

## Advent

Fred Rogers, known to most of us as Mr. Rogers, died over 16 years ago.

And yet, these days he's the subject of a major motion picture, a lengthy article in last week's Sunday New York Times magazine, and the topic of discussion on a whole variety of talk shows and news articles.

How strange that in this age of Trump, when lies and power and name calling are all the rage, that a man so incredibly simple and gentle should become the talk of the town, nearly two decades after his death.

According to the Times:

"Fred Rogers was a curious, lanky man, six feet tall and 143 pounds (exactly, he said, every day; he liked that each digit corresponded to the number of letters in the words 'I love you') – he was utterly devoid of pretense." NYT Magazine, 11/24/19, 48.

His whole aim in life was to let other people know, children yes, but adults as well, that "I like you just the way you are."

He was particularly distressed at TV commercials that are aimed at children, because the hidden message in all of them is that you aren't good enough if you don't eat this cereal or have this doll or visit this or that special place.

Fred Rogers insisted that every child was a miracle of God, just as they are.

He paid attention to people and things on the margins, often collecting discarded items that to most seemed nothing more than junk.

His favorite quote comes from the book entitled The Little Prince, which says:

“What is essential is invisible to the eyes.”

He closed his commencement speech at a college one year with a song, that I will not sing for you, but here are the words:

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 degrees  
They're just beside you.

But 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!  
Id.

Why wax on about Mr. Rogers this first Sunday of Advent?

Perhaps because he understood better than most what the message of Advent is all about.

He understood that it is from the seeds of self-hate and self-pity that so much of the world's evils grow; he understood that self-loathing is the springboard from which we loath others, feel alienated from others, and therefore attack others.

Advent is God's call to us to prepare to come home, home to a kingdom where lions and lambs sleep together, where we live in love with one another, where competition is finished and all need for anger comes to an end.

Who understands these things better than a child who knows that she is loved?

Which is why Jesus constantly reminds us that if we wish to enter his kingdom, we need to become like children.

If you listen carefully to the readings these four weeks, what you will hear over and over is that getting ready for the end times is all about returning to that which really matters in life.

Advent is about our return to the essentials - which Mr Rogers grasped in God's singular message to us all: "I like you, just the way you are."

That of course was the brilliant insight of the short story written by F. Scott Fitzgerald entitled The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.

That story, later a movie, tells of a fellow born as an old man, who spends his entire life getting younger and younger, so that when he dies in old age, he looks just like a new born child.

Spiritually — we are all called to be Benjamin Buttons.

We are all of us invited to live in the midst of all the muck and mud life has to throw at us — while at the same time growing into an innocence and trust that only a child can possess.

This is Advent!

It is our time to reconnect with the truth of who we are in the eyes of God, a connection that then allows us to be truly human with one another.

It's the time of the year to once again remember that:

"You are accepted.

You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything.

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." P. Tillich.

Advent is the season that invites quiet contemplation of these questions:

What happens to me when I really and truly come to a place of peace about who and what I am?

What happens when I finally like myself?

Attitudes and beliefs that used to suffocate me begin to drop away.

Big shotism, a symptom of feeling ashamed or afraid inside, slips away.

Anxiety over what the future holds, resentments over past injuries, these all slip away.

Advent is our time of letting go of everything that gets in the way of embracing this fundamental truth of our relationship with God: that God likes and accepts us, just as we are.

All of which frees us to jump into our lives and this world and the needs of others with a freedom and abandon we may never have known before.

Set free from worry and neurosis and guilt, we find before us a new day!

And right there sits the wonderful irony of the Advent of God!

As we spend week after week listening to gospel lessons about the end of the world and the second coming of our Lord in great glory and majesty and power, who greets us when all is said and done, but the babe, in a manger?

This is Advent!

May yours be blessed with innocence and hope and love.

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