

Christ the King Sunday Nov. 24, 2019
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It's A Beautiful Christ the King Sunday
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

While many people today call him a hero who is needed more than ever, when he was alive, he and his work were often belittled and hardly ever taken seriously, except by the people whose lives he touched. There was something about him that made people doubt he could be for real, that he must be trying to sell something. He was too countercultural to be believable. Instead of yelling loudly and speaking fast in order to get people to pay attention, he spoke softly and almost frustratingly slowly. Instead of getting offended by social injustices and writing scathing letters to the editor or op-eds dripping with condescending sarcasm, he wrote simple songs and found ways to incorporate his inclusive and peaceful view of the world in his television program that were as gentle as they were revolutionary. Instead of avoiding tough topics like divorce, death, war, or racism, he was honest and compassionate in addressing those issues with his audience. Instead of hyper programming, he took a slow pace to make sure attention was given to the matter at hand, and to make space for uncomfortable feelings and time to talk about them. He was not violent, in word or action. His strength was not in what he could bench press, or how much money he had, but in his dedication to help children name their feelings, and empower them to talk about those feelings, especially feelings like anger and sadness and fear.

By now, I'm sure you have figured out I am describing Fred Rogers and his children's television program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* that many of us grew up with. Growing up, I don't remember *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* getting much attention from the news media or popular culture except in good natured parodies like Eddie Murphy's version on *Saturday Night Live*. Today, however, there appears to be a renewed interest in the man and his work. In the just the last few years countless books have been published about Fred Rogers; some biographies others are books about his faith, his wisdom, how counter-cultural he was, or how he or his television program helped someone through a difficult time in their life, heal from trauma, or grow. There have been a few documentaries, including the powerful *Won't You Be My Neighbor* that came out last year. Just this weekend another Fred Rogers movie came out; this one is called *It's A Beautiful Day In the Neighborhood* and is inspired by true events about how a jaded, cynical journalist formed an unlikely friendship with Mister Rogers that helped that journalist forgive his father who had abandoned his family when the journalist was a boy. My husband and I saw it Friday, and even at 4:00 in the afternoon, the theater was over half full. Throughout the movie, I couldn't help overhearing the soft sounds of crying around me, sometimes people sang along with the songs. As soon as the end credits started, people got up and started to leave, but

then a clip of Fred Rogers himself, not the actor Tom Hanks who portrayed him in the movie, appeared on the screen singing another song, and I watched the people who had left come back into the theater, stand in the side aisle and watch with rapt attention, as if they were still thirsty and wanted to soak up every bit of Mister Rogers they could. It seems no one is having trouble believing Fred Rogers was for real these days.

As people in the media talk about this and other Fred Rogers movies or books, they all say the same thing: we need Fred Rogers today more than ever.

And while it might seem easy to agree with that statement, I am concerned that doing so is to diminish the work he dedicated his life to. I don't believe Fred Rogers wanted to be worshiped like a hero, with people hanging on his every word. I believe he wanted to teach and empower us when we were children to recognize our feelings, most especially those difficult feelings like fear or anger or sadness or boredom or worry, to have the courage to talk about them, to learn to listen to each other with out judgment, and to find healthy ways to deal with those difficult emotions so we would not hurt ourselves or others. I believe he tried to teach us to face difficult situations with honesty and courage, so we when we grew up, we'd be better equipped to live in a complex world that has joy and pain in it. So that we'd be able to find a way through the times we suffer that help us heal and grow more compassionate to our fellow human beings. In other words, Fred Rogers was someone who took seriously the command to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. He understood such love wouldn't spare anyone from life's pain but could be a way to navigate those painful times in life.

Fred Rogers understood what it means to be at the foot of the cross, which is where we find ourselves in this morning's Gospel. This might seem like an odd or inappropriate Gospel this morning, as today we are celebrating Christ the King. When we think about what it means that Jesus is the ruler of creation, the messiah, God's Son, and our lord and savior the crucifixion might not seem to fit. Perhaps we'd rather see Jesus preaching his triumphant sermon on the mount, or feeding 5000 people, or a dramatic healing, or perhaps calming a storm at sea. Those images might seem more king-like to us than the crucifixion where the references of Jesus as king are pure mockery intended to shame him and remind the world who their idea of who the "real" king is so no other smart aleck gets too uppity or rebellious and acts out. The cross is a painful image to face, one usually reserved for Good Friday. And I know many people who avoid coming to church on Good Friday simply because they don't want to face such a painful, disturbing image.

But – disturbing or not – that is what the Church itself has chosen for today’s celebration of Christ the King Sunday. Perhaps because in the midst of that pain, the torture, the mockery, the power-plays, the suffering there is something else present. Salvation. Liberation. Reconciliation. Because in Jesus we have God with Us. God came to be with us to repair the breach in the relationship between us and God and in so doing did not avoid any of the painful parts of human life. Jesus experienced family dysfunction, he experienced rejection, and he experienced injustice. His life and death and resurrection show us liberation does not come from far away; nor can reconciliation happen without vulnerability, and unjust systems can’t be changed from the outside. And salvation isn’t a knight on a horse, or a hero with a big gun; salvation is God’s power that doesn’t over-power evil but uses the energy of evil against itself.

Perhaps the cross isn’t such an inappropriate Gospel lesson for today. Because through Jesus’ life and death and resurrection he has upended what we usually think of when it comes to kingdoms and kings. Jesus as our king shows a God who loves us so much, God did not distance God’s-self from even our worst most painful parts of life. And in Jesus’ words on the cross we heard today, he reveals those moments for what they are: moments when we act out of our ignorance and fear – not knowing what we do. And Jesus our king forgives our ignorance and our fear because forgiveness is how the life of heaven and earth can be present here and now. That’s salvation.

The life and work of Fred Rogers reminds us what any of our lives can look like when we embrace and follow Jesus as our king. It means putting our trust in that life of heaven no matter what, even when things are bad or hard or unjust. If we just look to Mr. Rogers to do that work for us, we miss the point that Mr. Rogers wasn’t the only one saved, we all are. We can learn from Mr. Rogers and put what he taught into practice. My favorite part of the newest movie, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* is when Fred Rogers met the journalist’s father. The man was dying and trying to reconcile with his son. Fred was invited to spend a little time with the family, an invitation he accepted, and when he left the gathering, he said goodbye to the journalist’s father and whispered something in his ear. When the journalist asked Fred what he said, Fred replied, “I asked him to pray for me. I figure anyone who is suffering so much must be closer to God.”

Embracing Christ as our king also means we aren’t king of our lives, and that scene reminded me of that truth and that when we celebrate Christ our King, he shows that some kinds of suffering can be redemptive. We need to be careful not confuse abusive suffering as redemptive, but we also need to learn to distinguish other kinds of suffering for the potential life of heaven we can find on the other side of the suffering. One way to do this is just what Mister Rogers taught us: learn to name our feelings,

have the courage to talk about those feelings, and find ways to work through those feelings that do no harm and in so doing learn to face our world and its important issues without being blinded by anger, fear, or sadness.

After the terrible tragedy of September 11, 2001, Mr. Rogers came out of retirement to give a series of public service announcements. This time it was to us grown ups who were afraid, angry, and confused. At the time, his unflappable, calm communication proved to be an anchor that could remind us the lessons we learned as children applied even in that situation. His words weren't just comfort, they were also a call to action, to not let the fear we were feeling go unspoken or to let it keep us from being the good neighbor he taught us to be, a neighbor that is also an image of Jesus. So, on this Christ the King Sunday, perhaps Mr. Rogers' words from those public service announcements are perhaps the best ones for us:

“No matter what our particular job, we are all called to be ‘tikkum olam’, repairers of creation. Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are, to bring joy and light and hope and faith and pardon and love to your neighbor and to yourself.”