

**DANCES WITH TRUTH; 2 SAMUEL 6:12b-19; JULY 15, 2018;  
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Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood has made a comeback. There's a new documentary about him now showing in major theaters and a dramatic Hollywood version of his life starring Tom Hanks to be released this fall and none too soon. We are living in hard times and most of us, adults included, especially those on ethnic and economic margins, need a safe place where we are accepted 'just the way we are.'

Carol and I recently went to see "Won't You Be My Neighbor." The documentary opens with a young Mr. Rogers in a grainy black and white film sitting at a piano, looking into the camera, talking about where his vision for helping children came from. Then the scene shifts to the first production of his television show and what became its iconic opening as he comes through the stage set door, singing his trademark song, steps onto the little staircase, walks down the steps to the closet, opens the closet door, takes off his jacket, dons his sweater, sits on the bench by the steps, then takes off his street shoes, puts on his sneakers then feeds the fish and watches them in silence.

This was not a multi-million dollar, high drama documentary. Yet, less than five minutes into it I felt a tear roll down my cheek, then noticed others around us sniffing and wiping their tears away. A bit startled, I wondered: why are we all crying? Then it occurred to me, we were watching one of the last public figures known simply as good man who devoted his life to showing us how to be good neighbors, *while we are living* in a culture that has fallen increasingly into the grip of cynicism, greed and violence.

The documentary goes on to recount how Rogers as a young college graduate with a deep sense of calling shaped and fulfilled his dream of finding ways to respect the dignity of children by using the new medium of television.

In the process, he became a leading advocate for children from the late 1960s to his death in 2003. The documentary reminds us how Rogers helped kids understand and equipped their parents to explain not just the world of feelings like anger and sadness and experiences like grief and disability but also the big events of that era: the Vietnam War, the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the Challenger space shuttle tragedy, racial bigotry and segregation especially in the South, and finally the 9-11 terrorist attacks which took a toll on Rogers as he tried to fathom how to tell children what it was all about.

At the core of Rogers' message were two biblical pillars – which have their roots in the Old Testament and were often on the lips of Jesus: one, we are each made in the image of God and two, each of us is called to love our neighbor as ourselves. It isn't surprising that Rogers embraced these tenets since he was an ordained Presbyterian minister. Yet the doctrinal side of these biblical and theological principles never appears in his work with children; rather he focused on everyday regard for oneself and others using his menagerie of hand puppets to tell stories about kindness, citizenship and courage.

That we are made in the image of God implies that every human has a soul which gives us a moral conscience and bestows on each of us intrinsic worth; Rogers knew that we are each innately aware of these deep formative truths about ourselves and he knew that children could recognize these innate gifts and qualities in themselves. Treating others the way we want to be treated makes sense if you see your neighbor as a person like you with thoughts and feelings and friends and family.

These are basic values found in every religious tradition and most ancient philosophies. Rogers' genius was that he illustrated these principles in such simple and compelling ways that his young viewers trusted him implicitly and applied his counsel to their own lives. In one scene Rogers talks about winning the trust of a group of children who were testing him to see if he was going to take their concerns seriously. When he passed their test, responding to a boy who said his stuffed animal lost an ear in the dishwasher, he said it was like the door swung open and he was given a passport into their world.

Fred Rogers shaped the emotional health of kids whose deepened awareness of self and neighbor rippled through their families, schools and neighborhoods. His goal for which he was famously ridiculed and made fun of was to meet kids at their level and counter the cartoonish violence designed to keep their attention until the commercial.

As if I'd planned it, the next day after the Rogers' documentary I went to Chautauqua and heard ethicist, David Gushie, chaplain for the week, David Brooks of the *New York Times* and John Halpin, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.

What I realized listening to all three is that Mr. Rogers was the endpoint of a century long enculturation of progressive moral/ethical principles rooted in biblical values; Brooks and Halpin explained how these religious values fused with secular movements that gave us a remarkable era of progress, yet is now being replaced by a culture of aggressive, survival of the fittest tribalism.

That progressive era was not perfect. We were and still are plagued by racism; we still make scapegoats of those on the margins; men were largely in charge excluding women from business and professional opportunities. We were late to acknowledge that LGBTQ persons deserve rights like anyone else. And our care for the earth has been terrible. Even a century of progressive values did not result in utopia.

But for over a century society placed its trust in a moral/ethical framework that called for the good of all and created civic movements, institutions and the political will that translated into broad-minded policies and opportunity for more people.

Brooks said the shift from a communal, serve-the-common good society came from an individualism that began in the '60s but has reached extremes.

What happened was that one social/historical movement gave way to another; and we can almost perfectly locate it in time by the two quarterbacks who met in the 1963 Super Bowl: crew cut, team player Johnny Unitas and ten year younger, mink coat wearing, rock star, narcissist Joe Namath. You might recall the title of Namath's book: "I Can't Wait For Tomorrow Because I Get Better Looking Everyday."

Fast forward to 2018. President Trump is less the cause than the reflection of an era that is Namath on steroids. The symptoms of extreme individualism are not just the gilded age watches, cars and luxury apartments advertised in glossy magazines but loneliness, the erosion of trust, depression and politics driven by fear and hatred.

Consider the statistics – 45,000 suicide deaths a year, which is really just a proxy for loneliness; 55,000 opioid deaths which are slow suicides; and a tidal wave of people who identify as unaffiliated as seen in the rising number of those who claim to be political independents as well as the fastest growing religious group in America that claims to be spiritual but who respond to the question of religious affiliation by checking the box labeled “none.”

The erosion of trust is no surprise – a generation ago we had a few trusted media news sources, now each of us has our own trusted sources. Yale 20<sup>th</sup> historian and Pulitzer Prize expert on fascism Tim Snyder says our institutions are in danger and need our support at a time when they are under attack and not trusted – from intelligence agencies, to the courts, to health care, to universities, to churches. A recent survey reports only 35% of Americans trust immediate family and friends and just 19% of millennials trust their immediate circle.

Depression is the next logical symptom in a world of loneliness and distrust. Nietzsche said, “He who has a why to live for can endure anything.” But judging from the levels of loneliness and distrust we’ve given the current generation no ‘why’ to root their lives in. Commencement speeches extol ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy’ and ‘you being you’ when what young adults need is a moral/emotional “why” to live for.

Brooks teaches at Yale and has come to expect the desperate phone calls of former students who’ve been out a few years. While they achieve success in the world’s eyes – jobs on Wall St. or prestigious fellowships – when a crisis occurs, a death in the family or the breakup of a romance they are emotionally lost. They’re asking the wrong question of life, he says, which is not “what do I want from life” but “what is life asking of me.” Once they start asking that second question they often discover their true professional calling.

Finally, we are living in an age of politics driven by fear and anger. Gone are the party affiliations that were philosophically based; if you ask a member of a party today what they think of the opposite party they’ll say they’re barbarians and thugs but if you ask them if they’re committed to their own party they’ll say ‘not so much.’ What we want is to damage a system or party or elite that ignores our values.

The result is not the age of Trump but the age of tribalism; and its threat is to the very core of our freedoms; if Pearl Harbor was a wake up call for the generation of WWII, Brooks says, we are now witnessing more than a few ‘silent Pearl Harbors.’

The question is not what do I want from life but what does life ask of me; all three presenters at Chautauqua said the answer is clear.

It is an answer I am hearing more and more people recognize and commit to; and an answer to societal problems Westminster discovered and implemented a century ago.

What I'm talking about is what we did in 1904 when we founded and staffed Westminster House east of Main St. Our spiritual ancestors who led this congregation recognized an entire urban population of poor, struggling German immigrants and responded to their physical, emotional and economic plight.

We were among the first to get on board with a movement sweeping across the country, started by a Rochester Baptist preacher, Walter Rauschenbusch, who had a church in New York's Hell's Kitchen and said we can't talk to people about their spiritual needs until their physical needs are addressed. This became known as the "Social Gospel" and fifty years later psychologist Abraham Maslow said the same thing; humans have a 'hierarchy' of needs. Until shelter, food, clothing, and safety are in place people live in turmoil.

So the Settlement House and Social Gospel movements embraced the Parable of the Good Samaritan and recognized their neighbor in the physical and emotional needs of the urban and rural poor.

In the early 1900s all kinds of civic institutions like the YM and YWCAs; Boy and Girl Scouts; labor unions; child service agencies; and the NAACP were founded to serve neighbors in need. Teddy Roosevelt began championing the causes of the poor and oppressed and initiated an era of sweeping reforms in labor and industry. And nearly every president after him added to this legacy.

We are living at a time of striking disparity and polarization; it is increasingly clear what we are lacking and what we need to do to return from the angry, aggressive, self serving age we live in and become again a society that values each human being regardless of color, creed or immigration status.

I'm saying the politics of fear and revenge and tribal culture that are shaping the present is not inevitable or necessary. What all of us, regardless of party, want is something better, something that reconnects us to one another. This is true even for the harshest nationalists, racists and bigots because we are at our core what Mr. Rogers said we are: moral creatures. Fear and depravity convince us we have to fight.

Life now asks of us our full attention and engagement. Religious and civic leaders are calling for citizens to start civic movements and organizations, to get involved in politics, to run for office, to become patriotic not just to the nation but in a local way – to Buffalo, to WNY and to reclaim our history and freedoms as a nation. We have an emerging mission east of Main St. that will meet several of those goals.

Today's story pictures King David a flawed leader with an ego the size of Mt. Hermon and a serious case of infidelity when he had an affair with Bathsheeba after he sent her husband into battle knowing he would be killed.

But the one thing David never lost sight of was the importance of the Ark of the Covenant – the tablets of the law (or constitution) on which Israel's safety, security and future rested. His rejoicing at returning the Ark back to Jerusalem feels to me like the kind of rejoicing we long and hope for when our rights and freedoms, now in such grave danger, are restored. But it won't happen without a revival of commitment from us to the values of our faith and democracy. Amen.