

Peace in the Neighborhood

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This is our second sermon our series: Lessons of Faith from Mr. Rogers.

Last week, I shared about Mr. Rogers' underlying philosophy that the feelings and experiences of children mattered deeply. That the deep inner world of children is worthy of our attention, and that their emotional experiences should never be dismissed but always engaged seriously.

And there was one feeling that Mr. Rogers spent a lot of time talking about.

Anger.

Mr. Rogers once devoted an entire week of the Neighborhood show to "mad feelings."

The first episode in that series begins with him sitting and drawing a picture, and it is not very good.

“I am not very good at drawing.” he tells us. “Probably because I haven’t practiced very much.”

He continues: “When I was a boy and I couldn’t do something very well I got angry about it, I would go over to the piano and tell it my feelings on the piano keys.”

He then walked over the piano on his set, made a scowling angry face, and pounded a dissonant chord.

This was his underlying message about anger always. Everyone gets angry sometimes.

We cannot stop ourselves from feeling angry. But we can control what we do with our anger. And we can do things when we are angry that don’t hurt ourselves or anyone else.

But for Mr. Rogers, this was not merely an individual therapeutic technique. He understood that learning at a young age to express anger in a healthy way that did not hurt others was an essential part of growing up, and one that so many people missed.

It was no accident that he aired his week on “mad feelings” while every other second of television airtime that week was filled with the gruesome details of the OJ Simpson trial.

He sang that week, to children and adults alike...

What if I were very, very sad

And all I did was smile?

I wonder after a while

What might become of my sadness?

What if I were very, very angry,

And all I did was sit

And never think about it?

What might become of my anger?

Where would they go,

and what would they do

If I couldn't let them out?

But what if I could know the truth

And say just how I feel?

I think I'd learn a lot that's real

For Mr. Rogers, all violence was a consequence of anger that could not be expressed in a better way. He abhorred the violence that permeated so much of children's television, noting how shows like Batman would show the moment of violence to children without ever exposing them to the consequences.

Violence, but no tears. Gun fights, but no funerals.

This teaches children that the way to solve problems was to “wipe out the bad guys by force.”

In the puppet world of this show “The Neighborhood of Make Believe.” King Friday XIII, the ruler of the land of make believe was a hawkish and often comically reactionary ruler.

In the very first week of nationally broadcast episodes in 1968 orders his subjects to build a wall around the Neighborhood of Make Believe to, in his words, “keep out the change.”

In episode after episode, the King’s first instinct whenever anything is out of the ordinary is to muster troops, gather weapons, and bolster fortifications.

Time and time again though, he is persuaded toward more thoughtfulness and patience, by his subjects, often led by Daniel Tiger, the tame and timid puppet who was always willing to say how

scared he was. How the talk of war made him afraid. Who wondered if there was something else that could be done.

And Fred Rogers did both their voices.

He understood that all of us individually, and we as communities and nations, have within us natural fear and anger as we confront the vulnerability and precariousness of our human condition. His lesson to children was the same as his lessons to the most powerful. You can do something with those feelings that will not hurt anyone.

Mr. Roger's Neighborhood began during the war in Vietnam, it was on the air through covert interventions in Latin America, through the Korean War, up until the First Gulf War.

And whenever war came to America, war came to the neighborhood of Make Believe, and Mr Rogers repeated the message to children as often as he had the chance. It is ok to feel angry. It is ok to feel scared. It is not ok to hurt people.

Mr. Rogers held this position steadfastly. He was a pacifist, through and through.

And for this he was often criticized by both more “pragmatic” political observers; realists who felt that his ethic of non-violence was unrealistic and fanciful, out of touch with the real world.

From the other side, antiwar activists, including some within the cast of his show, felt that he was not explicit enough in condemning the particular conflicts of the moment. They wanted him to talk about the specific wars of his time, not just about war and conflict in general.

But I think that Mr. Rogers was bringing to the world at war the some of the best of what our faith can offer. A larger, an alternative moral imagination. One that is insistently bigger than the moment.

He believed that violence would invariably lead to more violence, and that teaching generations of children to process the trauma of war

and express their anger without hurting people was the only way to bring peace to the world.

He was unwilling to sacrifice that hope to realism or pragmatism, nor was he willing to shrink it into cudgel against a particular person or policy.

He understood that faith changed the world by everyday bending the arc of history toward peace and justice, not only in the way we engage our government, but in the way we engage our families and our communities.

Mr. Rogers spoke often about the work of making “goodness attractive to children.” Telling stories, and creating media and culture, that made the hard work of peacemaking as compelling as the drama of war, and that made reconciliation in the face of conflict as exciting as violence.

His role, and our role as people and a community of faith, is to be a steward of a larger vision. We should not define our values by who or what we are against today, but about the world we dream of.

And so then the question is not what team to join, but rather what is the next faithful step we can take to bring that world to life.

It is our role to take those steps, no matter how costly they are.

And also to refuse to take any step that brings us further from that vision, no matter how practical it may seem.

“You can imagine my heartbreak” Mr. Rogers told a reporter during the Gulf War, “when I think of how many of the 20 year old soldiers dying in this war grew up with our neighborhood program.”

Mr. Rogers was a minister of the Presbyterian Church. And he was ordained by the church as a television evangelist. The church believed that his presence on television could help bring about the

world God dreamed of. They saw his program as part of the work of bending the world toward love and justice.

But he did not use his show to share religious messages or proselytize his particular faith.

Only once did an unambiguous religious message appear in the show.

In November of 1983, days after the American invasion of Grenada, in the midst of the cold war, the neighborhood did a week about conflict.

He spoke candidly to children about war, about what led to war, and told stories about people who made peace in big and small ways. As the puppets in make-believe narrowly avoided going to war with their neighbors in 'The Land of Somewhereelse' He presented the attractive vision of a world without war, and explored ways people might solve their problems without violence.

He ended the final episode of that week's show, like this:

[video]

Mr Rogers made 912 episodes of the Neighborhood show. Everyone but this one ended with the same song about being neighbors.

And every single episode of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was replayed on PBS in syndication for a decade.

With one exception. The week about conflict, that ended with these words of peace never aired again.

If you want to, you can watch every episode of his show ever made on Amazon Prime when you get home this afternoon. Just not those 5 episodes.

No one has ever quite figured out why these episodes in particular were immediately removed from future release. But someone made a deliberate choice.

They only recently resurfaced on youtube, and that is why we got to see it today. Someone found them on old home-recorded VHS tapes in their basement.

Some part of our world —devoted to the waging of war— understood that this gentle man in singing in his sweater, and those like him, stood a real chance of bending the world away from violence and toward peace.

That he stood a real chance of provoking the conscious of a generation in a new way.

Someone who was resigned to a world at war, was afraid of the power of a plainly delivered message of peace, from a man who meant it with every ounce of his being.

They did not underestimate what a vision of peace could do.

Neither should we.