

## **Many Ways to Say I Love You**

Rev. John Allen

For those of you who might be wondering what is going on here, let me get you caught up.

This week is the last in a series of sermons about Mr. Rogers. The creator and host of the iconic Mr. Rogers neighborhood, a children's television show that ran from 1968 until 2001, and which always began with Mr. Rogers walking onto the set, and changing out of his jacket, and into a signature knit sweater.

Unlike the one I am wearing today, all of Mr. Roger's sweaters had been knit by his mother. If you want to see one of those sweaters now, you have to go to the Smithsonian Museum.

And that is because this gentle man, was a giant of early television, and an enduring figure in the culture and psyche of our nation.

My first sermon explored Mr. Rogers work on racial justice, and his friendship with Francois Clemmons, the young, black, gay man who played the police officer on the Neighborhood program. I shared with you the story of Mr. Rogers growing acceptance of Francois, and how he come to love him just as he was. It is the power of love to shift our hearts toward a broader and more inclusive spirit.

The second sermon looked at Mr. Rogers' views on childhood. How he respected the inner world of children as an object worthy of its own consideration. Kids are not just adults in waiting, but their experience is meaningful and their feelings matter.

And then last week, we looked at Mr. Rogers the peacemaker. We saw how he used his television program to help children process the horror and grief of a world at war, and how he steadfastly and unflinchingly presented an alternative world on his show, one in which feelings of anger were discussed productively, and conflicts were resolved without violence. He made the goodness of peace attractive to us, so that we might want to bring it out of the land of make-believe and into our own hurting world.

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Mr. Rogers is world famous as a television personality, and renowned for his work with children, but what is often missed is how integral his Christian faith was to his work. Mr. Rogers was a televangelist, of a very different mold. He was a Christian Moral Prophet who used the medium of television to share the gift of his faith with generations of children.

And I think he is a model for what it looks like to live with the full conviction of our faith in the world today.

I admit, I use the word televangelist to describe Mr. Rogers with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek. But the only reason I have to do that is because our culture has developed a pretty uniformed portrait of what counts as evangelism—as spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And across our whole culture we have come to see that a sort of heavily stylized zealousness is the only recognizable mark of true commitment.

That is not just in religion, but in business, and politics too. Loudness and attention are fast becoming our central moral currency.

Mr. Rogers offers an alternative. He is a model of quiet commitment that is not timid. Of moral clarity, without bombast, of being unshakably rooted in his values, without being incurious and unwilling to change and grow.

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I am quite concerned that we are losing the ability to motivate one another by speak positively of our vision for society.

I am quite concerned that too many of our leaders across society have discovered how effective it can be in the short term to provoke urgent anxiety through dire predictions. And I am afraid that we have become addicted to this sort of doom-casting as a means of motivating moral behavior.

And I am saddened as together we are beginning to learn how fragile a fabric these patterns have woven into our common life.

And I am also angered by those leaders who know this well, and who cynically abuse the prerogatives of leadership to drive our culture into a morass of persistent anxiety from which they seek to benefit.

I am worried that given all of this, most of us have come to feel like the only way to engage in our civic life with integrity, is to see it as a battlefield.

Throughout all his work, Mr. Rogers spoke often of the idea of making goodness attractive.

The idea that the most faithful, and the most effective way to help guide society toward justice and and peace is not to make the alternative so terrifying, but to make the vision so compelling. To live in this world as if it were already the place where such peace and love were possible. To tell the stories, and sing the songs of beauty and joy, to make the world we long for irresistible.

Mr. Rogers' gift was not just his technical mastery of this sort of rhetoric through his art, but the way his very being and presence seemed to see us as we wanted most deeply to be seen, and call forth from our hearts that person who we knew deep down we most wanted to be.

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The powerful gift of Jesus' teaching was not simply that it was another set of ideas about how the world should run, but it was an alternative way of being in the world as a moral agent. In our reading from Corinthians, Paul writes about the centrality of love. This is a beautiful reading for weddings, but if you only ever hear it at a wedding you could miss that it is not just talking about the virtues of a love between two people, but also a way of living with love in the world.

This text describes the sort of enduring patience that it takes to live with compassion and grace.

This text calls us to a way of being that does not insist on its own way, that is not boastful, or arrogant or rude. AND a way that does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but holds fast to the truth. AND that is hopeful in all moments.

That is a very challenging needle to thread.

To be enduringly committed to a clear moral vision for society.

To not be arrogant about our own perspective.

And to be hopeful no matter what we might endure.

I believe that one of the most important ways that we can grow and develop our own faith is to closely and carefully observe the lives of people who lived with uncommon faith, especially when that faith led them to engage meaningfully and fruitfully with the turmoil of the world.

I believe Mr. Rogers is one such saint.

Mr. Rogers was not perfect. None are.

But, I do think he may have walked as close to this challenging way of life as anyone ever has. And my hope is that he might inspire us to try to do the same.

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Fred Rogers died on February 27, 2003.

Eight months before his death, he offered the commencement address at his alma mater, Dartmouth College. It was the end of an academic year that has begun with the attacks of September 11, a moment when the world was once again cascading into war.

He was speaking to a group of students who were finding their footing with the responsibilities of adulthood, in a newly uncertain world. And also a group of students who had grown up with him as their teacher, and their neighbor.

It seems to me the only fitting way to end this series of sermons, is to give Mr. Rogers the last word. Here is how he concluded that commencement address.

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