studied musical composition as an undergraduate and was accepted into Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. On Easter vacation, his visit home made a real impact on him. His parents had purchased a television set which he watched for the very first time in 1951. He hated the programs he saw with people throwing pies

into each other's faces but he recognized the potential and decided right then to go into television. For two years, he worked for NBC in New York City. Ultimately, returning to Pittsburgh to take a job with the first community-supported television station, WQED. At the same time as he wrote, produced, played music and was puppeteer for *The Children's Hour*, he attended seminary part-time, trained in child psychology, and was ordained to his special ministry.

Mister Rogers was more than a children's television host or an entertainer, he lived a life of ministry. I chose to talk about him this morning because I believe that each one of us is also called to ministry in our lives. He offered an important message about the purpose of life that I included in your order of service: "The purpose of life is to listen—to yourself, to your neighbor, to your world and to God and, when the time comes, to respond in as helpful a way as you can find...from within and without."

This brings to life the greatest commandment of the Christian Scriptures. As it is recounted in Matthew, Jesus proclaimed "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Mister Rogers Neighborhood never used overtly religious language. However, week after week Mister Rogers offered a steady affirming message about the importance of self-love and being a caring neighbor. One of the songs that illustrated the inherent worth of every person was "It's You I Like."

It's you I like,
 It's not the things you wear,
 It's not the way you do your hair--
 But it's you I like
 The way you are right now,
 The way down deep inside you--
 Not the things that hide you,
 Not your toys--
 They're just beside you.

But it's you I like--
 Every part of you,
 Your skin, your eyes, your feelings
 Whether old or new.
 I hope that you'll remember
 Even when you're feeling blue
 That it's you I like,
 It's you yourself,
 It's you, it's you I like.

This simple song that has stayed with me offers a universal truth—each person is unique and special. Each person is worthy of respect and love. I like you, not for your appearance, not for your possessions, not for your accomplishments, not for who you

aspire to become but for who you are right now. Even when life is difficult, know that you are a special person, unique in all the world. Even when others say or do hurtful things, know that you make the world a better place just by being you.

In order to love our neighbor as ourselves, we must first love ourselves and then affirm the goodness we see in others. Everyone knows how important it is to encourage children, to let them know they are liked and lovable unconditionally. This is something we never outgrow. In all our interactions with people, it is essential that we value them for who they are right now. Truly, we are all neighbors. Fred Rogers illustrated this point with guests on his show. Whether the guest had a special talent or a significant challenge, he would greet them with the same warmth and genuine interest. By welcoming neighbors of all shapes and sizes, he taught an appreciation for all people.

Mister Rogers lived the greatest commandment of the Christian Scriptures not only in his interactions with people, but with the world around him. Do you remember Picture-Picture? The special screen in his living room like a TV/VCR long before that was a household item. Mr. McFeely the speedy delivery man would deliver tapes that would show the inside workings of machines and factories. I still remember the segment on bubble gum which showed how it was made and packaged from start to finish. The big vat of bright pink gum made a lasting impression as well as the machine that wrapped each piece. Whenever I chew a piece of Bazooka, I remember where it came from. By showing the inside of factories, bakeries, stores, and other places in the Neighborhood, Fred Rogers stimulated a sense of curiosity and appreciation for the world around us and the wonders of creation.

There was another reason for showing how people make things. As it is written on the PBS website, “Seeing the factory visits can help children understand that most things happen through a process— with a beginning, a middle, and an end. When they make something, they will know that everything takes time to accomplish. Then they may not give up so easily when they’re frustrated in the early stages.”

Mister Rogers reminded children of the importance of persistence and discipline. For example, during a show on rainbows, Mister Rogers tried to make a rainbow with a flashlight and a garden hose. Of course, this was not possible. He became frustrated and discouraged but never gave up. His neighbor brought over a prism which scattered rainbows everywhere.

This is an important lesson for kids who can get frustrated and give-up easily. However, it is also an important lesson for us in our life of ministry. Good ideas take time to make real. Our first efforts may not work out. There is no reason to give up! We must keep trying to make a difference in the world. Ideas are a good starting place, but then we must take action. Of course, there is a song for this called, “You’ve Got to Do It”. One verse goes:

"You can make believe it happens
or pretend that something's true.
You can wish or hope or contemplate

a thing you'd like to do.
But until you start to do it,
you will never see it through
'Cause the make-believe pretending
just won't do it for you"

“All the guests, from cellist Yo-Yo Ma to children's author-illustrator Eric Carle and Olympic gold medal basketball star Suzie McConnell -- shared their talents and talked about the hard work and practice it takes to do something well.” (PBS website) I encourage you to put your ideas into action. Do not be afraid of failure. What comes to pass may turn out differently than your aspirations, but it is the process of creation and your active participation in the world that matters most.

One of the greatest gifts Mister Rogers shared was the importance of paying attention to feelings; the feelings of our neighbors and ourselves. His philosophy was that all fears are mentionable and manageable. That’s why he had episodes on death, illness, disability, poverty, divorce, moving, and other difficult issues children and adults face.

The only way to learn the lessons that life has to teach and to grow, is to allow our selves to feel and to share our feelings with others. Listen again to these words, “But what if I could know the truth and say just how I feel? I think I’d learn a lot that’s real about freedom.”

In the week ahead, I encourage you to love your neighbor as yourself. You can do this by being authentic about your own feelings and being there for others. You can do this by letting the people who cross your path know that you like them just the way they are. You can do this by asking questions and exploring how people make things. You can do this by doing that thing that you have only been dreaming about. You can do this just by being you. This is a life of ministry, making the world a better place by listening to yourself, your neighbor, your world, the Sacred, and, responding in as helpful a way as you can find from within and without.