

"Mister Rogers and the Gospel of Love"

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¹⁶We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²²and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (1 John 3:16-24)

Many of us remember it well: his entry into the warm and inviting living room... the brief, singing descent down just a few steps... the opening of the closet to change into a comfortable cardigan... and the quick swap of his more formal leather loafers for lace-up boat sneakers. Having just gotten an electric train myself, I remember loving that cool trolley car that traveled from his home right into the "Neighborhood of Make-Believe," where Daniel Tiger, King Friday XIII, and X the Owl came to life. For 31 years, 912 episodes, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" beamed into American homes. The show's philosophy was not complex, but it was very deep. In a society where the messages given to children were increasingly negative, violent, and manipulative, Fred Rogers wanted his show to be a respite, a help, a place of safety and care. He wanted children to hear and embrace a very basic truth: that they were valued and loved just the way they were.

These memories came flooding back to me as I read over this little sermon-ette tucked back near the end of the New Testament. It calls itself a letter, but it doesn't read like one. As one observer has said, 1 John feels more like a short, "'loving and anxious sermon' written by a pastor who loved his people."¹ Again and again, the writer tenderly calls his listeners "little children." He uses a form of the word love no less than thirty times in 1 John alone. While the emphasis suggests that the situation was not very loving or ideal in the faith community that received this letter, this writer earnestly believes that things could be better, that his dream is really not that far away, if the people could just accept that they really are loved by God just the way they are... and if they will just do as Jesus said and love one another as Christ has loved them. "*Little children,*" he writes, "*let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action... this is his commandment, that we should ... love one another.*" It seems like just the kind of thing that Mister Rogers would say, if he were still alive and with us, if somehow we could be transported back to that time of innocence when we sat in front of a flickering TV that had dials and rabbit ears, listening to a gentle pastor

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, 2d ed., Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 3.



use a public television station as his pulpit to share with little children a gospel of love in words we could understand.

For the children who first met Mister Rogers on the airwaves, his purity, wisdom, and compassion only seemed to get more valuable with age. One prominent example of this phenomenon is Tim Madigan, decorated reporter and best-selling author who first got to know Fred Rogers when he was assigned to do a story on him. The two struck up an immediate friendship, primarily because Madigan was drawn to the simple depth of this man who always had something supportive and encouraging to say.²

Eventually, Madigan wrote Rogers a letter that could no longer be avoided. "I think it's great that we are friends," he wrote, "but if we are going to be friends you really need to know the state of my insides, which are not very good at the moment." Madigan went on to confess one of his deepest wounds – the fact that he never felt that his father was ever really proud of him. At the end of his letter, Madigan said, "Fred, I have a question for you. Would you be proud of me?"

Within just a few days, Madigan got a hand-written response from Fred Rogers. "The answer to your question is YES," he said. The "yes" was written in big capital letters. And then again, in underlined letters "...a resounding YES. I will be proud of you. I am proud of you. I have been proud of you since we first met."

It was clear that what touched the man we know as Mister Rogers the most was the fact that Tim Madigan would trust him enough to confide such deep emotions and vulnerabilities with him. "Nothing you tell me could change my YES for you," Rogers said. "Please remember that."

In every show, Mister Rogers found a way to say to his audience, "I like you just the way you are." Outside of the show, when he spoke about his philosophy, the message didn't change much. "To love someone," he said, "is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now." So, in virtually every human encounter, he would work to be completely present – to make sure that person knew that his conversation with them, in that moment, was the most important thing in the world to him. "If I can do [that] 5% of the time," Tim Madigan later wrote, "I feel like I am doing a pretty good job. He did it from the moment he woke up in the morning until the time he went to bed at night."

The gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is described in the letter of 1st John, offers us this same kind of love. The premise of the letter is that we never outgrow the need for the simple message of God's love. We never stop being God's children. We never stop being loved as God's precious people. "*See what love the Father has given us,*" the letter says, "*that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are*" (1 John 3:1). And there is nothing we can do that can change God's "YES" for us. To use the language of the famous theologian Karl Barth, God's "yes" for humanity will always be greater than God's "no" to sin. And how do we know this? It's right in the text we have this morning. "*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us*" (1 John 3:16). Christ represents the victory of God's "yes" for all humanity, the confirmation that God's love will always prevail in your life, in my life, in every life. And nothing we do, nothing we think, no failure, no misstep, no dark part of our heart will every change that "Yes," because, as the letter says

² Details of Tim Madigan's relationship with Fred Rogers come from "Mister Rogers and Me," a film directed by Benjamin Wagner (2010), viewed at amazon.com.

"God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." God knows our hearts through and through, and that does not change God's love for us, not one little bit.

But there is more. Because of this amazing love that has been so freely given to us, we are called to share that love with others in God's name. *"Little children," the letter says, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."* In the next chapter, right after this passage that we read today, we hear this: *"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love"* (1 John 4:7-8).

One of the best illustrations I have seen of this biblical truth happened in this congregation a week ago Saturday. It began as an idea that one of you had. It was not a complicated idea. She just wanted to do something new, something in mission that we could all do together, something that we could use to show love to our neighbors, both inside and outside of the church. The idea was to have a sale, a glorified yard sale that could raise money for missions, bring new people into the church, and allow everyone in the church, of every age and ability, a way to contribute and help.

If you came out on April 14th, you saw how it all came together. Davis Hall was packed with treasures donated by our members, so much that the collection spilled out into the yard outside: clothes, furniture, art, toys, holiday decorations, pillows, pottery, pocketbooks... you name it. But the real story was the people. New people, all kinds of people, milling around together. Shoppers who arrived early actually helped our members set up tents and get things organized. Everyone was smiling. The sun was shining. Many of our volunteers arrived before the sun was completely up, and stayed for 7 hours or more. But we were all happy to be doing it – enjoying each other's company, happily giving generously of our time and energy... showing up for each other and for the church. And the message we offered to the community was clear. *"We want to be your neighbor. We are happy you are here. We like you just the way you are. Would you be mine, could you be my mine, won't you be my neighbor?"*

And our neighbors responded. Todd Phillips told me about a woman who snatched up a great find from the selection of art at the sale. It was a print of the Charleston battery, with waves crashing over the sea walls in front of the beautiful homes on that row. The woman knew that it was a valuable piece. We had offered it for \$20 or so, which was a great deal. She knew this was no ordinary yard sale, that we were giving all of the proceeds to support our mission partnership with OFCB in Haiti. She wanted to give us more, but she didn't have more cash. Todd said, no, it was OK. We had priced the item in good faith and she should not feel guilty for buying it at that price. We appreciated the sale just the way it was. So she bought the item and left. Later, Todd happened to be helping someone else when he saw the woman back at the cashier's tent. She had gone to the ATM and come back. She insisted that we accept a larger donation.

One of the bedrock philosophies that guided Mister Rogers throughout his life was the conviction that, to use his words, "deep and simple is far more essential than shallow and complex." Even in the 1960's, he saw the world getting more and more complex, and as things sped up, there was a corresponding loss of depth in thoughts, beliefs, and personal interactions. He was much more interested in going deep on simple things -- those basic interactions between people where the deepest and most essential connections can be made. The same is true of the little gospel primer of 1st John. God is love, it says. You are

loved. God is proud of you, and loves you, just the way you are. So, *"little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."*

Last Saturday, we, as a church, loved. We loved each other, and we loved our neighbors, not just by talking about it, but by taking some time and taking some action. It began with a simple idea... that we could have a sale... that we could do something new together... that we could welcome our neighbors into our house and invite them to join us in shared mission. A few of you poured yourselves into the depth of this idea, and over the past months others began to pour themselves into it as well. At the end of the day, we ended up collecting more than \$7,500 for our friends in Haiti. That is certainly icing on the cake, but in my opinion the greatest cause for celebration is that, through this whole process, we embraced the essence of what it means to be the church -- to show and share the love of Christ not in words or speech, but in truth and action.

It really was a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Thanks be to God. Amen.