

## **Peace in the Neighborhood**

Rev. John Allen

For the last two weeks, we have been talking about Mr. Rogers, and seeking how his work is related to the themes of our faith, and what we can learn from it today.

Much of Mr. Rogers work is about feelings, and helping children to learn about their feelings, to know that their feelings are meaningful, mentionable, and manageable.

Of all of the feelings that Mr. Rogers discussed with children, there is one that he spent a lot of time on.

Anger.

Mr. Rogers once devoted an entire week of the Neighborhood show to “mad feelings.”

The first episode in that series begins with him sitting and drawing a picture, and it is not very good.

“I am not very good at drawing.” he tells us. “Probably because I haven’t practiced very much.”

He continues: “When I was a boy and I couldn’t do something very well I got angry about it, I would go over to the piano and tell it my feelings on the piano keys.”

He then walked over the piano on his set, made a scowling angry face, and pounded a dissonant chord.

This was his underlying message about anger always. Everyone gets angry sometimes.

We cannot stop ourselves from feeling angry. But we can control what we do with our anger. And we can do things when we are angry that don’t hurt ourselves or anyone else.

But for Mr. Rogers, this was not merely an individual therapeutic technique. He understood that learning at a young age to express anger in a healthy way that did not hurt others was an essential part of growing up, and one that so many people missed.

Mr. Rogers believed that all violence was a consequence of anger. Anger that could not be expressed in a better way. He abhorred the violence that permeated so much of children’s television, noting how shows like Batman would show the moment of violence to children without ever exposing them to the consequences.

Violence, but no tears. Gun fights, but no funerals. This teaches children that the way to solve problems was to “wipe out the bad guys by force.”

If you listen to Mr. Rogers, you cannot mistake how propounding violence in all its forms simply broke his heart.

“You can imagine my heartbreak” Mr. Rogers told a reporter during the Gulf War, “when I think of how many of the 20-year-old soldiers dying in this war grew up with our neighborhood program.”

And I can imagine that his heart would break too, knowing about children in war zones today, whose basic safety cannot be assured by the adults who love them.

Mr. Rogers understood that play, imagination, and make believe were powerful tools in helping children to explore their feelings about difficult topics like war.

In the puppet world of this show “The Neighborhood of Make Believe.” King Friday XIII, the ruler of the land of make believe was a hawkish and often comically reactionary ruler. He wore his fear and anxiety on his sleeve, and frequently had to be talked down from catastrophic decrees.

In the very first week of nationally broadcast episodes in 1968, King Friday orders his subjects to drop everything else and build a wall around the Neighborhood of Make Believe to, in his words, “keep out the change.”

And in episode after episode, the King’s first instinct whenever anything is out of the ordinary is to muster troops, gather weapons, and bolster fortifications.

Time and time again though, he is persuaded toward more thoughtfulness and patience, by his subjects, often led by Daniel Tiger, the tame and timid puppet who was always willing to say how scared he was. How the talk of war made him afraid. Who wondered if there was anything else that could be done instead.

And Fred Rogers did both their voices.

He understood that all of us individually, and we as communities and nations, have within us natural fear and anger as we confront the vulnerability and precariousness of our human condition. His lesson to children was the same as his lessons to the most powerful. It is ok to feel afraid. It is ok to feel vulnerable. But you must do something with those feelings that does not hurt anyone.

As was so often the case, Mr. Rogers was critiqued from bot sides. He was mocked by realists who felt that his ethic of non-violence was unrealistic and fanciful, out of touch with the real world.

And he was chided by antiwar activists, including some within the cast of his show, felt that he was not explicit enough in condemning the particular conflicts of the moment. They wanted him to talk about the specific wars of his time, not just about war and conflict in general.

But I think that Mr. Rogers was bringing to the world at war the some of the best of what our faith can offer. A larger, an alternative moral imagination. One that is insistently bigger than the moment.

His personal politics were steadfastly aligned with the anti-war activists of the Vietnam Era in which his show first aired. Yet he saw a particular role for himself in the peace effort.

He believed he could have the biggest impact by teaching a generation of children to process the trauma of war, and to express their anger without hurting people.

Mr. Rogers has a broad moral imagination. He understood that violence and warfare are expressions of a cycle of misdirected and unprocessed trauma and fear, and trying to stop any one conflict in particular was an incomplete approach to peace-making, if it did not engage in growing our collective emotional faculties.

Mr. Rogers spoke often about the work of making “goodness attractive to children.” Telling stories, and creating media and culture, that made the hard work of peacemaking as compelling as the drama of war, and that made reconciliation in the face of conflict as exciting as violence.

During the American invasion of Grenada, he used his airtime to show a video on his show of military aircraft dropping food under parachutes to folks who were stranded by disasters.

His role, and our role as people and a community of faith, is to be a steward of a larger vision.

It is our role to take steps toward that vision of peace, no matter how costly they are.

And also to refuse to take any step that brings us further from that vision, no matter how practical, expedient, or necessary it may seem in the moment.

Mr. Rogers was a minister of the Presbyterian Church and he was in fact eventually ordained by the church as a television evangelist. The church believed that his presence on television could help bring about the world God dreamed of. They saw his program as part of the work of bending the world toward love and justice.

But he did not use his show to share religious messages or proselytize his particular faith.

In fact in the 33 years he was on the air, there was only one time an unambiguous religious message appeared on the show. It was in November of 1983, in the midst of the Cold War, and the show did a week about conflict.

That week— in the land of Make Believe, King Friday discovered a small mechanical component that was being shipped to Somewhere-else Land, and quickly surmised that it must be part of some new weapon. He quickly makes a decree, that all the money that we being spent on education should be redirected to build bombs, and everyone in the neighborhood should stop what they are doing to put the bombs together. And again, in an effort to speak directly to the fears of children through play, the puppets engage in Air Raid Drills, and even practice putting on gas masks. All until they eventually discover that their neighbors in Somewhereelse Land are in fact not building a weapon, but a bridge.

Throughout that week, Mr. Rogers spoke candidly to children about war, about what led to war, and told stories about people who made peace in big and small ways. He invited children to talk and play about their feelings of war. He named that war was very scary, and that it was not nice.

He ended the final episode of that week's show, like this:

[video]

Mr Rogers made 912 episodes of the Neighborhood show. Everyone but this one ended with the same song about being neighbors.

And every single episode of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was replayed on PBS in syndication for a decades. With one exception. The week about conflict, that ended with these words of peace never aired again. The episodes were deemed too controversial.

I think it is an unfortunate but profound compliment to his peacemaking. After all, its is just a gentle and impractical man, singing in his sweater and playing with puppets.

And yet there is a deep current in our culture that is either devoted to warfare—or simply resigned to it.

And these episode poked at that part of us in a way that just felt like it went too far.

To me, it is the reminder of the power that comes from simple phrase like Daniel Tiger saying:

“That sounds scary to me. Isn't there anything else we could do?”

Or Ana Platypus' simple and timeless declaration that: “war isn't nice.”

It is a reminder of the potency of a plainly delivered message of peace.

It from a man who meant it with every ounce of his being.