

Transforming Lives
Galatians 5:22-23
July 31, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

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, not the things that hide you, not your toys, they're just beside you. It's you I like, every part of you. Your skin, your eyes, your feelings, whether old or new. I hope that you'll remember, even when you're feeling blue, that it's you I like, it's you yourself, it's you, it's you I like.

This song is the Gospel according to the Rev. Fred Rogers. Mr. Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister, called and commissioned specifically to serve children, but I think he preached to all of us. His television show, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, was his ministry, and – though God is not mentioned – this song, “It’s You I Like,” is probably the purest expression of God’s unconditional love for us that I have ever heard. Actually, I could probably do a whole, theologically sound sermon just by singing Mr. Rogers’ songs to you. But today I will just use this one.

Did you have the wonderful luxury of being home with a child or grandchild when they were in the Mr. Rogers period of their early lives? Do you remember how you felt when Mr. Rogers sang this song to you – when he looked right through the television into your eyes and sang it to you personally? Even if you were folding baby clothes while you watched the kids with the television on across the room, when Mr. Rogers sang, he wasn’t just singing to the preschoolers. He was singing to parents everywhere, too.

If Mr. Rogers likes us just as we are, we don’t have to pretend to be anything else. We don’t have to be ashamed of our bodies, or our accomplishments, or our feelings. When Mr. Rogers sings to us, we can almost feel tension and defensiveness and shame and even fidgeting drain out of us. We are okay, just as we are. It is such a powerful and transforming message! It frees us to be gently present and to trust the people around us with the gift of our whole selves.

One of the United Church of Christ’s Core Values is our belief that experiencing the unconditional love of God transforms us. That transformation can be seen in what the Apostle Paul calls “the fruits of the Spirit.” Because it’s Paul, he gives us not a story but a list. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That sounds like Mr. Rogers, actually! And maybe when we experience God’s unconditional love, we will all be a little more like him. That would be lovely. But the message of this song is that when we experience God’s love, we will all be more like the best version of ourselves.

This is a gift that we both receive and give. We receive it from God and also from one another. We come to church to fill up on it. We leave church each week with a fresh start, a clean slate, a renewed awareness of the boundlessness of God’s love for us. And then during the week other people experience that love from us. We don’t have to walk up to people and tell them that God loves them, like an evangelist. We don’t even have to mention God at all. We only have to be gently present with them, to see them as they are “way down deep inside,” as Mr. Rogers says, and just “like them as they are,” the same way that God likes us. That’s all. In the presence of that unconditional positive regard, lives are transformed. We believe that in this church, in this denomination. We experience it. We offer it to others.

This kind of love can transform whole nations, too. After the Apostle Paul gives his list of the fruits of the Spirit, he says an interesting thing. He says, “There is no law against such things.” That sounds odd. Of course, there isn’t a law against gentleness and patience. But Paul means that earthly laws, even religious laws, have no power in the presence of the simple virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That, right there, is the principle of non-violent resistance to oppression, the kind of resistance practiced by Martin Luther King, Jr., that transformed our nation in the 1950s and 1960s.

Mr. Rogers taught us about that, too. In the 1960s, when federal laws finally required states and municipalities to admit African Americans to public schools and restaurants and swimming pools, communities across the nation, but

particularly in the South, simply closed their public swimming pools to everyone so that they would not have to admit Black children to swim with white children.

Mr. Rogers didn't talk about this on this television show directly, but he didn't shirk from it either. He simply demonstrated a different way. He brought out a little plastic kiddie pool, filled it with a few inches of water from a hose, and sat with his bare feet in it. Then a Black character, Officer Clemmons, walked by, and Mr. Rogers invited him to put his feet in the pool, too. They talked about how good cool water felt on their feet on a warm day, and then Mr. Rogers shared his towel with Officer Clemmons. As the Apostle Paul tells us, earthly laws and customs and rigidity cannot stand in the presence of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Mr. Rogers didn't have to shout his message or hold a protest sign or write a letter to the editor or lobby his Senator. He simply showed his audience how to be lovingly present with someone who was different from himself. Demonstrating God's unconditional love for all people can transform the whole world.

Long after he had retired from his television show, Mr. Rogers gave a graduation speech at Marquette University, a Roman Catholic institution. Can you imagine having Mr. Rogers as your graduation speaker?? This was Mr. Rogers, the man who had spoken directly to each of them through the television set when they were little, naming their fears and their strengths as toddlers and assuring them of their essential worth. This was the man who got them through that pivotal time in their early lives, that turning from infancy toward the greater independence of elementary school. And here he was again, speaking to them in person as young adults at a similar moment, the turning from college toward the greater independence and responsibility of adulthood. A terrifying and confusing time. Once again, Mr. Rogers named their fears and their strengths and affirmed their essential worth. Here is a portion of what he said:

Nobody else can live the life that you live. And even though no human being is perfect, we always have the chance to bring what is unique about us to life in a redeeming way.

[A redeeming way, he said.]

You don't ever have to do anything sensational to love or be loved. The real drama of life (that which matters most) is rarely center stage or in the spotlight. In fact, it has nothing to do with IQs and honors and the fancy outsides of life. What really nourishes our souls is the knowing that we can be trusted, that we never have to fear the truth, that the foundation of our very being is good stuff.

I wanted to be with you today, *[he said]*, because I know that many of you grew up with our television neighborhood – some as children, some as parents – and I'm proud of the way you've grown. *[Can you imagine Mr. Rogers saying that to you?]* So, before I say goodbye, ... I'd like to give you the words of one of my favorite neighborhood songs.

[And then gently, Mr. Rogers began to sing to the graduates, and one by one, they joined in.]

*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, not the things that hide you, not your **diplomas**, they're just beside you. It's you I like, every part of you. Your skin, your eyes, your feelings, whether old or new. I hope that you'll remember, even when you're feeling blue, that it's you I like, it's you yourself, it's you, it's you I like.*

Amen

