

“Growing the Fruit of the Spirit”

February 9, 2020

Faith in Film Series - “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood”

It was 1998 when Tom Junod was given the assignment to profile Mister Rogers as a part of *Esquire* magazine’s special issue on New American Heroes. That’s the backstory for this film; Lloyd Vogel (a character based on Tom Junod) is tasked with the story. Lloyd and his editor wonder together if Rogers is just a guy producing this hokey kids’ show or if he’s really a beloved children’s television host. Is he for real?

I was eagerly anticipating this film, especially after our series last year, but I wondered if more Mister Rogers would be too repetitive. Well, God’s timing is interesting, and I’ve found myself resonating with the title of the 1998 article that sparked the film. On the cover of that November 1998 issue of *Esquire* magazine, the story headline reads like this: **SHOW SLIDE** “Can You Say ‘Hero?’ Mister Rogers, Especially Now.”

That was 1998, but I’ve needed Mister Rogers as a hero for a while now, and this week, it was clearer than ever. In the midst of an impeachment trial and division and courage and ugliness and so much that can make us anxious, I need the balm that Mister Rogers offers. And it’s not just a “good feeling” that doesn’t deal with reality. It’s not a cover for overlooking what’s real or ignoring what’s really going on, but actually just the opposite. It’s the encouragement to feel feelings and express them in healthy ways even when others don’t - family, friends, leaders, and so on.

This film is a personal story based on Tom Junod’s experience of becoming a friend to Mister Rogers and the way that Junod’s life was changed in the process. It’s about forgiveness, reconciliation, grief, the way we live the faith we claim, and reclaiming faith when we feel we’ve lost it. Junod experiences the gift of grace through Rogers and is able to offer it to others including his family, and it’s a powerful witness.

Josh Larsen says that “movies are prayers” where we encounter the human experience - all of the joy and sorrow we experience in this life. Remember that Larsen says, “Movies are our way of telling God what we think about this world and our place in it.” For Lloyd, the pain of family relationships and the need for healing come to the surface when he encounters Rogers and starts to deal with his feelings. Rogers offers safe and holy space to Tom; we might even call it sanctuary.

In the article, Junod writes, Rogers “clearly believed in prayer as a way of life. He prayed every day of his life. He woke up in the morning and prayed, and wrote, and prayed for people.” Rogers had charisma that attracted others to him, and we might call it many things - grace, authenticity, true caring, and kindness.

Fred Rogers used the medium of television to share a message, which was grounded in his faith in Christ. He was ordained in the Presbyterian Church as an evangelist for television. And he used the platform to share Good News - perhaps not with faith words - but everything came from a place of wanting people to know they are valued, important, and loved.

In the film, Lloyd even struggles to understand if Mister Rogers is a character or not. Is this guy authentic? The answer is "yes." Lloyd is taken aback when Rogers listens so intently and asks questions. He's amazed by Rogers' laser focus on whomever he is with - seeking to be fully present with others even when his staff tries to rush him and keep him on schedule.

There's a scene that was particularly powerful and challenging. Lloyd asks Rogers' wife, Joanne, what it's like to be married to a "living saint." And her response is that calling Rogers a "living saint" isn't helpful because it makes his way of living unattainable. I realized that I've thought that way for a long time. Who could possibly be like Mister Rogers? Who could possibly be as kind and loving and gracious and caring?

The other part of her response is that Rogers had to work at being the way he was. So simple, yet profound: he had to work at it! So it doesn't let us off the hook, even though we look at Mister Rogers and put him in a category with those who are simply more holy than we are. All of those whom we admire because of their faith are people like us - and my guess is that they'd say they had to work at it. They had to work at living faithfully.

Well, brothers and sisters, we need to hear Paul's words about those qualities we admire so much. Many of us may look at Rogers and others we esteem as "good people" or "kind people" or "saints" and think that they're just that way - kindness is a part of who they are. But the truth is that all of us have to cultivate that in ourselves with God's help. We get good at what we practice. And this week, I had personal epiphany: I can't depend on anyone else to do this work - to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit. It's God's call in my life and in all of our lives. And it takes work.

Maybe you can recite the nine parts of the fruit of the Spirit. Don't worry if you can't. I know them because of that song. But, this isn't just a list. This is the fruit of the Spirit - not a list that I make for myself, but a result of the Holy Spirit's presence in us. With God's help, we can nurture and cultivate them in our lives and call them out where we see them in the Body of Christ. I believe that Jesus was thinking about these when he says in Matthew 7: "You shall know them by their fruits."

Paul's offering of the fruit of the Spirit convicts us as we seek to show it to the world! And it's important that we read it as a follow up to the other list - the works of the flesh. They are easy to identify, and the list is long. If we claim to follow Jesus, then

we also claim to be people who are led by the Spirit. If that's true, then we have to show the fruit of the Spirit. Notice that it's fruit – not fruits – all of these are connected to each other.

Paul was writing to the church in Galatia where he had started new churches. He had shared the Good News of Jesus Christ: everyone could have a direct relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God sent Jesus to set us free and gave us the Holy Spirit as a sign that we are heirs and children of God.

But there were some issues around what would happen to Jewish Law. Some Jewish Christians thought that Gentiles Christians had to first follow the Law before they could have a complete relationship with Jesus. There were issues around circumcision and eating together. All this was creating division in the Galatian church – not unity.

When Paul heard this, he wrote to them. He tells them not to reject God by trying to earn their salvation through keeping the Law. Jesus died for them, and there was nothing else to do but believe in Jesus and accept the gift of salvation. There were no conditions on God's grace.

They received freedom in Christ. Paul didn't want them to go back to their old ways of trying to follow the Law as a way to earn God's favor. He had been a devout Jew for his entire life, but meeting Jesus had changed how he thought and lived. There was freedom in Christ – not freedom to do whatever we want, but freedom to love and serve God...freedom to love and serve others...freedom to live together in community.

We can imagine what happened when Paul told the people to rely on God's grace and the Holy Spirit rather than the Law. We human beings need rules and order, don't we? Even if we don't think we like rules so much, we need structure. Those who were struggling with how to follow God probably thought that abandoning the Law would leave them without moral guidance.

Jesus had won freedom for those who believed in him, so Paul tells them to act like free people – not being slaves to the law. Then he says that we are free to love, serving one another in order to follow the call that Jesus gives us – to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

If we don't love as Jesus calls us to do, then the consequences are dire. Paul gives a list of sins of the flesh. It's anything that seeks human desire over God's will, anything that causes us to live at odds with God: when we treat our wants as top priority, keeping enemies, living with jealousy and anger, holding up our own ambitions without asking God to guide us, shutting others out of the community. All of this fractures Christian community and breaks it down. That's what was happening in Galatia – the emphasis on human law over God's grace was disrupting community.

So we have this list of what it means to show the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. **Agape love** that sacrifices, **joy** that's not dependent on our circumstances, **peace** that comes from God and lessens our anxiety, **patience** that is God's work of helping us to restrain ourselves, **kindness** that seeks to put others at ease, **goodness** that seeks to be generous to others – even more than they deserve, **faithfulness** that comes from trust and “love hanging on,” **gentleness** that is not weakness but profound strength in the grace of God, and **self-control** that ultimately seeks God's will for our lives and not our own way and really is the foundation for the rest of the fruit. When we seek God's way, then we will be more loving, joyful, peace-filled, patient, kind, good, faithful, and gentle.

At the National Prayer Breakfast this week, Washington Post columnist and Harvard professor Arthur Brooks offered a message I heard last year at Calvin's January Series. He introduced himself saying, “I'm a follower of Jesus who taught us to love God and love each other.” And he spoke to the polarization in our country. His contention is that we're not just too angry, but that what we're really dealing with is contempt. Anger is hot and has a hint of caring with it, but contempt is cold and basically views the other person “worthless.” Brooks' advice is to ask God for the strength to reject contempt and to seek accountability with others to do it.

I wonder what Fred Rogers would say to us - and to our leaders. I still cry when I see clips of Mister Rogers accepting awards and telling people to remember the people who have helped them. There's a moment in the film like that, too - when he invites Lloyd to take a minute and think of all of the people who have loved him into being.

But the deeper truth is that Rogers knew how important it was - and what hard work it is to live the call of Christ on our lives...to pay attention, to focus on God's call that sometimes comes as a “still, small voice” amid a lot of other loud voices, and remember that living faithfully means that we have to work at it. It is our work to do with God's help - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How much we need to cultivate them - to grow them in our lives as a witness to the One we worship and serve.

You have a copy of a *Kindness Declaration* in your bulletin - a reminder that kindness matters. Big and small acts of kindness make a difference and transform the world. Kindness and all of the fruit of the Spirit are a vital witness to our faith in Jesus. Dr. Walter Brueggeman says: "When the Church is empowered by the Spirit, the world finds it irresistible." Can you imagine how much people are seeking a place where the fruit of the Spirit is real?

I offer this word that I read in the midst of this week when I needed to hear it.
SHOW SLIDE: “At the end of this day, the world will either be a more or less kind, compassionate, and loving place because of your presence. Your move.”

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...