

**A Christian's Wardrobe Essentials**  
**Colossians 3:12-17**

In November the movie “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” starring Tom Hanks as the beloved Mr. Rogers opened in theaters. For anyone over 21 years of age a picture of Fred Rogers in his trademark red cardigan brings back powerful memories of the PBS Television series “Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood” that was a mainstay of many a childhood. For 34 years Fred Rogers opened his show by coming into his home, taking off his jacket, hanging it up in the closet, donning his zip up red cardigan, putting on his tennis shoes and inviting us to be his neighbor. Generations of children learned about many people in the neighborhood as Mr. Rogers talked about many subjects that were scary and challenging. He once said he believed that if we could “make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service for mental health.” Somehow I think we still need to work on his life’s dream.

Since Fred Rogers death in 2003 there have been several documentaries on his life and the movie “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” is the latest attempt to tell his story. And yet when I saw it this week I was struck that it is not so much a story of his life as a story about the effect his life had on other people. And I wonder if there isn’t a lesson there for us.

The movie tells the real life story of Fred Roger’s relationship with Tom Junod, who is known in the movie as Lloyd Vogel, a journalist who was assigned to profile the television host for Esquire magazine in 1998. As a cynical investigative writer, Vogel was initially hoping to uncover the dark side of the cheery public figure for he did not believe anyone could really be that genuine. And yet what one sees in the movie and has been revealed by those who knew Fred Rogers was that he really was the kind, compassionate, caring man everyone knew from the TV show.

There is a powerful minor scene in the movie featuring Fred Rogers' wife Joanne. Vogel asked her what it was like being married to a "living saint." She immediately rejected his premise saying "If you think of him being a saint, his way of living is unattainable. It is a practice and he works at it." She knew Fred Rogers well and she knew that he worked at - practiced this art of loving and caring - in the same way that he practiced playing the piano - another one of his loves. What that means for us my friends is that in Mr. Rogers we see someone who early on in his life made a conscious decision to live in a Christlike manner. He took on the mind of Christ and shaped his life around a desire to make everyone around him a neighbor - a friend. And that means that it is possible to become the person Paul describes in our passage today but it takes practice - effort - a conscious decision to live in a certain way every day of our lives. Paul knew that and Mr. Rogers knew that.

As I was reading our scripture for today I began to reflect on the symbolism of Mr. Rogers donning his red cardigan and his tennis shoes at the beginning of each episode. In many ways Fred Rogers actions are similar to what Paul was encouraging the people of Colossians to do. For Paul was describing the new life that comes through baptism but he knew it didn't just magically happen with baptism. It took a conscious effort on the part of those who had been baptized. Earlier in his letter Paul talked about putting away the ways of the world and then moved to talk about clothing oneself with certain traits. The essential traits of Christ. In the ancient baptism liturgies of the church the person who had been baptized would literally take off their clothes, be baptized and then put on a new fresh garment after being immersed in the baptismal waters. It was symbolic of the new life that had begun when baptized into a life with Christ. Fred Rogers trademark cardigan hangs in the Smithsonian as a testament to the cultural influence of his simple daily ritual. And yet when you know the whole story of Mr. Rogers you realize that not only when he was wearing the cardigan but throughout his life he made a conscious effort to embody the essential characteristics that Paul

identified. These were the essential pieces of his wardrobe: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace and thankfulness. Watching Tom Hanks masterful portrayal of Fred Rogers reminds us that these characteristics take practice - they require intentionality. And yet I have known other people like Fred Rogers - people who have lived their faith daily not as saints but as faithful Christians seeking to live in the way of Christ. And friends, our world is a better place because they lived and practiced the faith.

You may or may not know that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. He graduated from Pittsburgh Seminary and was ordained to do the work he did. But he did not make a big deal out of his ordination. He chose instead to use his calling to teach children through the medium of television. It was not his ordination that motivated him to service but his baptism as a child of God. He once said “I’d like to be remembered for being a compassionate human being who happened to be fortunate enough to be born at a time when there was a fabulous thing called television that could allow me to use all the talents that had been given.” And that is how he is remembered today. For he every day in every situation clothed himself with these essential characteristics. One of the things the movie points out is how Fred Rogers continued to do many of the ordinary things of life like riding a subway or taking a bus. He did not let his fame go to his head and he did not reveal in the power that fame gave him. He just continued to daily care for others and because of the way he lived his life others were drawn to him.

The movie is really a great deal more than a story of Fred Rogers life. It is a story of the role of forgiveness in our lives. If you struggle with forgiveness or with forgiving someone take the time to see this movie for there are so many powerful moments that reveal how freeing forgiveness can be. As Mr. Rogers shares compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience with Lloyd a way for Lloyd to forgive his father is revealed and in the process we witness how binding love can become.

After seeing the movie and reflecting on Paul's powerful words I began to wonder what would happen in our world if we - the baptized - as God's chosen ones, chose to fill our wardrobes with these same essential characteristics and daily took the time to put them on - to make it a practice as Fred Rogers did - to love others and to show compassion and care to our neighbors.

What would happen to our community - to Covenant Presbyterian Church and those who live around us - if each one of us chose love as our guiding virtue - the thing that binds us together - and lived thankful lives. If we chose *to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

So as we today install new elders and move into another year as a community of faith centering our lives on Christ's ways I challenge us to consider what would happen if we made our priority to get to know our neighbors and invited them into our lives?

What would happen if we offered compassion to those we meet on the street, in the grocery store, at our favorite restaurant, at the Senior Citizens center or at the gym?

What if we practiced being kind to everyone we meet even when the world around us is not being kind to others?

What if we made it a priority to centered on the needs of others humbling ourselves to serve instead of placing our needs above our neighbors needs?

What if we listened more and talked less? What would we learn about the concerns of our neighbors and their needs? What if we asked probing questions of others instead of talking about our own needs and interests first?

What if our priorities were to find a way to get along with one another instead of identifying differences that set us apart?

What if our motivation was to understand others and situations so that forgiveness would be

possible?

What if love and peace were our first thoughts and what motivated our actions instead of hate and animosity?

What if we took time every day to think about those who helped us and said thank you God for helpers?

I wonder how our community inside and outside these walls might be changed by our actions? I think it is worth a try. It worked for Fred Rogers....What do you think? Will you join me in living as Christ calls us to live?