

More Fred Rogers,
Please

Fred Rogers, known to generations of children and their parents, as Mister Rogers, was a Presbyterian minister. His show, begun in 1968, embodied much of old mainline Protestantism at its best. Without naming the Name, he walked the walk, in public spaces, and taught more what the way of Jesus by living it than most of us preachers do when we preach.

If the old mainline had modern saints, then the Rev. Fred Rogers is among them.

Mister Rogers opened himself to forming a relationship with his audience, and everything he did on his show was relationship-building with his audience. Fred actually acted as if each child watching was his neighbor, his friend.

. The theme was “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” She immediately reminisced. “When I was a kid, I loved Mister Rogers. I always thought he was speaking directly to me.”

The focus on relationship was facilitated by the low-tech nature of the show. The show operated on a shoestring budget in its opening years, and that might have been a blessing. But even as the budget grew, the use of ancient devices such as obvious models of villages and puppets to tell stories never gave way to sophisticated animation or the latest in attention-grabbing tech. The show was as rich in imagination as it was low in its use of eye-popping technologies.

Fred was an educator who grounded his teaching in the relationship he sought with his audience. He understood his audience. He never talked down to children. He did not avoid sensitive subjects.

From dealing with race relations to death to anger to disabilities, Fred’s stories and characters talked about difficult matters that often silence adults. A teacher once told me a teacher teaches primarily students—content is secondary. Fred sought to friend and neighbor his audience, to form relationships. That relationship gave him permission to teach.

Fred taught behaviors and values rather than beliefs. He did not use his show to teach propositional Christianity: the inspiration of the Bible, the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus. Every character and story and segment was not an object lesson for a particular Christian truth.

Rather, he called his viewers “neighbor” and taught them to see differences as interesting and positive, to accept and learn how to deal with anger, disappointment, grief, to be curious about the world, and how to express joy.

Like the old mainline, Fred embraced the arts and sciences as central to human life. Fred introduced his audience to all kinds of musicians (such as Yo-Yo Ma and Wynton Marsalis) and himself wrote nearly 300 songs for the show.

In addition, he invited his audience to dance and paint. Modern science was featured often. Through and with his artist and scientist guests, he demonstrated curiosity and love of experimentation and observation. In the old mainline point of view: all knowledge and practices that build up human beings is godly.

Fred exuded kindness, unfailing kindness. Kindness is easy to parody, especially in today’s toxic Christian and national cultures that are marinated in fear of the other. But being unfailing kind is so difficult to imitate. A person who is unfailing kind is exceeding rare.

Finally, Mister Rogers aired on *public* television and his show promoted a broad and deep sense of “public”—a public full of difference, tensions, and opportunities to neighbor someone who may not look like me but who is like me in desiring to be loved, cared for, respected, and to belong—as well as how to neighbor and befriend.

In this public, neighbors of any particular faith would share public spaces with those who differ from themselves, would seek to engage in public and influence the public but not control the public.

In order to be good neighbors, we have to recognize differences, practice emotional and social intelligence, show respect, know ourselves, be curious about our world, do something to make the world better or more beautiful through arts and sciences, and accept every opportunity we can to neighbor.

More Fred Rogers, please. Christianity will be on the right track in this country when it forms more like Fred Rogers. And perhaps more of that kind of Christianity would do a better job, by how we live, in showing the public what it means to be neighbors.

And, perhaps to see and help other see when a king (no, not King Friday) has no clothes.

PBS has assembled an excellent resource base in this year of celebrating the 50th anniversary of the show. <http://www.pbs.org/parents/rogers/>. Among the video links: If you've never watched Fred Roger's testimony before congress in 1969, watch it.

PBS aired a one-hour special called "It's You I Like" <http://www.fredrogers.org/frc/news/mister-rogers-it%E2%80%99s-you-i-premieres-march-2018-pbs>.

A documentary on Mister Rogers is being released this summer: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/03/fred-rogers-wont-you-be-my-neighbor-trailer-tom-hanks>. If you're prone to tears as I am, have a goodly number of tissues handy when you watch the trailer.

And Tom Hanks is playing Fred Rogers in a movie telling the story of the encounter between a skeptical journalist and Fred that changed the journalist's life because, in Fred, the reporter discovered a person who is how he appears: <http://ew.com/movies/2018/03/19/tom-hanks-mr-rogers-movie-you-are-my-friend-plot-details/>.