

**SERMON**  
**April 28, 2024, First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield**  
**Title: "To Such As These"     Dan Crump**

The second scripture reading is from the gospel called Matthew, chapter 19, verses 13-15.

"Then little children were being brought to [Jesus]  
in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray.  
The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them,  
but Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me,  
and do not stop them;  
for it is **to such as these** that  
the kingdom of heaven belongs.'  
And he laid his hands on them and went on his way."

For the word of God in scripture,  
for the word of God within us,  
for the word of God among us,

**Thanks be to God.**

I am a shameless fan of Mister Fred Rogers, although my generation did not grow up in his neighborhood. We watched Captain Kangaroo and any number of violent cartoons and pie-in-the-face comedians. We were taught that cardboard-boxed sugar nuggets were "the most important meal of the day," and heavily processed burgers and fries by the millions and millions was somehow food. We learned the lesson well. For my generation, Mister Rogers was a joke, courtesy of late night television. And we laughed and laughed, never wondering if the joke wasn't actually on us.

I discovered The Neighborhood just as my career in theater set design was poised to take off. I'd had the great fortune to achieve some measure of success with the support of good friends who knew me, and trusted me, along with the ignorance of how rare and special being known and being trusted was. I had been hired to design a set for Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" for the summer opera season in Cleveland, Ohio, a decisive and necessary career move outside the safe but fertile bubble I had taken for granted. It was all expectation and no support, and I was terrified.

Staring at my drafting board one afternoon, exhausted, desperately hoping that inspiration would somehow overcome my fearful perspiration, I switched on the tv and there was Mister Rogers, making something with construction paper, and talking directly to me, his television neighbor. The set was simple, the puppets were primitive, the content was clearly meant for the youngest of children, and, may I not be frank, it was a little weird. But it was clear, cohesive, and intentional, and this slow talking fellow clearly had the support of a dedicated and talented team of production and funding professionals.

I had grown up loving a snarky comedy bit that had an ultra-square imitation of "Mr Rogers" talking to a half-hungover/half-high jazz musician about fast food egg-a-muffins, but the music I was hearing in the background was incredibly sophisticated and virtuosic. I would eventually learn that Johnny Costa, the neighborhood's music director, was an established jazz

pianist once given the title, "The White Art Tatum," by . . . jazz great, Art Tatum. Joe "Handyman" Negri, another musical neighbor, taught jazz guitar at the University of Pittsburgh, the first college to offer jazz guitar, for 49 years. There was something very, very serious, yet profoundly simple, going on in this neighborhood.

My experience in Cleveland, which was very hard for me, would teach me the difference between making a name for myself in a competitive, zero-sum world, and defining success and failure in the company of people who know me and love me for who I already am. I learned which world I wanted to live in and which one to entrust to my own "neighborhood of make-believe." It is difficult to imagine where my Cleveland experience would have left me if I had not turned the tv on that day.

Fred Rogers was born in 1928 in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, one year before the stock market crash that wiped out the accumulated wealth of millions and set the course for the Great Depression. The Rogers family had been among the wealthiest in the region and emerged with the family fortune intact. They were faithful members of Latrobe Presbyterian Church which was founded in 1852 as a mission to immigrant workers and still takes its mission roots very seriously. Fred's mom, Nancy, was instrumental in organizing other Latrobe churches in order to locate and respond to need in the community, often responding to that need with the family's funds. The family's faith and philanthropy would dominate Fred's early life.

While growing up well aware of his family's positive influence, Fred himself grew up over-sheltered, over-fed, and isolated from the common childhood experiences of his peers. The family made many trips to New York City to see shows, concerts, museums, and other cultural extravagances. To make matters worse, Fred suffered from many childhood ailments, including asthma, which often kept him housebound. He would spend hours alone, creating worlds and growing adept at expressing the many voices of his private drama through puppets.

Just before his tenth birthday, Fred's grandmother responded to a rare request: a piano. She allowed him to shop for it himself and he selected a second-hand Steinway concert grand. The music store staff were stunned to see a ten year old walk in with a check, adjusted to today's dollars, for Fifty Thousand Dollars, the full price of the piano. That very piano accompanied him throughout his entire life and, when he died in 2003, it was bequeathed by his wife, Joanne, to the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media at St Vincent College in Latrobe. His grandfather and namesake, Fred McFeely, provided his own encouragement with what would become a signature phrase, "You have made this day very special, just by being who you are."

Further transformation came in high school. His mother learned that the school sports star, Jim Stumbaugh, had been injured in a game and was laid up in the hospital. She recommended that Fred volunteer to bring school assignments and catch him up on studies. Fred did, and he and Jim became the best of friends. Returning to school, Jim vouched for him to his other friends and helped shy, introverted Fred find the confidence to become the school newspaper editor and, eventually, class president.

Fred wowed his classmates at Rollins College and charmed Joanne Byrd, the love of his life. "We loved his playing," she wrote. "Few of our small group could play the jazz and popular songs of the day with so much ease and grace. And he could play the classics, too!" He graduated with honors with a degree in music composition. Seminary would have been next, but he saw his first television on a visit to home and was both fascinated at its potential for education and ministry, and appalled at the crass and cruel, low-grade comedy he saw being directed at kids. Seminary would wait; he took a job at NBC and gained valuable practical experience in television production.

News of a group in Pittsburgh starting the first public-supported television station in the US, what would become WQED, offered the opportunity to realize the dream of developing children's programming that fulfilled television's promise he had seen from the start, that would be free from the need to sell either its own content or a sponsor's products to its easily manipulated audience. Fred, from the beginning of his career all the way to the end, was vehemently opposed to marketing to young children. He easily left the promise of a successful career at NBC for a station that had not yet even gone on air.

I think this career turn reflects the raw and profound authenticity of Mister Rogers as much as anything. Remember, Fred began life convinced his delicate and dependent young life was utterly eclipsed by the charity and influence of his family's wealth, but discovered, through the impact of just a few people, his grandparents, the high school sports hero, his wife, Joanne, that his true worth was not defined by possessions or accomplishments, that it was from God, that it could not be taken away, and that it was immeasurable. In a sense, he had already lived the shift from having to prove himself to having to be himself.

While working at WQED, Mister Rogers attended Pittsburgh Theological Seminary where he met Dr. Margaret McFarland, a foremost expert in childhood development. Dr. McFarland would become Mister Rogers' most important collaborator until her death in 1988. She helped him express his conviction that kids are not just little adults, but that they have their own hopes and fears, and lessons to learn, and growing to do that adults usually forget they have put behind them, sometimes without learning those lessons themselves. The most important message he would have for parents is to remember what their childhood was like. "There is a child in me still," he would say, "And sometimes not so still."

Seminary took eight years, but Fred graduated, once again, with honors. Ordination in the Presbyterian Church requires installation as a pastor in a local church and the Presbytery elders were not inclined to make an exception. A seminary friend, Dr. Bill Barker invited himself to the Presbytery meeting, made the plea for Fred's ordination, and the elders relented. Mister Rogers became the first ordained Presbyterian pastor ever to ministry to the needs of children through the media of television. In thirty years of television ministry to children, Mister Rogers fulfilled that ordination without ever having to say the word, 'God.'

There were detours and dead-ends on the road to creating Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. He had left behind the money fountain created by marketing garbage food and disposable toys to kids. Money would become scarce, perhaps for the first time for Fred. Tight budgets would have the last word on any artistic ambitions. If you have not seen the Youtube video of Mister Rogers testifying before Senator John Pastore's 1969 hearing on funding for

public television, you might not be aware of the steely resolve of Fred's conviction that kids needed this alternative, especially in the world in which they were growing up. His kind, sincere, yet insistent presence won over the tough, cynical senator in barely ten minutes after an hours-long stream of executives had been summarily dismissed.

His biographer, Maxwell King, tells of the time Fred excitedly brought a video home to show his teenaged sons. He had early access to a comedy program the public network was considering, a certain six-man "Flying Circus" from England. Fred loved whimsical humor, the more ridiculous the better. Knowing there is a line connecting the Neighborhood with the silliest of comedy shows, I can appreciate how the quirky weirdness of his imagination, which was always rendered safe for small people, reflected his love of laughter. And I wonder if we all got to see Monty Python in part because Fred liked them first.

Our scripture selections illustrate two of the many legacies Mister Rogers bequeathed us. First, as Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Human development is often described as stages of increasing complexity. Tiny humans begin with the need to trust the ones who love them so they can learn to love what is right. Older children can learn how to love hard work and the success it brings. Young adults can learn to love fairness and justice, to not just accept the rules but the right rules. But that first one built on trust and learning what is right, the one that Fred Rogers focused a life of service to, is critical for all the rest. It is truly the foundation of the best we were created to be. We don't want kids to learn to love winning before they learn to love the rules, otherwise they will learn that it is okay to lie and cheat as long as you win. And we don't want kids to suspect that the rules are not fair before they learn in love what it means, what it costs, to break them.

The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these, the ones who have reason, yes, *reason*, to trust that they are loved as if they were little children who have not yet achieved success, or tasted failure. It can be learned early-on from parents, or it can come to adults as a blinding surprise, as God's awesome love suddenly breaks through the mess and proves to them that they are in fact loved and always have been. One is life-establishing and one is life-changing, but they are one in the same. This is why Mister Rogers' message resonates with both tiny children and crusty old adults who have been given eyes to see.

The second legacy is the shift away from "Who do you say that I am?," that haunting question that asks others to label us and demand that we prove our own worth, to the unswayable, undying assurance that not even the title, "Messiah," the one and only who comes with the singular mandate of the Creator, comes close to capturing the unfathomable, "once-in-the-infinity-of-all-time-and-space" unique special-ness of you. You can't win it, you can't earn it, and you can't lose it. It is who you are. It is the 'special' that God created you to be. And it is the 'exactly' that people can like about you. When you know it, you can love them exactly as they are, too.