

WITH LOVING ABANDON

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Rally Day, September 16, 2018

Lectionary Reading: Luke 10: 25-37.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mr. Rogers Visits Our Church, Spills the Beans, Reveals His Many Anxieties to a Psychiatrist

In the guise of Mr. Rogers, our world traveler temporarily returned to home base for a short time only to surprise us with more frequent and longer disappearances without asking our approval. This time, he entered singing as though at home with nothing to do but to change from his outdoor spiffiness into a cardigan sweater and loafers. “Oh, goodness, I’ve been more nervous about that than anything. But thank you. It’s good to be back,” he said, while dreams of shedding his heavy schedule of sermons must have harbored in his mind.

“I’ve had a marvelous sabbatical, and there are stories to tell, of course, for another time.” As you are aware, we thought the tribute to Mr. Rogers would be an appropriate theme for Rally Day —gathering together again after the summer break.

There’s a version of this show that actually began five years earlier, in 1963, on a tiny network, but it was picked up by PBS in February of 1968. And so that’s why 2018 is the Golden Anniversary. Personally, I’m

more of the Captain Kangaroo generation, a little older, but “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood” surpassed “Captain Kangaroo” in popularity a long time ago. Then in turn, it was surpassed by “Sesame Street.” The cardigan, by the way, is on display at the Smithsonian Institution. I have not seen it, but in my imagination, it’s just down the hallway from the set for “All in the Family” with the two chairs, which I have seen — things that have to do with our culture over time.

Two documentaries have been produced on Mr. Rogers a number of years ago. The first is called “Mr. Rogers and Me,” and the other one was in celebration of his Golden Anniversary, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” In those documentaries, we learned more about Fred Rogers the man, his anxieties, the fact that he needed to see a psychiatrist on a regular basis to deal with his anxieties. We learn that he was born wealthy. His father was a rather successful businessman. His mother was an heiress from one of the Pittsburgh industrialists, so there was serious money there, to the point that his mother was a very generous soul. She gave out about 1,500 Christmas gifts every year to the various students in the schools where her

sons attended, such that the school nurse in the elementary school in Altoona would buy shoes, clothes, eyeglasses, even sometimes furniture, and she would just have the bill sent to Mrs. Rogers.

They lived on Mellon Street, after Andrew Mellon. The young Mr. Rogers, Fred, had a serious gift, and it's always wonderful when a person uses whatever their gift is for the benefit of humanity. His gift was that not only could he think like an adult — after all, he ran a TV show, he ran a business, he hired people, he wrote the music, he did the narration — but he also had the ability to think like a child. Remember that this show was picked up in February of 1968. That was a really tumultuous time. Racism, Vietnam war, assassinations, and he had the ability to address the anxieties and the fears, the worry, the questions of little kids.

The Four Lessons of Major Themes of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood Was Love

And so this morning, there was a banner over the pulpit that says, "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," the theme song of Mr. Rogers' show. In addition to my little skit opening the sermon, Judy Garnar will be peppering some of his quotes throughout the worship service. What I would like to do with the sermon is to point out four themes. There are many, but I chose four that I felt are particularly meaningful from his life, from his words, and from his TV show. The four lessons:

- I. The first one is: **"Stand up for What You Believe in!"** Only at the one-year mark, after the show had

been picked up for PBS in 1968, in 1969, Nixon proposed to cut the funding for public television in half. After all, we had a war effort and needed money for the war, and Mr. Rogers was being grilled by a Senate subcommittee on the budget, and one senator with the last name of Pastore asked:

Senator Pastore: "I'd like to see the program itself, or any one of them." And Mr. Rogers replied:

Mr. Rogers: "We made a hundred programs for EEN, the Eastern Educational Network, and then when the money ran out, people in Boston and Pittsburgh and Chicago all came to the fore and said we've got to have more of this neighborhood expression of care. And this is what I give. I give an expression of care every day to each child, to help him realize that he is unique. I end the program by saying, 'You've made this day a special day, by just your being you. There's no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are.' I feel that if we in public television can only make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service for mental health. I think it's much more dramatic that two men could be working out their feelings of anger — much more dramatic than showing something of gunfire. I'm constantly concerned about what our children are seeing, and for 15 years I have tried in this country and

Canada to present what I feel is a meaningful expression of care.”

As your pastor, may I suggest to you that that phrase, “a meaningful expression of care” was Fred’s prime directive. Everything revolves around that phrase in his life.

Senator Pastore: “Do you narrate it?”

Mr. Rogers: “I’m the host, yes. And I do all the puppets and I write all the music, and I write all the scripts”

Senator Pastore: “Well, I’m supposed to be a pretty tough guy, and this is the first time I’ve had goose bumps for the last two days.”

And then the funding was indeed restored.

- II. The second lesson, equally important, is: **“We Can Work to Make a Difference Right Where We Are!”** Michael G. Long published a book about Mr. Rogers called *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Counter-cultural Mister Rogers*. In it, he said that Fred’s work for the greater good did not take the form of marching, rallying, or picketing. He occasionally wrote a note to a member of Congress, and of course he testified before that Senate subcommittee.

More often, however, Fred did his work in and through his own context. He didn’t march against Jim Crow; rather, he cast black actors on his

program. He didn’t travel to Birmingham or Selma in support of integration; instead (now think of this in 1968), he set up a wading pool and invited Officer Clemmons (played by black gay actor François Clemmons) to soak his feet in it with him and share his towel. (This happened not that long after separate drinking fountains and separate swimming pools and riding in the back of the bus.)

Marching, writing, calling, and organizing are all good ways to make change, but Fred’s life reminds us that we can work for the well-being of the most vulnerable persons wherever we may be, in whatever work we may do. In other words, he once told an audience, “There are many ways to say, ‘I love you.’”

- III. The third and the fourth lessons are the ones that are the most important to me in particular. The third one is called simply: **“We Are Neighbors!”** Mister Rogers didn’t call us acquaintances or friends; he didn’t call us boys and girls or ladies and gentlemen. He called us neighbors.

“Neighbor” is biblical language, which Fred knew well. The Hebrew Bible instructs God’s people to “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Leviticus 19: 18). And in the New Testament, Jesus discusses this commandment with a legal ex-

pert who is trying to lay a conversational trap for him (Luke 10: 25-37).

“And who is my neighbor?” the scholar asks, like a sly Thanksgiving table guest or a social media troll.

And Jesus answers, like Mister Rogers might, with a story:

In the story, a man on the road is beaten by thieves and left to die. A priest — a powerful man, both religiously and politically — approaches, sees the injured man, and crosses to the other side of the road to avoid helping. Another religious leader does the same. Finally, someone else comes down the road, someone who is of the wrong class or the wrong color, a member of a despised group. He is on a journey, but he stops. He is moved with compassion and tends the injured man, takes him to an inn, and pays for his lodging and care.

“What do you think?” Jesus asks this tricky guy. “Which one of these three was a neighbor?”

And though perhaps he can’t believe he is saying so, the scholar answers, “The one who demonstrated mercy toward the injured person.”

You probably knew this, but you might have forgotten it. Martin Luther King referenced this story in his “I’ve Been to the Moutaintop” speech on the day before his death, and he had been to Jerusalem and had been on that road. This para-

graph of his speech describes the road:

“As soon as we got on that road, I said to my wife, ‘I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable.’ It’s a winding, meandering road In the days of Jesus, it came to be known as the ‘Bloody Pass.’ And you know, it’s possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it’s possible that the man on the ground was merely faking, and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to seize them for a quick and easy robbery. And so the first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’”

When Mister Rogers called us neighbors, when he hosted us in his own Neighborhood for over 30 years, he was calling us — gently but firmly — out of our structures of power, out of all the myriad ways we use to classify ourselves, and he was calling us into a neighborhood, into lives of mercy, meaningful expressions of care for one another.

Admittedly, he was optimistic. Maybe he was calling us to something better than we actually were. But maybe he believed that if he got to us while we were young, if he told us as kids again and again that we

were good, that we were lovable, and that we could extend mercy, maybe we could grow into real neighbors to one another.

IV. And then the final lesson, probably the hardest. After all the years, many people don't get this one at all. The fourth lesson is: **“Just Being You Is Enough!”** How many of us in this sanctuary actually believe that? Rather, we need to improve in some way for us to be lovable. It was of the utmost importance to Rogers that kids felt valued, liked and appreciated, simply for being who they were. He'd acknowledge their fear and self-doubt, and take the time to reassure them through various life challenges.

Though he gave a lot in this way, he wasn't immune to his own self-doubt; the documentary revealed that he questioned himself and his value regularly. Perhaps that's why he was viscerally angered by random displays of meanness and cruelty — like those he'd witnessed in early cartoons (think Road-Runner, Popeye, always blasting Bluto, the Three Stooges, poking your eyes) — but he was intent on flipping that script. “You don't have to do anything sensational for people to love you,” he once told his audience.

How Far Does Your Neighborhood Extend? Do You Believe You Are Loveable as You Are

Here are four take-aways for you for you to cogitate on when you are alone with yourself:

- **Stand up for what you believe in.**
- **We can work to make a difference right where we are.**
- **We are neighbors.**
- **Just being you is enough.**

And here are two questions in conclusion. These are going to be hard:

- How far does your neighborhood extend? How far does your concept of neighbor ex-

tend out into the world? We care about those immediately around us. We probably care about those in North Carolina. Do we care about those in China, where their typhoon is much worse than Florence? Wherever we draw the line, and we all do, are you willing to push it out a bit farther?

- Do you believe that you are loveable just the way you are right now? We all have shortcomings and inadequacies, but can we believe that God, and a whole lot of people too, love us just as we are? And then, in turn, can we love others just the way they are, despite their deeper and more obvious shortcomings and inadequacies?

Amen.