

You may have noticed that Mr. Rogers is making a comeback. By Mr. Rogers of course, I mean Fred Rogers, the smart, soft-spoken, cardigan-sweater-wearing soul who dedicated decades of his life to the formation of young children. His long-running TV show, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* aired for 33 years.

And now, more than 15 years after his death, Mr. Rogers is making headlines again. Last month there was a biography released called, *The Good Neighbor*, and over the summer a documentary called, appropriately enough, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Reviews of both the book & the movie have been almost embarrassingly positive. What's interesting is how captivated people are by Mr. Rogers himself. They're more interested in the person than the recent productions about him. A *Booklist* review of the biography says, "the inimitable Mister Rogers becomes somehow even more enchanting." A movie critic went so far as describing the documentary as a "spiritual experience."<sup>1</sup>

I know, not everyone loved Mr. Rogers. Some thought he was too soft. He was ridiculed for his demeanor. But whether or not you liked his style, his influence was undeniable. The award-winning historian David McCullough says Mr. Rogers, "reached more children than any teacher ever." Not only that, "Academics who've studied Rogers's work often marvel at how young children calm down, pay attention," and then stay calm even after they've finished an

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wont\\_you\\_be\\_my\\_neighbor/](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wont_you_be_my_neighbor/)

episode. Turns out Mr. Rogers paid a lot of attention to, “the pacing of the program to help children slow down and steady themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

I wonder if that’s part of the reason he’s making headlines again. At a time when our public discourse feels more-and-more like shouting matches about self-promotion, Mr. Rogers is still a reassuring voice of empathy, kindness, and patience. That was his recipe for transformation: empathy, kindness, and patience. In the early 1980’s he used an entire week to explore our fascination with superheroes because a *real* child jumped off a *real* roof wearing a *make-believe* cape. His method was simple, but powerful. He, “used the Neighborhood of Make-Believe to explore the fantasies,” (incl. flying). Then, he used, “the ‘real neighborhood’ to patiently explain reality.”<sup>3</sup> That was his recipe for transformation: empathy, kindness, & patience.

It’s also a pretty good recipe for **Christian faith**. Following Jesus always means patiently learning to separate fantasy from reality; specifically the *fantasies* we tell ourselves about the world and ourselves from the *reality* of God’s love. Christian faith is never about cramming more facts in our heads. That’s not how we learn to follow Jesus. Instead, Jesus invites us on a journey of empathy, kindness, and patience as we separate the fantasies & realities of our lives. So today, let’s see what our readings have to say.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://longreads.com/2018/09/19/mr-rogers-vs-the-superheroes/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The book of Job is a great place to begin. Because **Job plunges us into a world of fantasy**. Job looks & sounds an awful lot like Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood of Make-Believe. I'm not saying it couldn't have happened. I am saying the way it's told has all the marks of a parable: *There once was a man in a far-away land who suffered more than possible....* That's the story of Job.

When we meet him, Job is a walking, talking stereotype. We know that because the narrator tells us. Even God tells us. When God and his director of heavenly prosecutions (called, *the Satan*); when the two of them are having a water-cooler conversation about their favorite parts of creation, God says, "Have you seen Job? He's quite a guy. He's utterly whole & complete."

Satan says, "Look God, nobody's perfect. You should know." Satan says, "let me at 'em. I'll rough him up and then he won't look so perfect anymore." God says, "Just don't kill him." What follows is a fantastical wave of tragedy & sorrow. Job & his wife lose everything; everything they own, everyone they love. Then after all that, Job gets hit with a skin disease. And all the way through, this is what he says: "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord," (Job 1:21). It's a Hollywood-style introduction. And just when things are getting juicy, we're plunged into 40 chapters of meditation, theology & debate about what perfect Job really deserves and how perfect God really is.

Let me tell you a secret. The introduction of Job is a setup. It's a tease to hook you for the 40 chapters of theology that follow. The author isn't claiming that he's seen a heavenly throne room like the prophet Isaiah. He's not claiming to peer behind the veil of heaven like the Revelation of St. John. The book of Job is wisdom literature. All the drama at the beginning is a setup for 40 chapters of meditation, theology & debate. That's where the wisdom occurs.

**By the time we get to the end, we realize the point of the story is patience; waiting for God.** Job is about our transformation through patience & trust in the God of our faith. He never gets an explanation for his suffering. Instead, he gets a personal encounter with God; the God who stands above him, beneath him, and even in him in the midst of his suffering. Job is a response to all the destructive *fantasies* pretending we can either take credit for our prosperity, or that we should be blamed for our suffering. They're both destructive fantasies that turn God either into a moral monster or a co-dependent enabler.

At the end of Job, the question isn't whether we can explain evil & suffering. The question is whether we can patiently journey with God – whatever we face. Job is an exaggerated story – maybe even a fantasy – to help us navigate our lives with empathy, kindness & patience. As we move from the Make-Believe neighborhood of Job to the real neighborhoods of our world, **we're invited to patiently journey with God.** That's Job.

The Gospel is also about patience, but it doesn't give us the luxury of a Make-Believe Neighborhood. Today's Gospel plunges us into the hard-edged reality of *divorce*. Divorce in the ancient world was at least as common as our own day, with this big difference: in the ancient world it was always a man's game (and I use that term intentionally). Women were always on the receiving end of a man's game. [Scholars debate about how much the upper class followed these rules, and Roman law seemed to give some women more power, but it was still a man's game.] So the first thing to hear when Jesus challenges divorce is, "a statement about the status of women."<sup>4</sup> "Jesus rejects a social system that treats wives and children as men's property."<sup>5</sup>

And even though divorce was common in Jesus' day, the grounds for divorce were debated. Some allowed it only in the case of adultery. Others allowed it for something as trivial as spoiling a meal. Jesus turns the debate on its head. Instead of focusing on what makes divorce allowable, Jesus focuses on what makes marriage meaningful. Brilliant. **He defines marriage as school of patience.** He says marriage is a lifelong union. *Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate* (Mk. 10.9).

It's important to add that Jesus is *not* excusing abuse, and there are times when divorce may be necessary for health or safety. Jesus is defining marriage as a

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Juel, as quoted in Placher, *Mark*, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> Placher, *Mark*, p. 141.

school of patience with another person. We'll never grow in patience without another person. Stanley Hauerwas says, "The truth is that we can be patient only through being made patient through the patient love of others."<sup>6</sup> In other words, patience is relational. That's how it works. So whether we're married or not, all Christians are called to committed, loving relationships with people who are different than us. Because our patience with others is how we're transformed in the image of God. That's the Gospel.

**Job** reminds us that we're called to a patient journey with God. **Jesus** reminds us that we're called to a patient journey with each other. **Hebrews** reminds us that our patience always puts us on a path of suffering. We don't want to suffer. God doesn't want us to suffer. But God made us for love. And **love is the connection between patience and suffering**. Christian suffering is borne of love. That's why Hebrews tells us that Jesus, the pioneer of our faith, was made perfect [whole, or complete] through suffering (Heb. 2:10). It's suffering borne of patient love.

In the end we could say that **suffering love is our measuring stick to separate fantasy & reality**. Any way of life that rejects suffering love is a deficient, even destructive, fantasy that plunges us into a world of selfish make-believe. Any way of life that embraces suffering love puts us on a path of

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<sup>6</sup> Hauerwas, *The Character of Virtue*, p. 83

transformation & flourishing as we follow Jesus. Suffering love is how we separate fantasy & reality.

“Early in the evolution of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Rogers offered this definitive observation to a meeting of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry: ‘It’s easy to convince people that children need to learn the alphabet and numbers. . . . How do we help people to realize that what matters even more . . . is how [a person] finally puts together the alphabet and numbers . . .? What really matters is whether he uses the alphabet for the declaration of war or the description of a sunrise — his numbers for the final count at [a concentration camp] or the specifics of a brand-new bridge.’”<sup>7</sup>

It’s beautiful. And we could say something similar about our faith. We could say, it’s easy to convince Christians that we need to learn about the painful realities of life. We shouldn’t be naïve. But how do we help people to realize that what matters even more is whether our faith becomes a weapon or a medicine. What matters is whether Christians can respond to conflict & suffering with a love that fearlessly charges into the world asking this question to everyone we meet: *Won’t you be my neighbor? Amen.*

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<sup>7</sup> <https://longreads.com/2018/09/19/mr-rogers-vs-the-superheroes/>