

“In Some Ways We Are Different”

January 20, 2019

Learning from Mister Rogers series – Season of Epiphany – MLK, Jr. weekend

Note: We're grateful to Rev. Amanda Rohrs-Dodge for the idea for this series.

Mister Rogers has been leading us in this New Year and in this season of Epiphany when we celebrate that God comes in Jesus Christ for the whole world. We've talked about the power of “a-ha!” moments when we have new insights about God or ourselves. We've been reminded of the call to love ourselves so that we might love our neighbors and heard Jesus' call to connection. We've heard the invitation “please won't you be my neighbor?” and the call to be in relationship with one another, even the challenge from Jesus to consider loving our enemies as neighbors.

I continue to be amazed by Fred Rogers, especially his clarity about his call to ministry. Pastors do a lot of work around clarifying our call, discerning our call, and being able to articulate our call. We have to share our call story many times in preparation for ordination and write a call statement. Fred Rogers would have no problem. His call was clear.

He was more than a TV personality. He was more than a musician or a puppeteer. He was an evangelist working with TV as a medium and sharing a message of care and compassion with the world. I couldn't have told you that as a kid, but the more I read and know about him, I agree with Amanda Morgan who said she was drawn in by nostalgia as she watched recent programs about Mister Rogers, but she came away inspired to change the future.

The call is on all of us to consider how we're loving God and loving neighbor - right now. I invite you to take the card that's in your bulletin and put it somewhere you can't avoid it - where you'll see it every day at least once and remember God's call on our lives.

Mister Rogers wasn't simply a character, but an authentic way that Fred Rogers could share his faith. He wasn't just teaching children; he was teaching grownups, too. I think of the words of the prophet Micah: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

I never realized when I was watching as a kid that Fred Rogers was a courageous person. He had a heart for justice, and in one of the films I watched, he said, “If there's anything that bothers me, it's one person demeaning another. It really makes me mad.”

I wonder what “mad” looks like on him, but nonetheless, it was something that moved him to action.

We demean one another for all kinds of reasons. Many times, it’s based on differences - how we look or act, where we come from or how we sound, social status, sexual orientation, what we believe, and on and on. We make a lot of assumptions without knowing someone’s full story. We judge before we know anything at all. Many times, differences scare us. We’re not sure what to do or how to respond.

Fred Rogers understood that differences - diversity - were a blessing to our lives and to our world. He was clear that each person was special, and that meant that each person was different, which was a gift. TV Guide said, Rogers “makes us, young and old alike, feel safe, cared for and valued...Wherever Mister Rogers is, so is sanctuary.” Think of it - sanctuary - a safe and holy place.

Rogers was intentional about including people of all races and backgrounds on his program. Earlier you saw the example of Jeff Erlanger, who continued to be an inspiration to many people after his appearance on the show in 1981. He was an advocate for persons with disabilities.

In talking about the song he sang with Jeff, Fred Rogers said, “When I say it’s you I like, I’m talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war and justice that proves more powerful than greed.”

Just this week, I heard Erik Carter speak about the church’s struggle to fully include and celebrate persons with disabilities. It was a powerful call and reminder that all of us want to belong. That’s true for me, and it’s true for you. Carter actually referenced First Corinthians 12 and showed a church sign that read: “We need you here ASAP!” It’s a call to everyone to belong!

Do we hear Paul’s words that way - that there are people who aren’t here who are beloved and whose gifts are needed and valued? There was dissension in Corinth, and Paul was concerned about it. He heard rumors about people arguing over status. He addressed specific issues about morality and conduct. And people were comparing God’s gifts and competing with one another – instead of celebrating how these gifts were to serve a greater purpose – building up the whole body.

So after addressing what’s wrong in Corinth, Paul goes onto to talk about what’s right. God’s gifts are already present and available, but we have to use them! So we’re confronted with that truth - that we are gifted. And Paul uses a powerful and relatable image - the body - to explain how and why we are different from one another, yet connected and supportive of each other.

I'm fascinated by human biology and anatomy. It's a miracle how we grow from microscopic organisms into full-size human beings. It's mysterious how our organs, bones, and tissues all fit together to form a body that does so many different things. We're fearfully and wonderfully made, and Paul challenges us to see how we function together for God's sake.

Frederick Buechner says, "God was making a body for Christ, Paul said. Christ didn't have a regular body anymore so God was making him one out of anybody he could find who looked as if he might just possibly do. He was using other people's hands to be Christ's hands and other people's feet to be Christ's feet, and when there was some place where Christ was needed in a hurry and needed bad, he put the finger on some maybe-not-all-that-innocent bystander and got him to go and be Christ in that place himself for lack of anybody better."

Just like each of our body parts, each of us is vital in the Body of Christ. Transformation – growth and development – happen when we're connected. It's powerful to recognize the gifts in ourselves and the gifts in one another. Sometimes we're so intent on overlooking or not recognizing our differences that we miss the blessing of diversity.

What if we celebrated diversity and gave thanks for it? We are not called to be uniform; we're called to be unified. We're not called to be the same, but we can celebrate common goals and give thanks for how God has blessed us with different gifts.

And Paul reminds us that there's a need for balance in using our gifts and celebrating the gifts of others. We should serve God with joy because of God's gifts to us. Unity in Christ and diversity of spiritual gifts is God's design. We should not expect uniformity – that all of us will look the same, act the same, or believe the same on certain issues.

And I can guarantee you that we don't all believe exactly the same on certain issues! The church is not a social club where we gather with people are just like us. We're not cookie-cutter cutouts, but we do share a common story of God's grace in Jesus Christ! We strive for unity in Christ.

I invite you to see another clip - **SHOW MEDIA: Officer Clemmons**

It was just this year when I learned what a prophetic role Fred Rogers had in speaking to the issues of his time. We know that he tackled difficult subjects and questions from children like death and divorce, but he also sought justice and celebrated diversity. It was radical for him to share the water and share the towel, and I couldn't help but think about the account of Jesus in John 13 - **Project: John 13:3-5 (NRSV)**

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a

towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

I'm not sure if Rogers intended it or not, but he showed the world the power of loving others and breaking down the walls that we create that have no business in the Kingdom of God. His words are memorable: "I think those who try to make you feel less than you are—that's the greatest evil." Friends, in some ways we are different, and that makes our world better.

Earlier this year, Ana shared her learning from science about melanin - the chemical responsible for pigment and skin color. She talked about how ridiculous it is that we're treated differently based on the amount of melanin in our body. Racism is sin. Racism says that the amount of pigment in one's skin determines status and worth. That is not from God; that is a human construction.

Racism and all of the other "isms" dehumanize. They destroy. They separate us. And it's not what God intends for us. God intends for us to be connected and to be in relationship with God and each other so that we might see the blessing of who we are as beloved and see one another as beloved, too. We're called to love wide - to embrace the gift of God's creation.

In some ways we are different. May God help us to celebrate and give thanks for ourselves and for each other - and to work for justice and peace in the name of the One who came that all might have life - and have it abundantly.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE...