

A Child's World

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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 American and Canadian 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.

It is also important to know that he was not a perfect person, none of us are. And his career is also marked by significant failures of that courage. Which we will visit as well throughout this series.

But at his heart, what made Mr. Rogers such powerful figure to so many children was an unwavering commitment to take the experiences of children seriously. Mr. Rogers did not believe that children were simply people who were in the process of becoming adults, he believed that the feelings they have right now are real and worthy of attention.

He believed, in step with the best work in child development that was being done at the time, that one of the most important things adults could do for children is to show them that their feelings are meaningful and manageable.

We begin this series also with an image from scripture of Christ with children. The world in which Jesus lived was one in which children were offered very little in the way of attention and affection, there was very little sense of childhood, and they were mostly just seen as adults-in-the-making.

And so when Jesus was sitting, and children were gathering around him, drawn to him, the disciples' first instinct was to shoo them all away, to get these children out of the way so that they would not distract from the serious grown-up things that Jesus was about.

No, Jesus said. Let the children come. Whoever does not receive the realm of God like a child does, will not receive it at all.

If you have ever seen an episode of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, you might remember his fish. There was a fish tank near the middle of his set and he would stop and feed the fish just about every episode.

Usually, it was a quick and wordless transition, walking from one side to another, he would shake a few flakes of food into the tank, perhaps accompanied by a little chiming noise from the musicians, as he crossed to the next segment of the show.

Once Mr. Rogers received a letter from a 5-year old child named Katie which read:

Dear Mister Rogers,

Please say when you are feeding your fish, because I worry about them. I can't see if you are feeding them, so please say you are feeding them out loud.

On the bottom was added a note from Katie's father. "Katie is blind, and she does worry if you don't say that you have fed the fish."

The very next episode they filmed Mr. Rogers came into the home in his customary way, donning his signature sneakers and cardigan, and then he stood up and and said:

"Before we do anything else today, I need to feed the fish." He walked briskly to the tank, and narrated himself giving them their food.

He went on to say, "I have some friends who get very concerned when I forget the fish during our visits. And I wanted you to know that even if I forget to feed them when we are together, I come back and feed them later, so they are always taken care of."

Now that is a beautiful way of responding to a child's question that I imagine any one of us could have come up with. And it is sweet that

he thought to take her concern seriously enough to devote some
airtime to it.

Only, he didn't stop there. He put down the fish food, and looked
right into the camera and said one more thing:

“It is good to know that fish, and animals, and children are taken care
of by those who can, isn't it.”

That was his brilliance. He somehow never lost his innate sense of
the child's world. He knew, almost instinctively, that consciously or
not, Katie wasn't just worried about the fish in the tank at Mr. Rogers
house.

She was trying to find out whether adults are reliable caregivers. She
was wondering what happens if there is no one to take care of her.

She is bumping up against the deep sense of anxiety that can
accompany the early childhood realization of how completely you are
dependent on people who you cannot control.

That is what Mr. Rogers knew, that made him such an effective communicator with children. He still remembered how to experience their world the way it really was to them, to take their experiences seriously.

He heard not just the words of her letter, but the feelings beneath them. And he responded to both.

So this is, of course, good guidance for all of us in our interactions with children. Take their experiences seriously. And listen for the bigger feelings behind their words. Help them learn that it is ok to feel those feeling and that is is ok to share those feelings by taking them seriously.

Jesus told us that if we do not encounter the realm of God the way a child does, we will not encounter it at all.

Some people take that teaching as an encouragement of a sort of simplified faith, that doesn't question or doubt, that takes everything at face value, and is uncomplicated by adult concerns.

But that is not what childhood is like.

How many kids do you know who take everything at face value without questions?

Perhaps what Jesus meant when he taught his followers to seek faith like a child, was to let the veil between their inner and outer lives become thin again. To take our feelings, and the feelings of others seriously.

To be open to growing and being changed by our experiences, and not making the mistake that maturity means certainty.

Perhaps he meant for us to learn to listen not just to people's words, but to listen to their hearts.