



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker  
August 5, 2018 Sermon

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## Won't You Be My Neighbor? Gifts of the Spirit: Goodness Lasts

Scripture Lessons: Colossians 3:12-15

*I'm so convinced that the space between the television set and the viewer is holy ground, and what we put on the television can, by the Holy Spirit, be translated into what this person needs to hear and see, and without that translation it's all dross as far as I'm concerned. . . . In fact, there have been times when people have said, "You know that program in which you did such and such and said such and such," and I'll look back at the script, I hadn't said that at all—but that person would say to me, "That meant so much to me." And I thought, "Well, happily, you got the words that you needed at that moment."—Fred Rogers, in an interview with Amy Hollingsworth, 1994*

Let's climb into Mr. Peabody's Wayback machine, crawl into Doc Brown's De Lorean, and spin Hermione's time-turner to travel back in time to the 80's—the *nineteen* eighties, that is—with a target date of, say, August 5, 1983.

Back then—way back then—I, having recently graduated from college, was wondering what the future held—both for me and in general. To be honest, I had already forgotten the three great challenges facing my generation as identified by our graduation speaker, whose name I had also already forgotten.

But back then, if you had asked me about the future, if you had asked me about *me* and the future, in, say, the year 2018, well, first, it would have been unimaginable, because, by 2018, I would be unimaginably, inconceivably, impossibly, ridiculously *old*. (For those of you who don't remember the 1980's, it will happen to you, too. And really, I hope and pray it does—as does everyone who loves and cares about you.)

But if you had persisted, and asked me, back then, in 1983, who would be the bigger box-office draw in 2018—Eddie Murphy or Fred Rogers . . . *Eddie Murphy or Fred Rogers?!? Are you kidding me?!?* If you had tried to tell me, back then, in 1983, that, in 2018, Eddie Murphy would be largely forgotten except for his children's roles (*Dr. Dolittle*, *Daddy Day Care*, Donkey in the *Shrek* movies), while Fred Rogers would not only be remembered, but respected, admired, and adored by generations of young and no-longer-young people, quoted again and again by presidents, politicians, and philosophers, especially in times of crisis, the subject of the 2018 summer hit movie, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, and of yet another movie due out in 2019, *You Are My Friend*, already the subject of much early Oscar buzz, in which Fred Rogers will be played by no less an actor than Tom Hanks (which, by the way, is how Hollywood confers sainthood—by having Tom Hanks play you in a movie)—if you had told me *all* that, back in 1983, I would have told you that you were crazy and to go back to the future where you came from.

You see, back in the early 1980's, Eddie Murphy was *bad*. I mean "bad" in the sense of good, but not in the sense of goody-goody (that was Mr. Rogers) but you know, "bad" in the sense of "he's *bad*," which really means, "he's *good*" . . . you know what I mean . . .

Back then, Eddie Murphy was coming off his famous-making run on Saturday Night Live, had done a sold-out, stand-up tour, and had just starred in his first movie. He was *bad*. One of his comic schticks was to take children's characters—Buckwheat, Gumby—and give them (ahem) very adult insights expressed in very adult vocabulary, while all the while maintaining their child-like speech-patterns, demeanor, and mannerisms. Which leads us to "Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood," which was Eddie Murphy's parody of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, which was Murphy adopting Mr. Rodgers' singing entrance ("It's a beautiful day in

the neighborhood . . .”) and demeanor, his slow, steady gaze into the camera, walking over to the closet, taking off his coat, opening the closet door, hanging up his coat, putting on his sweater, while all the while being Eddie Murphy and saying Eddie-Murphy-like things.

Look, I’m not up here to throw shade on Eddie Murphy (I love Donkey!). He was a perfectly fine entertainer for his time: he both appealed to, and articulated much of, the disillusion, cynicism and anger of the late 70’s and early 80’s. But Mr. Rogers—Mr. Rogers was no mere entertainer—and he was timeless, or rather he was for all time. He was good. And goodness lasts.

I fell in love with Mr. Rogers not as a child—I was a couple years too old when his show first aired nationally on PBS—but as an adult, a parent, in 1999, at the Pittsburgh airport. It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving. We had had a family reunion just outside of Pittsburgh to celebrate my parents’ 50th anniversary, and I was dropping everybody and their luggage off *before* I dropped the rental car off, *before* I ran back to meet them at the gate. You know what this is like—especially on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, especially back in those days of less strict airport security—chaos: cars pulling in, cars pulling out, cars with no drivers, engines running, horns honking, busses blaring, doors slamming, brakes screeching, people shouting, people hugging, skycaps running, whistles blowing, planes roaring overhead. I had managed to find a spot three rows away from the curb; I took a deep breath, checking my rear view mirror before I ventured out . . . When who should I see pulling in right behind me, in a station wagon that must have been at least 15 years old, but . . . *Mr. Rogers!* I was going to play it cool (you know, just give him a little half-smile and a slight nod), but then I thought of Maya, my oldest daughter, then six years old, sitting in the back seat. She and I had watched Mr. Rogers together—a lot; for me, he was a blessed relief from the purple dinosaur that preceded him; and Maya loved him—Mr. Rogers that is, though she loved Barney, too.

I got out of the car and went to the back of his car, where he was unloading his luggage.

“Mr. Rogers, excuse me . . . Yes, hello. I hate to bother you, I know it’s kinda crazy here, and I don’t mean to impose . . . But my daughter, Maya, is in the car, and she would love to meet you, she loves you . . . Would you mind, would it be OK, if I just brought her back to say hello to you? It will only take a minute.”

I opened the back door of the rental car. “Maya, Mr. Rogers is back here, in the car behind us, and he wants to say hello to you.”

I tell you, til my dying day, I will never forget the look on her face at that moment. So I helped her out and led her by the hand—slowly, steadily—to the back of the car, to Mr. Rogers.

He got down on his haunches and put his face very close to hers: “Hello, Maya, I’m so glad to meet you.” Maya of course was speechless: but her face said it all: delight, disbelief and maybe a little fear, at least a little shyness.

“Who’s this?” Maya was holding her new doll, a gift from her grandmother.

“That’s Molly” I supplied from above.

“Molly—my, she’s very nice. You know, I have friends like this too. Do you remember Daniel the Striped Tiger?”

If it were possible for Maya’s eyes to get any wider, they did. Did she remember Daniel the Striped Tiger?! Of course she remembered Daniel the Striped Tiger! She loved Daniel the Striped Tiger. But all she could do was nod—slowly, steadily—in wonder.

I tell you . . . time . . . in that moment . . . time . . . stopped in that moment. There were no cars or busses, or planes; no horns or bags or impatience or frustration or fear; there was no world, but the two of them, in that timeless moment: a young child, and an adult who cared about that young child, speaking directly to her.

Fred Rogers in real life was just like Mr. Rogers in his neighborhood. And by the way, not to be a plot spoiler here, but that's one of the major themes, maybe *the* major theme, of the movie, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Fred Rogers in real life was just like Mr. Rogers in his neighborhood. It was no act. Everything else—everyone else—might have been an act (or at least so we thought back in the late '70's and early 80's), but not Mr. Rogers.

Did you know that Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister? Yes, that's right: an ordained Presbyterian minister. Never served a church, but still was an ordained Presbyterian minister. In fact, if it hasn't already been done, I want to go and put up a plaque somewhere in the halls of Pittsburgh Presbytery:

*To the Committee on Preparation for Ministry, and to the Committee on Ministry, and to all those who were in attendance at that meeting of the Pittsburgh Presbytery on 1963 (I'll have to get the exact date) who had the inspiration, the imagination, and the courage to ordain Mr. Fred Rogers to a ministry of children's television, thereby honoring both the spirit and the letter of Presbyterian polity, as well as the vocation and nature of ministry itself, not to mention the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to Mr. Rogers himself and to all the children whose lives he touched, this plaque is hereby dedicated. May their names be blessed forever.*

OK, as plaques go, it's a little long-winded—but they deserve every word. As Joanne Rogers, Fred's wife of more than fifty years, says in the movie, "Ordination for children's television was pretty way out there for the Presbyterian Church."

As a young man, in the 1950's, Fred Rogers had a passion for this new medium, television, and specifically for children's television programming, so he started working on a local children's show in Pittsburgh (that's where Daniel the Striped Tiger was born); he also felt a call to ministry, so he started taking classes at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; and he also wanted to understand children, so he studied early childhood development at the University of Pittsburgh, under a prominent developmental psychologist, Margaret McFarland.

Put the three together—(1) a commitment to the positive possibilities of television for children, (2) a call to ministry, and (3) an understanding of early childhood development—and you have *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, which started airing nationally in 1968 on this new thing, Public Television, and continued for over 35 years, *895 original episodes*, with Fred Rogers as the chief writer, producer, and performer for each one of them. It was a remarkable—an astounding—accomplishment,

And it was bad TV. And I don't mean *bad* TV. If you define good TV as TV that grabs and holds a mass audience for purposes of advertising, then *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* was bad TV. In the movie, one of the associate producers puts it this way: "If you take all the elements of good TV and do the exact opposite—you have *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*."

Think of it this way: TV is a medium that rewards fast-moving, attention-grabbing visual images coordinated with quick-bites (or "bites") of sound, preferably musical. That's the way you use it to grab and hold a mass audience. It took television producers a while to figure this out. If you go back and watch TV shows from the 50's and 60's, they seem unbearably slow and staid, as if someone just set a camera on a tripod at the back of a theater, and started recording—which is pretty much what they did. The watershed was . . . well, in the late 70's and early 80's: "I want my, I want my, *MTV*." *MTV* exploited the inherent tendencies of television better—far better—than anything that came before it: fast-moving, attention-grabbing visual images coordinated with quick bites of sound, preferably musical. There were no talking heads on *MTV*. (Well, actually, there was, but that was the name of a rock band that was big back then . . . It's kinda hard to explain . . . I gotta get back in the DeLorean, I may get stuck in the 80's)

But Mr. Rogers . . . Mr. Rogers was always the same, and always did the same thing: he spoke slowly and deliberately; he took off his coat slowly and deliberately; he put on his sweater slowly and deliberately; he tied his sneakers slowly and deliberately; he fed the goldfish slowly and deliberately. "Want to see how long a minute is?" he asked in one episode. Then he pulled out a kitchen timer, set it for one minute, set it up on a little box, and he and Mr. McFeely sat there . . . in silence . . . watching . . . it . . . for . . . one . . . minute.

Now in television, one minute is an eternity, and one minute of silence is unthinkable. That's no way to grab and hold a mass audience. But Mr. Rogers wasn't programming to a mass audience, he was programming *for* children, or better, he was speaking *to* each individual child. Testifying before Congress for Public Television, he said: "This is what I give: I give an expression of care every day to each child. I say, 'You've made this day a special day by just you being you; there's no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are.'" He did that for over 35 years, 895 episodes. And he did it at the Pittsburgh airport, too. Fred Rogers in real life was just like Mr. Rogers in his neighborhood.

And make no mistake about it: *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* was bad TV—that's what made it good, good for children, that is. And it was good for children because Mr. Rogers was good. And what made Mr. Rogers good was the gifts of the Spirit: generosity, patience, goodness and kindness, forgiveness, peace and joy. These gifts—Mr. Rogers' gifts—are the same gifts that all of you—teachers, volunteers, kitchen workers, drivers, parents, grandparents, neighbors, Ma-hoop (our Colombian Praise Band), this whole church—all of you—these are the same gifts that you have given to our MADD Campers. This is what you gave for five days: an expression of care every day to each child, saying to each child, "You've made this day a special day by just you being you; there's no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are."

That is goodness. And goodness lasts.

And I say that goodness lasts not just because Mr. Rogers is the subject of one movie this year and another coming out next year. And I say it not just because God's steadfast love, as it comes to us in creation, in the person of Jesus Christ, and in the redemptive action of the Holy Spirit, endures forever, and therefore all the gifts of the Spirit are eternal and last forever. No—*goodness lasts* . . . I say that because . . . well, do you want to see how long a minute is?

You see, Mr. Rogers gave a lot of graduation speeches, especially towards the end of his life. But he never ever identified the three great challenges facing the next generation. Instead, he said this:

*I'd like to give you all an invisible gift; a gift of silence to think about those who nourish you at the deepest part of your being—anyone who has ever loved you and wanted what was best for you in life. Some of those people may be right here today. Some may be far away, some may even be in heaven; but if they've encouraged you to come closer to what you know to be essential about life, I'd like you to have a silent minute to think of them. One minute: I'll watch the time.*

That's what he said near the end of his graduation speeches. And that's what they did near the end of the movie, too, with all the major interviewees, one by one, and just holding the camera on them, slowly, steadily, in silence. It was beautiful.

Are you ready? An invisible gift; a gift of silence to think about those who nourish you at the deepest part of your being—anyone who has ever loved you and wanted what was best for you in life. I'd like you to have a silent minute to think of them. One minute. I'll watch the time.

Goodness lasts.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen