

Seventh Epiphany C  
February 20, 2022  
CCM

Let us pray. May the words of mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

And Jesus said, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

I consider it a very great honor and blessing to have been given the responsibility of presiding and preaching on many momentous occasions over the years. Some of have been joyous and joyful. Some have been born of tragedy. Some were celebrated at midnight on Christmas Eve. Some commenced in the pre-dawn hours of Easter morning. Some have included many hundreds of people. Others have been the incarnation of "where two or three are gathered together."

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My memory is not what it used to be, and so I can't say that I can recall all the details of all these celebrations! However, there is one occasion that I will always remember. At the time, I was serving as Rector of St. Paul's in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I had been meeting with a family who had recently joined the congregation in order to prepare for the baptism of their youngest child. On the day of the rehearsal, the father of this child informed me that they were good friends with Fred and Joanne Rogers and that they would be joining us for the service. Well, I thought, that's fine. But then it dawned on me:

He's talking about Mr. Rogers. Yes, THE Mr. Rogers!

My mind was blown. I can't even begin to describe the impact that Mr. Rogers had had on my children. Before she could tell time, our daughter instinctively knew when, "Mr. Rogers is on!" and when "Mr. Rogers is over." As with so many other hundreds of thousands of families, "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" was one of the theme songs guiding us through our daily lives. He was a legend. He was a hero. He was a celebrity. In my estimation, he was a saint. And now he was going to be in church while I was preaching and celebrating. It was too much.

Well, of course, nothing about that morning was about me. By God's grace, the baptisms were celebrated and the sermon preached. Afterwards, Fred Rogers was as genuine and kind and caring in person as you can possibly imagine. When Janie introduced him to our daughter, who was then fifteen, and shared with him that Holland had watched his program at least once a day for all her formative years, Mr. Rogers looked Holland right in the eye, and with nothing but genuine care, said, "There you are. And look how you have grown!" And he meant it.

I share all of this with you because, in my estimation, Fred Rogers was the embodiment of mercy. If you watch his program (which was also his ministry) carefully, you will see that it is all about love expressed in being merciful to others. Whether it was the interaction between the main characters or the conversations he had with his guests, the focus was never on power, on lording it over others, or trying to bend them to our will. (Unless that was part of the teachable moment concerning mercy!) It was never about critique or condemnation. Instead, it was about honoring others just as they were, having compassion for them, and loving them as the unique people God created them to be.

As one theologian writes:

Mercy is closely linked with forgiveness, but is broader here than just the forgiveness of specific offences: It is a generous attitude which is willing to see things from the other's point of view and is not quick to take offense or to gloat over

others' shortcomings (the prime characteristic of love according to 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:4-7). Mercy sets aside society's assumption that it is honorable to demand revenge.

I think that captures the true spirit of the television neighborhood inspired and created by Mr. Fred Rogers and his colleagues. It was, and is, a neighborhood built on unconditional love with mercy as its foundation. That is an invaluable lesson for our children to learn. It is an invaluable example for us who seek to follow Jesus to remember.

The world in which we live is in desperate need of many things right now, including the qualities and characteristics found in all of the Beatitudes. But perhaps at this point, we need to rediscover first and foremost the true nature of mercy. Without it, there can be little hope for the healing of our nation's wounds. Without mercy first, how can we as a people engage in the work of justice, reconciliation, restoration, and peace-making that will be required to make us whole again? Indeed, without mercy first, how do we even begin to have the conversations necessary to get the process started? I know. This works best when all sides of the divide sign on and commit. But mercy has to begin somewhere. What will mercy look like in your life and mine today and throughout the coming week?

Thank you, Mr. Rogers. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Rest in Peace.