

Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints: Mister Rogers

James 2:1-8, 14-18

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It is one of the most iconic opening sequences in television history. No, I don't mean the cast of *Friends* frolicking in a New York City fountain or Bart Simpson skateboarding home at the end of the day. This one was much simpler and quieter. A man opens the door into his home and smiles a kindly smile. He walks to his front closet as he sings, "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood." Meanwhile, he takes off his suit jacket and puts on a cardigan, takes off his dress shoes and puts on his sneakers, all of which seems to say to his audience, "I am stepping away from the adult world for a little while so I can spend some time just with you." He sings, and speaks, directly into the camera as if he is inviting every child who is watching to join him in his neighborhood. Everything he says and does is meant to create a safe place where young children feel welcome and cared for - a place where they can learn about themselves and others and the world.

When it first aired in the mid-1960's, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was a television show like no other. Fred Rogers was a college student studying music when he was exposed to television for the first time. The programs he saw were mostly slapstick comedies in which people threw pies at each other, tripped or slapped each other, all in the name of humor. Yet, Rogers could see the potential for this new medium to do so much more. This was a new tool - a tool he believed would be a powerful way to reach and teach young children.

Rogers had planned to go to seminary after finishing college but changed direction and started working behind the scenes at the NBC studios in New York City. He learned a lot about how television works but decided that commercial television wasn't the right fit for him. So, he returned home to Pittsburgh where he helped to start the first publicly-funded educational television station in the country - WQED. There he got involved in a children's program called *The Children's Corner* as its producer, puppeteer, and organist.

At the same time, he began his seminary coursework, studying during his lunch hour. After eight years, he was ordained by the Presbyterian Church to be an evangelist serving children and families through the mass media. An unusual calling but clearly where God was leading him.

And so Mister Rogers found his vocation – the work he had the gifts to do that served God and the needs of the world. He evangelized not by knocking on doors or preaching on street corners but by ministering to his viewers and their families.

So, why, you might ask, are we featuring Mister Rogers in our sermon series on Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints? This is supposed to be a series about people who took risks and got into what John Lewis called "good trouble". With his passion for reaching the youngest television viewers, you could probably make a case for Mister Rogers being a saint, but a troublemaker? And yet, when you learn a bit more about him and look at the content of some of his shows, you discover that he was exactly that. Mister Rogers made trouble by living out the greatest commandment of our faith - that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

What a lot of people don't realize is that while Fred Rogers never preached or spoke directly about religion on the program, the content of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was highly influenced by his Christian faith.

For example, it was very intentional that Rogers created a neighborhood - in fact, two. There was the neighborhood in which he lived, populated by characters like Mr. McFeely, Lady Aberlin, Chef Brockett, and Officer Clemmons, and there was the Neighborhood of Make Believe with its ruler, King Friday XIII, shy Daniel Striped Tiger, and the unsinkable Lady Elaine Fairchilde, among others. Through his interactions in his neighborhoods, Mister Rogers taught us what it looks like to love our neighbors.

Sometimes he did this with words. For example, he would help two characters talk through a conflict and find a compromise or solution. Or he would help a neighbor express their feelings that they couldn't put into words.

Yet, sometimes he showed us what it means to love our neighbors without using words at all. Take, for example, an episode featuring the friendly neighborhood policeman, Officer Clemmons. When Fred Rogers asked Francois Clemmons, an African American opera singer, to play a police officer on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Clemmons was initially uncomfortable. He had grown up an inner-city kid during the Fifties and had learned a healthy distrust of the police. Yet, he consented as he hoped to show children - especially children like he was - that there can be kind, helpful officers who will make them feel safe.

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood first aired nationally in 1968, the same year that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The Civil Rights movement was well underway and racial segregation in public spaces - including swimming pools - was at the heart of it. Earlier in the 20th century, it became very common for communities and municipalities to build public swimming pools. They were only open, however, to white residents. No blacks allowed. Communities kept the pools segregated in two ways. One was through official means - police officers stood at the pool entries and refused entrance to any black person who wanted to get in. The other was by encouraging white people toward violence. If a black person made it to the pool, they were beaten, dunked, and driven out.

When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, it required that public facilities be integrated. Many communities filled in their swimming pools rather than have integrated swimming. Where community pools still existed, black residents who tried to enter them were still beaten up and intimidated into leaving. When a group of both white and black young adults swam in a hotel pool in St. Augustine, the hotel's owner poured acid into the pool. The law may have changed, but the racism which fueled segregation was still deeply infecting our country.

In an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* that ran in May, 1969, Mister Rogers was soaking his feet in a kiddie pool of cool water when he invited Officer Clemmons to join him. According to the website "Biography", the "two men took off their shoes and socks, rolled up their pants and then swished their feet together in a shallow pool on a hot day. But Rogers and Clemmons demonstrated that a Black man and a white one could peacefully share the water. When Clemmons had to go, he used Rogers' towel to dry his feet ... Rogers left the pool directly after Clemmons and proceeded to use the same towel. Their casual intimacy exposed the bigotry of denying Black citizens access to pools, or any other place in society."

Twenty-four years later, when Clemmons made his last appearance on the show, the two re-enacted the scene as Clemmons sang the song, “Many Ways to Say I Love You”. This time, though, when Clemmons was ready to leave the pool, Mister Rogers stooped over and dried his feet, obviously imitating Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

"It was a definite call to social action on Fred's part," Clemmons said in an interview in 2018. "That was his way of speaking about race relations in America."

In the book of James, the author writes about the importance of treating all people fairly, saying we shouldn't favor the people who are most like us or those whom we aspire to be like. If anyone, we should favor those on the margins. James speaks particularly about the poor but, as was true with Jesus, his words apply to anyone who is demeaned or oppressed by society. People of color, trans people, poor folks, immigrants, gay kids, women, anyone.

Later in chapter 2, James says, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” In other words, our calling as Christ-followers isn't just to say I have faith in Jesus. It is to act on that faith - to make decisions and choose behaviors that are consistent with what Jesus taught us.

Fred Rogers lived his faith - even when it meant taking risks. His love for his neighbor was visible, almost palpable. He believed in the sacred worth of every person and he acted in ways to affirm and celebrate their worth. His whole way of being – his words, his actions, and his behavior – grew out of his faith in the teachings of Jesus Christ, and he used the gifts God had given him - a kind heart, deep compassion, and a public platform - to demonstrate what love looks like in action.

That is what makes Mister Rogers a holy troublemaker. He showed us what it means to follow Jesus - to choose love for our neighbor even when it is counter-cultural, when it's risky, when it might cost us something. To choose love that is active and inclusive, just and all-encompassing. To choose love even when the world tempts us with power, security, wealth, popularity. To choose love - because that's what holy troublemakers do.

May it be so. Amen.