

Just the Way You Are

Rev. John Allen

One of the most memorable recurring characters on Mr. Rogers Neighborhood was Officer Clemmons, the neighborhood police officer.

Officer Clemmons was played by Francois Clemmons, who initially found his way onto the show after Mr. Rogers heard him sing at church.

He agreed to be on the show, but only as a way to pay the bills while he pursued a career as a professional singer, but ended up finding the defining role of his career and remained on the show for 25 years.

He first appeared on the show in 1968 and was the first African American to have a recurring role on a children's television show in the United States.

Clemmons admits that he was reluctant to play a police officer on the show, saying “where I grew up the police officer was the most dangerous person in the neighborhood, they were the ones sic-ing dogs and turning fire hoses on people”

But he would later remember, “there was something about Fred that made me say, ok.”

Officer Clemmons arrived in the neighborhood during the hight of the civil rights movement. Among many of the iconic protests that defined that era, one was the so called “wade-ins.” A sister action to the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, wade-ins involved black and white people together swimming in an otherwise segregated pool.

I expect that most of you have seen video or photographs from one of the most famous wade-ins in St. Augustine Florida which ended when the white hotel manager James Brock began pouring large bottles of acid into the water in an effort to force the swimmers out.

It remains an enduring image of the violence that marked the dying gasps of legalized segregation in America.

And it was that image that was on Mr. Rogers mind when he wrote a scene for the neighborhood show that began with him sitting, his bare feet resting in a kids pool in front of his house.

Officer Clemmons walks by and remarks how nice the water looks, and Mr. Rogers invites him to join in.

The camera slowly pans down from their faces until it is zoomed in closely on officer Clemmons black feet, beside Mr. Rogers white feet, together in the water. And the camera held that shot. And held it. And held it.

And only zoomed back out to Officer Clemmons realization that he did not have a towel. "That's ok, Mr. Rogers says, you can use mine."

And then Mr. Rogers bends forward, takes his towel, and dries Officer Clemmons feet. It is an unmistakable gesture of humility and love, and an unmistakable homage to Christ washing the feet of his disciples.

It was Mr. Rogers way, which some found too radical, and others found too timid. But it was his way of making clear the values of the neighborhood, in contrast to what was going on in the world around.

It was his way of showing us what love looked like. The neighborhood was a place where people lived the way we hope the world will be. It offered us a glimpse of what was possible.

Mr. Rogers believed that his part in changing the world was to make goodness attractive, to simply show how beautiful and free a world of justice and peace could be.

In a gesture as simple as two sets of feet, beside each other in the water.

It was his way of embodying the lesson he surely knew from the heart of his faith, stated so beautifully by the Apostle Paul in our reading today, that once we are united with one another in God, there is no longer slave nor free, male nor female, Jew or gentile, but all of us are first and foremost one with each other.

Yet, even the moral imagination of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood had its limits. Because, Francois Clemmons was also gay. And Fred Rogers was not ready to accept that.

Fred Rogers once confronted Francois during a rehearsal, he had heard that he had been at a gay club the night before, someone had seen him there.

“You cannot do as long as you are on this show,” Rogers told him.

Fred Rogers even suggested that Francois marry a woman as a way

to deal with his feelings, a suggestion that he took, and a marriage which —not surprisingly— broke up after only a few years.

Remembering this time in his life later, Clemmons would remember how hard it was to feel that this man whom he otherwise so admired, was not able to really love him, just the way he was.

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I have a good friend, who gave me permission to share a piece of her story with you.

Although she knew as long as she could remember that she was attracted to women, and not at all to men, she felt the need to hide this piece of who she was from her parents until she was in her mid 20's, when at last, after having graduated from college, she came out.

What happened to her is by no means the worst thing that happens to children who come out to their parents. So many are disowned, thrown out, or sent into dangerous “therapies.”

Her parents did not do that, they affirmed her place in the family, but told her that they would not support this part of her, they would not welcome future partners, attend a wedding, in fact, they didn’t want to really talk about it ever again.

For my friend, almost 10 years have passed since that day, and her parents remain steadfast and unmoved in their beliefs.

A conversation I had with her a few years ago has been ringing in my ears ever since.

“What hurts most” she said, “is knowing that their love for me is not enough to change their minds.”

“It doesn’t make sense that they can love me, and still believe what they believe.”

“Love is supposed to be stronger than that.”

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For 20 years, Francois Clemmons perfumed on Mr. Rogers neighborhood, living in a closet forced upon him by the shows star.

Although Francois said, as the years went by, it started to feel a little different.

He noticed Fred growing, in subtle ways, but he seemed more open than before.

Clemmons has since told this story, that during a taping of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood in the late 80’s, Mr. Rogers was singing one of his famous songs, and got to this line.

“I love you, just the way you are.”

Clemmons remembers the moment because Fred, who ordinarily was looking into the camera, directly into the eyes of the children watching his show, looked past the camera to where he was standing off stage.

Mr. Rogers looked right at Francois Clemmons as he sang those closing words.

“I love you just the way you are.”

“Where you talking to me?” Clemmons asked him after they wrapped for the day.

“I was talking to you, Francios” Mr. Rogers said, “I love you, just the way you are.”

And Clemmons says, for the first time I knew he meant it, and "I collapsed into his arms and wept. No man had ever told me he loved

me like that, I had needed to hear it all my life. My father never told me, my step-father never told me, so from then on he became my surrogate father.”

As much as the love that Mr. Rogers offered through his program changed the hearts and lives of millions of people around the world.

Ultimately, it also changed his heart. It changed his life.

There came a moment when the love he felt for, not just Francois, but the other same-gender loving people whom he came to know through his career in the entertainment industry, eventually that love was strong enough.

Strong enough to change his mind.

Love can be a source of divine revelation. It might just be the way that God is tugging at our hearts, the way that the Spirit is trying to change the world.

Love is strong like that. It has a way of ultimately eroding every resistance we build in our hearts, in our communities, in our laws.

In the end, that might be the highest praise we can offer Mr. Rogers. That the man who was widely known as the person who loved us all just the way we are, learned himself to love even better.

That the love he offered to change the world, changed him too.

Love is strong like that.

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By the way, I called my friend this week to ask her permission to use this part of her story in my sermon. She generously shared it with me again, just to make sure I had it right and in her words.

Then we caught up a little bit, talked about a few other things, reminisced, and then right as I was getting ready to hang up the phone she said:

“One more thing...I don’t really know how exactly to articulate this, but that thing with my parents..... It’s starting to feel a little different.
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