

The Demanding Theology of Mister Rogers

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Abstract

There has been a resurgence of interest in Mister Rogers, the person behind *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. The interest goes beyond stories of a famous television personality. There is a sense that Mister Rogers is needed today. U. S. culture is experiencing high levels of fear and anxiety, divisions and hostilities. Mister Rogers offers more than 'niceness' but a demanding theology. This theology offers tools for both diagnosing and treating our contemporary situation. Rogers believes that people have a need for acceptance and love, a vulnerability that is fundamental to our humanity. When this need is not met, people can turn in on themselves or lash out at others. Their fear can flow out into society and make it increasingly hostile. Rogers' treatment begins with the principle of specialness. People need to know that they are loved and accepted, and the affirmation of specialness meets this need. The principle also calls people to recognize the specialness in others, to love as they need to be loved. Rogers' principle sets in motion a system of circulating love. Instead of unleashing hostility, Rogers' call to specialness unleashes empathy so more and more people are brought into the dynamics of love.

Keywords

Mister Rogers, vulnerability, specialness, social ethics, love

It is difficult to capture the impact Fred Rogers and his children's television show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* has had on U. S. Culture. Through 895 episodes, from 1968–2001, everyone came to know songs such as 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?' and 'It's Such a Good Feeling', Rogers changing into a sweater at the beginning of each show, the trolley, the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, and its puppet inhabitants such as Lady Elaine, King Friday, and Daniel Tiger. At the show's peak in the mid-1980's, it reached almost two million households. The show earned a Peabody Award, four Emmys, and twenty-five Emmy nominations. Mister Rogers himself received a Lifetime Achievement Emmy, a Television Critics Association Career Achievement award, a

Hollywood Walk of Fame Star, and a Presidential Medal of Freedom. His style influenced subsequent children's shows such as *Arthur* and *Blue's Clues*, and his production studio continues with shows such as *Peg + Cat*, *Odd Squad*, and *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*.

Over the last few years, there has been a resurgence of interest in Fred Rogers. It has come from two films: the 2019 *It's A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* starring Tom Hanks, and the 2018 documentary, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*. Morgan Neville, the director of the documentary, said that Rogers' 'radical kindness' made him such an important topic. NBC News stated in the title of its review of *It's A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* that 'Mr. Roger's Message of Kindness and Empathy is Needed More than Ever'.¹ Even *The Washington Post* claimed that Rogers' 'kindness, his ability to speak to children and his seemingly unwavering moral compass' was 'Why We Need Mister Rogers, Big Bird, and Oscar the Grouch Now More than Ever'.²

Are we just nostalgic for a kindness that seems absent from our society?³ Large numbers of people feel like they have lost control, power, and hope, and a populism has arisen in response to these feelings advocating distrust of civic institutions, suspicion of minorities and immigrants, hostility to a perceived elite, and a return to a mythic past.⁴ It is a culture that is afflicted by increasing polarization and decreasing job prospects.⁵ Do we just want to escape to the niceness of a children's television show host from twenty years ago?

In this paper, I argue that Rogers offers us more than niceness. As Tom Junod, the journalist whose encounter with Mister Rogers is the basis of *It's A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, wrote in 2019, 'remembering him as a nice man is easier than thinking of him as a

¹ Ethan Sacks, 'Mr. Roger's Message of Kindness and Empathy is Needed More than Ever', *NBC News*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/movies/mr-rogers-message-kindness-empathy-needed-more-ever-n1088796>.

² Abby Whitaker, 'Why We Need Mister Rogers, Big Bird, and Oscar the Grouch Now More than Ever', *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/12/12/why-we-need-mr-rogers-big-bird-oscar-grouch-now-more-than-ever/>.

³ Ruscio AM, Hallion LS, Lim CCW, et al, 'Cross-sectional Comparison of the Epidemiology of DSM-5 Generalized Anxiety Disorder Across the Globe', *JAMA Psychiatry* 74, no. 5 (2017), pp. 465–475, doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2017.0056; American Psychiatric Association, 'Americans Say They Are More Anxious than a Year Ago', May 7, 2018, <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/americans-say-they-are-more-anxious-than-a-year-ago-baby-boomers-report-greatest-increase-in-anxiety>.

⁴ This analysis of is based on Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (New York: Pelican Books, 2018).

⁵ See Sinan Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health – and How We Must Adapt* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2020) and Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

demanding one'.⁶ I explore this demanding aspect of Rogers in what follows. To do this, I have to go beyond his television show. While Rogers the person was remarkably consistent with Rogers the television host, the show was for children and focused on their needs. The demanding vision comes from Rogers' broader theological view, one formed by his faith and his degree at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. It was a view that was not explicit on his show. So, I get at it by drawing on his homilies, interviews where he speaks about his faith, structural aspects of his show, works on his spirituality, and archival material from his seminary days.⁷ The result is a demanding theology that counters the social forces that turn people against each other by imagining and enacting a system of circulating love.

'Precondition for Sin'

Rogers' theology begins in vulnerability. When he was a child, Rogers was picked on. He was a bit overweight and shy. He was lonely and sought solace in playing the piano and with puppets, activities which, at times, further isolated him from other children. On his way home from school, kids taunted him, shouting 'Freddy, hey, fat Freddy. We're going to get you, Freddy'. He would run home or to a neighbor's house and, when inside, cry. While some people told him to ignore it, Rogers could not. He knew that it hurt him. 'I cried to myself whenever I was alone. I cried through my fingers as I made up songs on the piano'. Rogers said that what he was doing was mourning.⁸ His sorrow made him realize that one of his most basic needs was not being met, like a hungry person being given a stone instead of bread. He turned to the 'way-down-deep-inside-us' and discovered the need to know that 'we are accepted and acceptable in our own right'.⁹ In an interview in the *Christian Century*, Rogers said that '[e]verybody longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is capable of loving'.¹⁰

While Rogers' suffering led him to a deeper insight into the human person, this is not always the case. Rogers was aware that the failure to meet the fundamental human need to be accepted and loved could turn people away from the world and against others. Rogers' understanding of this dynamic seemed to take shape early in his theological thinking.

⁶ Tom Junod, 'My Friend Mister Rogers', *The Atlantic*, December 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/what-would-mister-rogers-do/600772/>.

⁷ Material found through courtesy of the Fred Rogers Center.

⁸ Fred Rogers, 'Invisible Essentials', May 10, 1997, Fred Rogers Center Archives, p. 5.

⁹ William Guy, 'The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*', in Margaret Mary Kimmel and Mark Collins, eds., *Mister Rogers Neighborhood: Children Television And Fred Rogers* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), pp. 102-104.

¹⁰ Wendy Murray Zoba, 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?', *Christianity Today*, March 6, 2000, 40.

In seminary, Rogers took a class on theology and psychology and, in it, wrote a paper entitled 'Anxiety and Guilt'.¹¹ He wrote that 'fear of disapproval' often resulted in a sense of guilt and anxiety. We come to a feeling 'of being disapproved of, of being unworthy, wrong' and so 'see ourselves or imagine ourselves not rating well with those about us'. This 'feeling of lovelessness' becomes the 'precondition of sin'. The feeling is not sinful, but, when people feel unwanted or unloved, Rogers felt they were more likely to turn on themselves or others. As a result, Rogers held that 'sin and anxiety become pretty well meshed'.¹²

For Rogers, this fear and anxiety do not just stop with personal sin. Sin damages one's relationship to others and so creates damaging social dynamics. Rogers calls this 'evil'. In his 'Invisible Essentials', one of his few sermons, Rogers writes, 'Evil will do anything to make you feel as bad as you possibly can about yourself ... because if you feel the worst about who you are, you will undoubtedly look with the evil eyes on your neighbor and you will get to believe the worst about him or her. Accuse yourself. Accuse your neighbor. Get your neighbor to accuse somebody else, and the evil thrives and spreads'.¹³ Rogers sees evil as a corrosive force that preys upon vulnerability to eat away at people by exacerbating their feeling of being unloved and unwanted. Then, evil flares out and afflicts others. It generates a vicious cycle where a person's sin damages others who damage even more people, creating a social environment that damages everyone, including the selves who began the cycle. It becomes a social force that overwhelms individuals, makes vulnerability more feared, and generates the preconditions for sin.

Rogers' diagnosis provides a valuable insight into our current cultural dynamics. Humans' fear can cause people to protect themselves at the cost of others. When people with power feel threatened, they turn to processes and rules, leaning into a system that favors them. Those people with less power tend to respond to fear by emphasizing outcomes and eschewing processes and institutions. Those with little or no power, close to powerlessness, can side with a prevailing unjust order fearing that change could make a situation worse.¹⁴ In each of these scenarios, fear turns people away from what is right, toward their own defense and against others. In populism, when part of a population that has historically had power feels that the culture or economy is

¹¹ Fred Rogers, 'Anxiety and Guilt', Fred Rogers Center Archives.

¹² Rogers, 'Anxiety and Guilt', p. 3.

¹³ Rogers, 'Invisible Essentials', p. 3.

¹⁴ Jojanneke van der Toorn, Matthew Feinberg, John Jost, Aaron Kay, Tom Tyler, Robb Willer, Caroline Wilmuth, 'A Sense of Powerlessness Fosters System Justification: Implications for the Legitimation of Authority, Hierarchy, and Government', *Political Psychology* 36, no. 1 (2015), pp. 94-95. See also, Tom Tyler, E. Allan Lind, Yuen Huo, 'Cultural Values and Authority Relations', *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 6, no. 4 (2000), pp. 1138-1163.

leaving them behind, they lash out against other vulnerable members of the population and claim that this population will destroy the country and so needs to be stopped.¹⁵ As Bryan Massingale predicted in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, the election of Barack Obama would be seen less as a sign of a post-racial society and more as a target for white ‘anxiety’. He writes, ‘Many white Americans are experiencing “culture shock” in their homeland, as the country is being transformed into something that is strange, unfamiliar, “foreign”, and threatening’.¹⁶ Similarly, Rogers grasped that vulnerability often leads to a fear that drives people into a mode of self-protection and turns other people into a threat. He notes that this fear rooted in feelings of being unloved or unwanted does not just harden the heart but also unleashes social and cultural forces that harm others.

However, Rogers’ diagnosis indicates that evil is not the inevitable outcome of vulnerability. Feeling unloved or unwanted can also move people to greater empathy. *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was an attempt to foster this direction in children. Part of his approach was never to commercialize his show. He believed people, especially children, were susceptible to buying things to feel better about themselves. The feeling, though, did not result from being accepted by others but by feeling better than others, by having things others did not. Instead of empathy, it generated competition, and as a substitute for love, such commercialization could easily become a precondition for sin.¹⁷ In episode 1521 of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, the 1983 week on conflict, Prince Tuesday gives voice to this reaction when he speculates positively about conflict, saying ‘yeah, but what if you win at war? You get to take everything the losers have!’ King Friday redirects this sentiment in the episode by singing a song about the many ways to solve a problem. Rogers refused to commercialize the show because he did not want to contribute to a ‘competitiveness that results from feeling underappreciated’.¹⁸

Rogers’ response to social forces of fear and anxiety was also through the visitors to his show. In ‘Play in the Real World’, Elizabeth Cooke notes that, when artists visited *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Rogers often asked them if they ‘had to practice hard’ or ‘made mistakes along the ways’.¹⁹ Rogers did not frame these visits as portrayals of the perfect expert, hiding their struggles and thereby implying viewers should hide their own vulnerability. Instead, Rogers focused on how

¹⁵ Eatwell and Goodwin, *National Populism*, chapter 4.

¹⁶ Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), p. 12.

¹⁷ Leroy T. Howe, ‘A Seminar with Fred Rogers’, *Perkins Journal* 31, no. 1 (1977): p. 4.

¹⁸ Guy, ‘Theology of Mister Rogers’, p. 106.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Cook, ‘Play in the Real World’, in Eric Mohr and Holly Mohr, eds., *Mister Rogers and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2020), p. 85.

people became who they are, attending to how even accomplished people learned and grew. It created understanding and empathy. In this way, Rogers was ‘uncovering [the] reality’ that vulnerability need not be feared and is part of a life of ongoing growth.²⁰

Likewise, visits to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe were not escapes from reality but explorations of alternatives to fear as a response to vulnerability. Unlike the live action neighborhood on the show, the Neighborhood of Make-Believe was fraught with issues, including family strife, war, and environmental disasters. Far from terrifying children though, Make-Believe presented an imaginary world that children could safely play in, engage, manipulate, experiment with, and question all kinds of fraught scenarios.²¹ This kind of play provided children experiences that generated insights about the real world. Rogers knew ‘that pretending offers an important opportunity to learn because sometimes parts of reality can be seen and understood more clearly from the perspective of the pretend world’.²² Children learned to take on different perspectives, to create new things, and to explore different ways of acting.²³ Rogers wants children to ‘work and rework and rework the themes of [any] particular story as they applied to him or her’ so they can explore their own vulnerability as a realm of possibilities rather than something to fear.²⁴ This is why, even in situations where children are in extreme depravity, Rogers thought the show could be ‘enormously enhancing’ as it could create otherwise inaccessible possibilities for positively hearing, seeing, and creatively engaging different parts of the world.²⁵ This ‘open ended’ play meant that children ‘never lose [their] true selves exploring a make-believe world’ but rather discover ‘truer selves’.²⁶ Cooke summarizes Rogers’ view by saying play helps children discover ‘what matters most, what is most real’ in themselves and the world around them.²⁷

Rogers also used puppets to imaginatively explore vulnerability in ways that avoided fear. As Rogers says, ‘Puppetry is very close to what I’ve done for a long time; I feel the closeness in hand puppets because you actually have your hand in it, but there is also enough distance that that puppet can say something that this mouth may not want to say’.²⁸ Puppets have a way of helping people understand themselves and, through empathy, understand others. In ‘Puppets are People, Too’,

²⁰ Cook, ‘Play in the Real World’, p. 86.

²¹ Cook, ‘Play in the Real World’, p. 87.

²² Cook, ‘Play in the Real World’, p. 87.

²³ Cook, ‘Play in the Real World’, pp. 89-90.

²⁴ Howe, ‘A Seminar with Fred Rogers’, p. 1.

²⁵ Howe, ‘A Seminar with Fred Rogers’, p. 3.

²⁶ Cook, ‘Play in the Real World’, pp. 88-89.

²⁷ Cook, ‘Play in the Real World’, p. 91.

²⁸ Howe, ‘A Seminar With Fred Rogers’, p. 2.

Sara Lindey and Jason King argue that, for Rogers, puppets function as a kind of cyborg.²⁹ They are not a mechanized enhancement of human beings that expand their physical strength or capacity for harm. Instead, the low-tech puppet enhances human empathy. Puppets enable people to voice feelings and ideas that come from inside them, sometimes what they fear to say as themselves, and voice feelings and ideas that come from others. They can help people engage in a dialogue through a being that is different from but also connected to themselves. The puppeteers understanding of the world is expanded, including their understanding of other people and their feelings, and so helps expand empathy within the self and for others.

Thus, through refusing to commercialize his work, exploring how people grew and developed, and fostering imagination through make-believe and puppets, Rogers' show was meant to be a social force fostering empathy in response to vulnerability and countering evil flowing from sin and fear. This is Rogers' work of trying 'to enter into the feelings of others'.³⁰ He is trying to increase acceptance and empathy in children. Or, as Rogers says in episode 1520 in a week on caregiving, 'You'll know you're growing by how much care you're giving'.³¹ As a result, Rogers approached his show as a 'tremendous ministry'.³² As Shea Tuttle noted in her *Exactly as You Are: The Life and Faith of Mister Rogers*, Rogers' show was an exploration of people, emotions, and relationships.³³ It introduced children to new possibilities they could enact, whether they be through puppets, pretend, or artistic creations. Rogers hoped that the show could help children see their 'deep down inside' need to love and be accepted in ways that averts fear and anxiety and so sin and evil.

'You Always Make Each Day Such a Special Day'

Rogers' key response to the need for love and acceptance was his principle that people are special. It is a principle so clearly associated with Rogers that it is often used against him. Critics range from claiming it is a meaningless platitude to a source of narcissism in children.³⁴ These

²⁹ Sara Lindy and Jason King, 'Puppets Are People Too', in Eric Mohr and Holly Mohr, eds., *Mister Rogers and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2020), p. 105.

³⁰ Guy, 'The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*', p. 119.

³¹ Episode 1520, 1983. Quoted in Guy, 'The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*', p. 117.

³² Howe, 'A Seminar with Fred Rogers', p. 2.

³³ Shea Tuttle, *Exactly as You Are: The Life and Faith of Mister Roger* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2019), p. 68.

³⁴ Amy Davidson Sorkin, 'The Two Freds: When Phelps Protested Mr. Rogers's Memorial', *The New Yorker*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-two-freds-when-phelps-protested-mr-rogerss-memorial>; David Mikkelsen, 'Did 'Fox

interpretations, however, fail to comprehend Rogers' principle. They assume that specialness is just a description about people. Instead, specialness is more about how to treat people. It is a principle about how to respond to people's vulnerability.

In trying to counter a fearful response to vulnerability, Rogers made himself vulnerable on almost every show. Rogers would ask simple questions or participate in activities that would be embarrassing for an adult. In episode 1543, Rogers tried to breakdance. In episode 1636, he put on a racoon mask and crawled on the floor. In episode 1618, Rogers was unable complete a puzzle and said he would need someone to help him. These examples of vulnerability and the many others like them were intentional. Rogers saw vulnerability not as a weakness to be hidden but as an openness for relationships, an opportunity for solidarity with his viewers. The expression of vulnerability could turn people toward each other, bringing them together, so that they might feel safe showing their own vulnerability and their need for love.

This understanding of vulnerability was one of the reasons why Rogers believed one of his greatest gifts was to be his honest self.³⁵ He felt that showing people and viewers his true self would make it easier for them to be their true selves. This link would create greater empathy instead of greater fear. Rogers believed that 'if we can all talk about our needs, and if we can all open up and respond to each other, then everyone will get the attention and the love' they need.³⁶ Because Rogers felt a connection through vulnerability was possible, he believed the space between himself and others, especially his television viewers, was holy ground.³⁷ It was a means by which 'his television neighbors [could] understand the loving interplay between him and them'.³⁸

This idea – that if our need for love is met, we love others – is the basis for Rogers' use of specialness. The origin of the phrase comes from Rogers' Grandfather McFeely. When Rogers would visit him as a child, Grandfather McFeely would say, 'you've made this day special by being here'. This expression of love met Rogers' need and helped him to grow into a more caring adult. This experience led Rogers to conclude his show by saying, 'You always make each day such a

and Friends' Call Fred Rogers an "Evil, Evil Man"?' *Snopes*, August 12, 2009, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/fox-fred-rogers-evil/>; Lawrence Diller, 'Mr. Rogers Was Wrong', *Psychology Today*, April 20, 2008, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-last-normal-child/200804/mr-rogers-was-wrong>; Jeffrey Zaslow, 'Blame It on Mr. Rogers: Why Young Adults Feel So Entitled', *The Wall Street Journal*, July 5, 2007, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB118358476840657463>.

³⁵ Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World's Most Beloved Neighbor* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), p. 51.

³⁶ Guy, 'The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*', p. 113.

³⁷ Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, p. 35.

³⁸ Wendy Murray Zoba, 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?', *Christianity Today*, March 6, 2000, p. 43.

special day. You know how: by just you being you. There's only one person in the whole world exactly like you, and that's you yourself, and people can like you exactly as you are'. Rogers was hoping to do on his show what his grandfather did for him: meet people's basic need for love and move them to love others.

In his song 'It's You I Like', Roger felt he was communicating this idea of specialness. The key stanza was, 'It's you I like. It's not the things you wear. It's not the way you do your hair. But it's you I like. The way you are right now, the way down deep inside you'. As Rogers explains, 'When I say it's you I like ... I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive: Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war, and justice that proves more powerful than greed'.³⁹ It is the affirmation of this 'way down deep inside' aspect that initiates the love of and care for others. People who are loved for who they are commit to peace and justice and so express love that 'is a hard, active noun, more like "struggle" than "affection"'.⁴⁰

Rogers' affirmation of specialness is also an active noun, like struggle more than affection. It was to address the human need to love and to be loved and so help people to love others. Specialness was meant to encourage—to put courage into—children such that they could grow safely and securely into adults who could come to love others. Or, as Rogers said, 'As a child is loved, he loves in return'.⁴¹ However, there are children who are vulnerable and who can be subject to forces that harm them. They can come to fear the world, dislike themselves, and act on these feelings in ways that harm others. Rogers' specialness is meant to counter these possibilities. While it is not foolproof as some children will not respond to such affirmation, Rogers' understanding of specialness is meant to make it more likely that children will turn toward love instead of hate, like the young Rogers did. Moreover, it is meant to make those who respond with love outnumber and surround those who do not. Specialness is meant to create an environment where the effects of those who love far exceed the damaging effects of those who fear and enact sin.

As a result, Roger's specialness is a way of countering the social dynamics of evil. In 'The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*', William Guy names Rogers' approach a system of circulating love.⁴² 'It is an ethical system that ... [shows] love to other people so that those other people can eventually show love in return'.⁴³ People's sense of

³⁹ Matt Malone, 'Life in the Neighborhood', *America*, March 5, 2018, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Malone, 'Life in the Neighborhood', p. 3.

⁴¹ Zoba, 'Won't You Be My Neighbor?', p. 43.

⁴² Guy, 'The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*', p. 106.

⁴³ Guy, 'The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*', p. 106.

love overflows. The ‘confirmation of one’s own unique importance’ moves one ‘to become aware of other people’s needs, which are like one’s own’.⁴⁴ In recognizing one’s own specialness, one can recognize the specialness of others. We can help others see they are loved, and, in so doing, they can go on and love others. The circulation of love loops around, so that others love us and enable us to love others. It becomes a social force drawing in more and more people. Even those who do not respond to love are swept up in this circulating system, neither abandoned nor halting all the people who love others. This system goes beyond just interpersonal relationships though. It is a kind of ‘ecstatic naturalism’ that expands to connect ‘life in all its forms’.⁴⁵ It is a system captured by Rogers’ belief that, when people meet another’s human need for love, they are ‘loving someone into existence’.⁴⁶ All of this is embedded in the phrase, less an affirmation and more a call to action, that ‘you are special’.

Perhaps Rogers’ principle of specialness is often dismissed because it seems unable to address the systemic problems of society. As Pew Research noted in November of 2020, ‘Americans have rarely been as polarized as they are today’.⁴⁷ Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* noted the racial disparity in our society that the criminal justice system exacerbates, and Kate Manne’s *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* has explored how society controls and marginalizes women.⁴⁸ Robert Putnam’s *Our Kids* have highlighted increasingly divided economic classes, and Bill Bishop’s *The Big Sort* has noted increasingly divided places.⁴⁹ Social media seems to inflame our animosity toward those who differ from us.⁵⁰ Nowhere does it seem there is a system of circulating love.

However, as Bryan Massingale notes, ‘Visions, metaphors, and images have a dynamism that pulls those captivated by them to unknown and unforeseen places; thus they are fertile ground of risk-taking behaviors and daring acts of resistance for the sake of justice’.⁵¹ This

⁴⁴ Guy, ‘The Theology of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*’, p. 106.

⁴⁵ Guy, ‘The Theology of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*’, p. 114.

⁴⁶ Zoba, ‘Won’t You Be My Neighbor?’, p. 40.

⁴⁷ Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, ‘America is Exceptional in the Nature of its Political Divide’, *Pew Research Center*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>.

⁴⁸ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Kate Manne’s *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴⁹ Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2008).

⁵⁰ William Brady, Julian Wills, John Jost, Joshua Tucker, and Jay Van Bavel, ‘Emotion Shapes the Diffusion of Moralized Content in Social Networks’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 114, no. 28 (2017), pp. 7313-7318.

⁵¹ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, p. 136.

imagining is what Rogers does in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. In his 'The Virtues of Art', David Boersema notes how Rogers was 'building community with others'.⁵² Rogers says that 'in order to express our sense of reality, we must use some kind of symbol: words or notes or shades of paint or television pictures or sculpted forms'.⁵³ This expression shapes children emotionally; so Rogers 'consciously and intentionally' used art to help 'children become fulfilled and virtuous persons'.⁵⁴ This formation happened through collaboration with others and with emotional connections powerful enough 'to create change'.⁵⁵ Ultimately, for Boersema, Rogers' show was meant 'to help us (make us?) see the world differently, and may even be a means of social and political activism'.⁵⁶

This approach is why Carol Zelski, in her short reflection, calls *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* 'sacred art, for it's clear that this gentle and canny minister saw himself as offering through television the biblical hospitality that makes pilgrims and strangers welcome'.⁵⁷ The hospitality of Rogers' show 'transcends the specific theme of any single episode'.⁵⁸ The show imagines a new kind of world, where welcoming is more prominent than fear, where people and creation are special. It is a community imagined through things like a trolley, a living room, crafts, and a Neighborhood of Make-Believe.⁵⁹ It is a 'sacramental view' of the world where a spiritual world can be seen in ordinary life.⁶⁰ As Chris Buczinsky notes in 'The Performance of the Pastoral', 'Throughout its 895 episodes, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* created a picture of an ideal community for American children. It was a model *of*, and to some extent a model *for*, community: both a framework within which children might begin to see their own neighborhood and a blueprint for the community that his audience, Mister Rogers' "television neighbor", might someday help to build'.⁶¹ Through the sacred art of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, Rogers was showing the social impact of his principle of specialness, highlighting that it was not a banal

⁵² David Boersema, 'The Virtues of Art', in Eric J. Mohr and Holly K. Mohr, eds., *Mister Rogers and Philosophy: Wondering Through the Neighborhood* (Chicago: Open Court, 2020), p. 71.

⁵³ Boersema, 'The Virtues of Art', p. 70.

⁵⁴ Boersema, 'The Virtues of Art', p. 69.

⁵⁵ Boersema, 'The Virtues of Art', p. 71-72.

⁵⁶ Boersema, 'The Virtues of Art', p. 73.

⁵⁷ Carol Zaleski, 'Mister Rogers', *Christian Century*, April 19, 2003, p. 35.

⁵⁸ Chris Buczinsky, 'The Performance of the Pastoral', in Kathy Merlock Jackson and Steven M. Emmanuel, eds., *Revisiting Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Essays on Lessons About Self and Community* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2015), p. 9.

⁵⁹ Zaleski, 'Mister Rogers', p. 35.

⁶⁰ Guy, 'The Theology of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*', p. 105.

⁶¹ Buczinsky, "The Performance of the Pastoral," p. 8.

aphorism but a challenge to people to love others, and so a new kind of community, into existence.

‘God is the Foundation’

Through his explicit theological works, Rogers indicates that God is the foundation of love and sustainer of the system of circulating love. In his graduate school paper ‘Sin and Covenant’, Rogers describes God as the ‘covenant-partner’ with humanity and the uniqueness of humanity as the creatures ‘to whom God related’. The principal concern of the Bible is ‘with God and his relationship to men and the ancillary relationships between men’.⁶² In this context, sin is ‘correlated with covenant’ because it ‘points to a broken relationship’.⁶³ As noted in ‘Anxiety and Guilt’, humans’ anxiety about being unloved is the precondition of sin, and sin is an isolation from and hostility toward others. Because of God’s covenantal love with humanity, sin means that the disruption between people puts people at odds with God. God, though, does not desire to leave people in this situation and so enacts love.

God meets people’s need to know they are loved and unique because ‘God is the foundation of life, the ground of being, the undergirding reality that prevents everything falling through into meaninglessness and dread’.⁶⁴ For Rogers, God’s love is manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. However, Rogers does not believe that God’s love is restricted to the time Jesus walked on Earth. God’s love is an enduring presence. As Rogers’ notes in his ‘Sermon for Installation of the Reverend Kenneth L. Barley’, ‘That’s the way it is with Jesus Christ. Through his resurrection and ascension, he gave us the gift of God’s Holy Spirit which we can always count on. Whenever you feel you’re in the middle of a personal wilderness – of any kind – the way to find that place of quiet where the real you can be ultimately found, you need only ask in your own way, “Dear God, Please help me” and you’ll see. God is right there at your side, walking along with you’.⁶⁵

God’s presence, Rogers believed, was experienced through other people. God is found in people who love us, people whom Rogers calls ‘helpers’.⁶⁶ These people are those whom God is working with and through. As Rogers’ writes in his ‘Invisible Essentials’ sermon, ‘my belief in the caring nature of God came from all of those people – all of those extraordinary, ordinary people who believed that I was more

⁶² Fred Rogers, ‘Sin and Covenant’, Fred Rogers Center Archives, pp. 3-4.

⁶³ Rogers, ‘Sin and Covenant’, p. 4.

⁶⁴ Guy, ‘The Theology of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*’, p. 111.

⁶⁵ Fred Rogers, ‘Sermon for Installation of the Reverend Kenneth L. Barley’, January 15, 1989, Fred Rogers Center Archives, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Rogers, ‘Invisible Essentials’, p. 6.

than I thought I was – all those saints who helped a fat, shy kid to see more clearly what was really essential’.⁶⁷ God is also found in the people who are at the margins of society, ‘God is in the midst of the needy, the helpless, the weak, the sad, the lonely people who are living along every road in every kind of wilderness. All we need to do is listen for the presence in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in any place at any time. For whether we realize it or not, God is with us always in this life and the life everlasting’.⁶⁸

This belief that God’s love works in and through the love of people, especially those on the margins of society, is why, when Rogers visited people who were sick or disabled, he often asked them to pray for him. It was an act portrayed in the 2019 film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* where Rogers visits Lloyd’s dying father Jerry and asks for his prayers. In Rogers’ real life, when he had asked a teenager with cerebral palsy to pray for him, the boy ‘was “thunderstruck” because “nobody had ever *asked* him for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed *for*. The boy had always been the *object* of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mister Rogers, and although at first he didn’t know if he could do it, he said he would, he said he’d try, and ever since then he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn’t talk about wanting to die anymore”’.⁶⁹

Rogers attends to the vulnerable because ‘much of what in the “real world” might be branded as weakness may turn out to be divinest strength in that it affords an opportunity for the divine affirmation of specialness to shine through and for familial bonds to be forged between people’.⁷⁰ Through what the world often perceives as weakness, Rogers finds God’s presence, and this presence calls people to care for each other and build bonds of love. This love is to enact God’s own love. It is defined less by intention and more by effects. It is meeting people’s need to be accepted, responding to vulnerability with affirmation. It is welcoming others and so making them feel secure. It builds relationships and makes people neighbors. Often, these are not grand gestures but rather small actions, almost invisible to society, but they are what make people feel loved and have the courage to love others. With this genuine way of loving, God starts, sustains, and is known through a system of circulating love. By drawing more people, more of creation into a loving community, a true neighborhood, heaven, God works through people to meet each other’s need for acceptance and belonging.

⁶⁷ Rogers, ‘Invisible Essentials’, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Rogers, ‘Invisible Essentials’, p. 9.

⁶⁹ Zoba, ‘Won’t You Be My Neighbor?’, p. 45.

⁷⁰ Guy, ‘The Theology of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*’, pp. 111–112.

Mister Rogers' Demanding Theology

In today's society, when fear and division are prominent, Rogers' theology provides a diagnosis. He argues that the problem is rooted in the human heart. It grows out of our need for acceptance and love, a vulnerability that is fundamental to our humanity. When this need is not met and fear of vulnerability dominates, people turn in on themselves and lash out at others. Their fear unleashes forces, what Rogers calls evil, that flow out into society, exacerbating fear and creating the preconditions for sin. These forces become a vicious circle as people encounter hostility, become more hostile themselves, and make it more likely that others will become hostile.

Rogers' solution is not just kindness but a more demanding response. He offers a response that calls for new social forces, countervailing forces, that create new dynamics in people and society. It begins with the principle of specialness. People need to know that they are loved and accepted, and the affirmation of specialness meets this need. The principle does more than this though. It calls people to recognize the specialness in others, to love others as they need to be loved, and, so, to love others into existence. Rogers' principle sets in motion a system of circulating love, a counter to the dynamics of evil. Instead of unleashing harm through opposition between one's self and others, Rogers' call to specialness is to unleash empathy and care and so expand hospitality so that more and more people are brought into the dynamics of love.

While we might be more familiar with animosity and division in our society, Rogers' call to specialness pushes us to imagine a different way of being and relating. It is to help us see past fear and hostility to the possibility of neighborhoods and communities of care. Rogers' call is to imagine and enact new ways of human flourishing. It is a demanding vision as it calls us not to act out of fear and so devolve into attacking others but to live in new ways that seek to make neighbors of others. This does not mean that we let sin and evil reign, that we let a populism continually attack and diminish others. Rogers' vision is meant to stop this by bringing together a new type of community that counters those forces of evil with a system of circulating love. It is meant to provide an alternative way of being and so welcome others into its community, thereby diminishing evil by diminishing the number of people who perpetuate it.

Rogers' vision of this new community, one that tries to live out a system of circulating love, has distinctive characteristics. It is not a static place or building but a network of relationships where people try to love each other into existence. It is where people try to be helpers. This community must listen to God, and to hear God, they must listen to the people around them. In particular, they must listen to the people that society most often marginalizes, like the vulnerable, sick and poor.

Only if the community is truly listening to God would it be truly special and able to overcome evil.

This special community is the response Rogers' theology offers to a populism or a polarized society. It is neither just being a nice person nor fighting fire with fire. It is more demanding than both. Rogers' approach is to live differently. It calls people to act as God does and to respond to vulnerability with love. It rejects evil that destroys self and others, and in the face of those who sin and so generate such evil, Rogers says to keep being a community, a neighborhood, that perpetuates a system of circulating love. It even keeps its doors open in case these people want to become part of this community. It is a community of helpers that are to love everyone into new life.

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