

In the end of the 20th century a pioneer in children's television created a meaningful experience of grace and belonging using his study of theology, music and education in child development. You know this pioneer as Mr. Rogers. He produced his show from 1968-2001. I was too old to have watched it as a kid. I did begin to see it when my own children were young.

I thought of his children's programming this week as I reflected on Jesus describing himself as the "gate" or "door" for the sheep. In Palestine a sheep pen likely was a fence made out of stones with a narrow opening where the sheep could be led into and kept safe for the night. A shepherd may have sat in the doorway guarding them until the morning when he would lead the sheep out into green pastures. The responsibility of the shepherd was to watch over the going out and coming in of the sheep day after day. This reflection reminds me of another psalm of trust, Psalm 121, where the LORD is described as a keeper, watching your going out and your coming in forever.

Jesus describing himself as the "gate" or "door" led me to reflect on Jesus' knowledge of those who follow him, his protection of them, and the life of abundance he leads them into. In this part of John's narrative, beginning in chapter 8, Jesus is bringing outcasts into the fold and encouraging all in Judea to look to him. He is providing protection and what is needed for life for those who know him and follow him. He is indicating that he is the source of life. With his bold declarations, some indeed see Jesus as the Son of God, the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, while others question his authority, miss his divine nature, and stumble in belief.

In the midst of the conflict that his divine nature presents to those who struggle to hear him, he persists in repeating his word of welcome. In John 9 where Jesus comes upon a man born blind, he heals his blindness and gives him sight that should restore the man to community. Jesus is elsewhere as the man tries to integrate, but some of the Judeans question what had taken place. When the former blind man continues to give witness to Jesus, they cast him out from the community. When Jesus heard this he demonstrated the restoration he intended, he went to the former blind man, and gathered him in and began to speak of his protection of those who know him and love him.

This is very similar to what Fred Rogers saw as his purpose in creating his children's programming. He designed the opening of the show to create anticipation and belonging. As soon as he came through the door, the audience would feel welcomed and safe. They learned to depend on Mr. Rogers. He explored the world by inviting guests in or going to factories, museums, and many ordinary places. He used puppets to act out life lessons, and he often taught children how to handle emotions. The kids who watched often felt as if Mr. Rogers was speaking directly to them. And he opened up this time by entering through a door. As soon as he entered, children could anticipate a wonderful experience.

Fred Rogers was careful to create a purpose for his show and he lived a rather disciplined life determined that what he was doing had meaning and that it provided life for his young and vulnerable audience. In 1969, Fred Rogers testified before Congress to talk about the importance of national public television in order to garner support for the newly formed Public Broadcast Service. Instead of reading the prepared statement that the Senate Subcommittee had before them, he described his vision by using examples of his work. He spoke in his measured and quiet manner before the Senate subcommittee.

He talked about his concern about what he called "cartoon bombardment" and what was being delivered to children in this country through that programming. In contrast, he had a focus on providing a meaningful and dramatic experience which would be helpful to children. His focus was on the inner needs of children and what he called the inner drama of childhood.

He dealt with such simple things as getting a haircut, with having brothers and sisters, and the anger that can develop in the lives of families. He was careful to project what he called "a neighborhood expression of care." Every part of his program was crafted to present this idea of care. He would end his programs with this word, "You have made this day a special day by just your being you. There is no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are." He knew the value of that consistent message.

He then began to talk about his overall work of making it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable. He stated that it is much more dramatic that two men can be working out their feelings of anger by each managing their own

emotions. He said it is much more dramatic than showing gunfire, which is often portrayed in media. By that time in 1969, he had already worked for 15 years in the United States and Canada to develop his ideas and be able to show a meaningful expression of care in his work. In working with children, and using their words, he created a song about how as human being we have the ability to control our feelings.

The words of one of the song had to do with that good feeling of control, which Rogers felt that children needed to know is there. "What do you do with the mad that you feel, when you feel so mad you can bite? When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong, and nothing you do seems very right. What do you do? Do you punch a bag? Do you pound some clay or some dough? Do you round up friends for a game of tag or see how fast you go? It's great to be able to stop when you've planned a thing that's wrong. And be able to do something else instead and think this song. I can stop when I want to, can stop when I wish, can stop, stop, stop anytime. And what a good feeling to feel like this, and know that the feeling is really mine. Know that there's something deep inside, that helps us become what we can."

Rogers testimony was so moving Congress acted to fund Public Broadcasting. Then Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood became a steady, welcoming, and meaningful show that reached generations of children helping them to know that they were loved.

Today we have the story of Jesus as the door. The purpose of the door is to welcome people into the house. The One who calls his sheep by name, does not leave this fold to stand around wondering what to do. He goes ahead of them and opens up a way for them to listen for his voice. He speaks in order to provide community, belonging, protection, provision and abundant life for all. He speaks in a strong and steady voice with a persistent message. This steady voice of grace and life is needed today.

Today we have many people at risk, not only of the extreme danger of a virus, but of the complications of time as the pandemic slowly runs its course. All of us are doing things for the first time because none of us has ever lived through a pandemic. A couple of weeks ago at home I began to say, "This is how we have to handle shopping and our groceries" without sharing the thinking that led up to it.

Of course I still pay attention and find myself adapting even to things I had thought I knew three weeks ago. That is the nature of life for us today.

The bad news is that we are living in the time of a pandemic against a virus that we can spread without our knowing it, that our bodies have trouble fighting, and that can easily overtake an area when people do not follow guidelines created by scientists and researchers. The good news is that the pandemic will not last forever. There will be a time in the next couple of years where we will have vaccines and treatments which will open up life. We just are not there at this time. The reality is, for the foreseeable future nothing is going to go as planned. And even our adaptations to try to provide for this day will need to be adjusted. We have found that out in trying to lead worship for you.

We are all living through a first time experience, but we are not doing it alone. Especially when we think of the gathering of the body of Christ, we have persisted in providing words of grace for you. Look at our e-news and online resources for help and solace. We continue to turn to Jesus, for in him we have life. The life which Jesus offers he calls abundant. It is a gift for all who hear his voice. It is not a right of those who hear, because it is abundant by nature, and more than enough.