

Meditation – It's a Beautiful Day in Bethlehem
Tuesday, December 24, 2019
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Springfield, IL

The title of the meditation: It's a Beautiful Day in Bethlehem

Let us pray. Loving God, as we reflect together this Holy Night, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In 2018, on the 50th anniversary of the classic PBS children's television show "Mister Roger's Neighborhood," a new documentary entitled "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" was released rekindling interest in the legacy of the Presbyterian minister, The Rev. Mr. Fred Rogers, who created the show.

In February of 2019 friends from Westminster gathered for an Adult Education Forum on Fred Rogers led by my husband and pediatrician, Peter Kieffer. Watching the videos brought back memories and warmed the hearts of those gathered. On Founders' Sunday in May 2019, the Strategic Planning Committee introduced the "Steadfast Neighbor Endeavor" with drawings of the site and landscape plans as well as goals for the neighborhood mission component. The Walnuts, directed by our own Mr. Rogers, sang "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" at our Founders' reception.

Thanksgiving week 2019, the American film "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" inspired by Tom Junod's 1998 Esquire article "Can You Say...Hero?" was released. In the film, Fred Rogers, played by Tom Hanks, brings healing and hope to the life of a troubled and cynical journalist who is assigned to interview him.

It was when I walked out of Springfield's AMC Theatre the Friday after Thanksgiving that I knew Fred Roger's would be a part of this year's Christmas Eve Meditation. As we gather to contemplate the wonder and mystery of the God who would join us in our humanity and become one of us in the birth of a child, it seems to me that reflecting on a man who became the incarnation of God's love in a lifetime of ministering to millions of young children might shed some light on the meaning of this beautiful day in our faith story. Without mentioning God's name, Mr. Rogers shared the love of God with both the child in front of the TV and the child within each of us.

Born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania on March 20, 1928, Fred McFeely Rogers grew up in the Presbyterian Church. He matriculated at Dartmouth before transferring to Rollins College where he studied music composition and met his wife Joanne. When Fred watched children's television for the first time in 1951, he was terribly concerned about the graphic display of violence. He understood there was just so much a very young child can take and wanted to create a thoughtful, theologically sound, and developmentally informed television show for children. Before creating Mister Roger's Neighborhood in 1968, Fred received a master's of divinity degree from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was ordained a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and attended the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Child Development where he began his 30-year collaboration with child psychologist Margaret McFarland, associate professor in the department of psychiatry and a colleague of Benjamin

Spock and Eric Erickson. Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, which began in 1968 ran for 33 years. His final show was in 2001, two-weeks before 9/11.

From the beginning Mr. Rogers talked to children about difficult subjects: death, disability, and divorce. His mission was to help young children make sense of a very complicated and often troubling world. One of his first episodes addressed assassination the day after America's tragic loss of Robert Kennedy. In 1969 with battles over desegregation raging, Mr. Rogers invited the neighborhood's African American police officer to share his kiddie swimming pool. When Officer Clemons retired 24 years later they reenacted the scene, this time Mr. Rogers proceeded to wash his neighbor's feet in a poignant reenactment of Christ's Last Supper.

Fred believed that loving thy neighbor as thyself is at the root of everything: all learning, all parenting, and all relationships. When he sang, "I like you just the way you are," he taught the children to love themselves so that they could love others. His ministry brought to life Abraham Lincoln's sage advice, "Teach the children so it won't be necessary to teach the adults." Christmas is a time for children, and the One whose birth we celebrate this Holy night taught us to become like children.

Mr. Rogers received the Lifetime Achievement Emmy in 1997 "for giving generations upon generations of small children confidence in themselves, for being their friend, and for telling them again and again and again that they are loved and have worth." As Mr. Rogers invited the audience at that time, I would like each of us tonight to take 10 seconds to think about those who have helped us become who we are, who have cared about us, who have wanted what was best for us in life, and who have loved us into being. Ten seconds of silence. I'll watch the time.

Tonight we gather with neighbors, loved ones, and those who have loved us into being to affirm the incarnation of God's love in Emmanuel. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, when we saw the glory of God's child, full of grace and truth, meeting us in the neighborhood, we knew it was a beautiful day in Bethlehem. Amen.

Final reading from Chancel

Christian:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was in the beginning with God, and all things came into being through the Word. What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen God's glory, the glory of God's only son, full of grace and truth.

Blythe Benediction

And now, with grateful hearts for this beautiful day, for the neighbors with whom we share life, and for the God who joined us in our humanity, let us go into the world with peace and kindness, have courage, hold on to what is right. Return no one evil for evil, strengthen the faint hearted, support the weak, help the suffering, honor and respect all people. And let us join the angels we have heard on high, singing and ringing in the birth of our Savior. Amen.