

The first time his future wife Joanne set eyes on Fred Rogers, known to millions of us as Mr. Rogers of “Mr. Rogers Neighborhood,” was in 1947. She was a student at Rollins College in Florida, and he was a freshman at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, who decided that he wanted to major in music. Dartmouth did not have a music degree program at that time. A music professor there suggested he come down to Winter Park to see Rollins. Joanne’s music composition teacher said they should all go greet him, so they piled into a very big, elderly Franklin car to meet this new prospect at the airport. And so it was that this unhappy Dartmouth student was welcomed by a dozen happy Rollins music students.

It must have worked, Joanne reminisced, because he decided to transfer to Rollins. He and Joanne became good friends, then a couple. He impressed the other students because he could sit at the piano and play all kinds of music by ear that none of the others could play without the score. After she graduated in 1950, she went to Florida State University for a master’s degree in music. After Fred graduated in 1951, he moved to New York City to do an apprenticeship at NBC in a new thing called television. She got a letter from him in late spring proposing marriage. She felt he deserved a

quick response, quicker than writing back, so she went to a phone booth on campus....put in a million dimes, and said“ Yes!”

The wedding was July 9, 1952. Fred and Joanne spent their first year together in New York, and Fred continued at NBC. In 1953, he heard from his father about plans for an educational TV station in Pittsburgh—near their home in Latrobe. Fred landed a job with a brave group and joined the first community educational television station, WQED. And so they settled in Pittsburgh.

He worked behind the scenes at first, then in front of the camera. He launched a children’s show in Canada that was called Misterogers—all one word like that—and developed a lot of the characters he would use in Mister Rogers ’Neighborhood, which he produced back in Pittsburgh.

Joanne taught piano, gave recitals and was soon preoccupied with raising their two young sons, Jim and John. Sometimes the three of them would go to the studio and see Fred at work, which they loved. When the boys were young, running around the house, and the show would come on, they would point to the TV and the man in the cardigan sweater and say, “Other

Daddy.” Their daddy was a father figure for children all over the United States.

That zippered sweater became his trademark on camera. Off camera he was more likely to wear a bow tie. That bow tie once led to an amusing case of mistaken identity.

Fred came home from a trip one day with a big smile on his face. “What are you smiling about?” She asked.

“Something that just happened on the trip home,” Fred said.

“What was it?”

“I was getting on the plane, going up the ramp, and the flight attendant kept staring at me. You could almost see the wheels going around. She knew she knew me but was trying to remember how. When I came up to her, I smiled and she said, ‘I just love your popcorn!’ They called him Orville (Redenbacher) at the office for a week after that.

Fred was also a man of faith. He would get up early in the morning to read the Bible and pray. He and Joanne prayed together every night at dinner. And though he's been gone now for almost 17 years she still says that prayer when we gather as a family at Thanksgiving:

Come, Lord Jesus, be thou our guest,
Our morning joy, our evening rest.
And with thy daily bread impart,
Thy love and peace to every heart.

And this faith of course informed what he did. His vocation as a father and husband is reflected even in his characters of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. Queen Sara Saturday is named after his wife; Sara is Joanne's first name, though she usually goes by Joanne. He used McFeely, his middle name, for another character. But of all the characters he created Joanne's favorite is Daniel Tiger, who she says reminds her so much of Fred. His sensitivity, his thoughtfulness and kindness. That was the most important value of all for Fred. He wanted to spread kindness in the world.

Joanne in an interview that was published just a couple of weeks ago, says she thinks about what the show did for the children—and their parents—who watched it over the years. It gave them a safe place, a nurturing place. It reminded her of sitting on her grandmother's lap. She knew she was loved and cared for. Children and adults need that feeling.

Fred was an ordained Presbyterian minister and a man of great faith, but Joanne says he rarely talked about it. It was more important to show it. To his family, to the people he worked with, to audiences through the characters he created and the stories he told. That's what mattered most. In her words: "He spread God's love in everything he did. His life was his sermon."

One of the reasons people love Mr. Rogers is that it reminds them of a time in their lives when there was happiness and peace. A child could watch Mr. Rogers and feel like he was talking right to them, as he was careful to talk to, not at, children. And in our polarized society with so much anger about things, we can look back and be reminded of this peaceful time.

I haven't yet seen the movie with Tom Hanks, but like millions of other people Mr. Rogers was a part of my childhood before I began school. And while there are some great memories looking back on those years of my life, and while it might be nice if I could to go back for a day, we as Christians are not preparing to be Peter Pan; we are preparing to be saints. And as such, we are looking forward. The prophet Isaiah in that first reading tells us to look forward to an age when all the peoples of the world will come to God's temple on Mount Zion; "they will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks," the prophet tells us. Its what is inscribed on a bronze statue outside the United Nations headquarters in New York City.

The fulfillment of this dream has begun with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. Jesus calls us to be his temple, his Body, the Church, and He offers us a kingdom not of this world but rather one where the justice and peace foreseen by Isaiah can be realized.

This season of Advent that we begin today in the build-up to Christmas invites us to prepare and to help the world prepare for the arrival of Jesus. Not the historical first time He came which is in the past, but the time when

He will come again and we will meet Him face to face. So how does one do that? I think Fred Rogers in many ways gives us a blueprint.

As a child, Fred was engaged by his mom Nancy and this continued into his adulthood. She helped pass on the faith to him. He then went to the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary where he studied the faith, even winning a prize for his preaching ability and giving sermons at Pittsburgh's Sixth Presbyterian Church. He prayed. Fred Rogers took seriously his vocation, and used his relationship with God to inform his life, to give him direction, and help him to live it out. As an adult, he was up by 5 a.m. before a morning swim to have time for prayer and reflection. He said "real revelation comes through silence" and his concern was our society was more interested in information than wonder and noise than silence. To be prepared means to, as we hear in that second reading to "throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light," and to "conduct ourselves properly as in the day." Advent gives us a time, much like Lent, to rid ourselves of the things that need to be thrown off and to put on that armor of light. Next Monday, we have our parish penance service and parishes are having them throughout Advent. I'll be hearing added confessions too starting at 3 p.m. on the Third and Fourth weekends of Advent. It's a great

time to go to reconciliation, and to think about what in our lives we ignore that needs to change, but also just to have some quiet time in prayer. Maybe after everyone goes to bed you can find a quiet spot and do some spiritual reading, reflection, or just meditation in silence and think about how you might like to use this time before Christmas to better; or just stay more focused and participate more at Mass, making the effort to come each week. Growing closer to God in our faith helps us better prepared to do what Mr. Rogers did, namely, to live it out.

That living it out was his life-long sermon. In 2001 at a commencement address at Middelbury College, Mr. Rogers said: “When we look for what’s best in the person we happen to be with at the moment, we’re doing what God does; so in appreciating our neighbor, we’re participating in something truly sacred.” We’ve lost a sense of that in society. Whether we are so busy we never make time for people, or exert so much energy into judging and condemning others based on politics or seeing the splinter in their eye, what if we truly remembered Mr. Rogers wisdom, and understood that Jesus is just as much prescient in the soul of a human created in God’s image as He is in the Holy Eucharist?

For instance, one episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood in May of 1969 demonstrated to children how issues of race could be dealt with.

Demonstrating the power of empathy and human compassion, Rogers invited an African American police officer played by actor François Clemmons onto the set as "Officer Clemmons." At a time when black people could not swim alongside whites in many public places, the American audiences witnessed Rogers and Officer Clemmons wash their feet in a small plastic swimming pool. It was also a reminder of the Christian tradition of foot washing, which we celebrate every Holy Thursday as a reminder to be a way of life.

In another such example, Rogers did a series of five episodes, first aired on Nov. 7, 1983, in which he addressed the difficult subject of conflict between two neighboring lands. The series warned its audiences of the dangers of war in general and the stockpiling of bombs in particular. Rogers added his own theological touch to the episode's conclusion by flashing the text of the Old Testament verse Isaiah 2:4, our first reading today, on the television screen, which said, "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, And

their spears into pruning forks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war any more.”

We can take a page from him by being engaged with the world and one another. He said he actually learned so much from children, quoting Jesus who said let the children come to me. And the way this happens is through engagement with one another. Mr. Rogers said “the most important thing is we can be one to one with each other at the moment; if we can be present to the moment with the person we happen to be with at the moment that’s what is important.” Time is such an impactful gift, which is why he spoke slowly and looked directly at people when speaking with them and had a unique way of engaging children. As Joanne his wife put it, his life was his sermon. We have to have that same mentality so others come to know Jesus through how we live. Giving that gift of time and being engaged with people; thinking about the words we use in the house; showing kindness and compassion and empathy. So much time and money is spent on gifts and it’s great to give Christmas presents, but why not use the season to think about how we can give the gift of helping someone to know who Jesus is by the way we lead our lives?

In a 1997 interview, Mr. Rogers said: “It helps to be loved in order to work in this life; I’m sad for those who do not feel they are loved.” In this world are so many people who feel that way. Maybe they feel the stress of life; they deal with angry people around them; they compare themselves to others and can feel such pressure. But we must always remember, with Jesus, there is no pre-condition to receiving His love. Rather it is a love which is beyond our wildest imagination. A love that didn’t just come 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, but rather a love that comes to us time and time again. So use the season to open your hearts to receiving it by coming to know the God who want’s to not only be your neighbor, but your Redeemer, and helping the people in your lives open the door to his love and mercy.