

## Lent -- Life and Death

Jamaica Plain, March 2, 2003, Rev. Terry Burke

This Tuesday Mister Rogers died at the age of 74. I remember first seeing his show when I was in my twenties. I was visiting my parents in Michigan, and my father had the show on when I got up in the morning. I was somewhat embarrassed that my dad would be watching a children's TV show, but he said, "You learn about a lot of things in this show." I remember we watched together the segment on making crayons. In retrospect, it's not surprising to me that my father, a gentle, whimsical man who loved children, would like Fred Rogers.

It was always clear that Mister Rogers cared for and respected children. When my children were small, I always appreciated watching his quiet, slow-paced anti-television sort of show, "Mister Roger's Neighborhood." Obviously, many other people felt the same way, and he touched the lives of countless people. When Fred Rogers was receiving an honorary degree at her Boston University graduation, church member Darlene Jackaway told me that the students spontaneously started singing as one, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?"

Fred Rogers tried to be a good neighbor. I remember the excitement when he visited the Firehouse Arts Center in Jamaica Plain in the 1980's. In Jonathan Kozol's book *Amazing Grace*, Kozol writes how Fred Rogers asked to accompany the educator to the poverty-stricken South Bronx. Walking together down the street, a 30ish Black sanitation worker stopped his street sweeper truck and jumped off to give Mister Rogers a hug. Later, Kozol noted how Fred Rogers would mostly listen to children, unlike most experts who visited the South Bronx to pontificate. Following the meeting, it was clear to Kozol how deeply Rogers had heard the children.

It was reported in the press that Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, never spoke of someone as having died; he always said that they had "gone to heaven." This week begins

the traditional church season of Lent, a time to focus on the meaning of our lives and deaths. Lent gives us a chance for a break in the routine, for a mountaintop experience, a time apart or different.

In today's lesson from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus and his followers Peter, James, and John climb up on top of Mt. Sinai. The disciples have a dreamy vision of Jesus talking to Elijah (representing the prophetic tradition) and Moses, (the traditional author of the five books of the Torah). They see Jesus, Moses and Elijah shine with a transfigured light – in the words of John Lennon: "We all shine on, like the moon and the stars, and the sun." This glimpse of the transfiguration is meant to show the ultimate destiny of humans, to grow into the likeness and image of God. As the ancient church put it, "God became human, so that humans could become God."

That growth involves spiritual struggle, as is clear in the writings of Russian author and dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Writing in the Gulag Archipelago about his own and others' experiences in the Soviet slave labor camps, Solzhenitsyn speaks of the "path of ascent." Everyone in the camps faced a choice: do anything you can to survive, which inevitably would involve harm to others, or decide not to in any way to do harm, and probably die. Thus a person could choose to do anything to survive, and be spiritually dead as a human person, or choose to be a human person, and probably die. Solzhenitsyn finds a model in frequent camp escapee Georgi Tenno, who, when faced with a choice between murdering innocent civilians and remaining free, suddenly spots an ordinary white kitten. He resolves not to become like the murderous guards and camp establishment, and so remains alive as a human person.

In today's passage from Gulag Archipelago, Solzhenitsyn writes how "all religions" speak of a line through the human heart, through all human hearts, dividing good and evil, and how the line moves to indicate greater or lesser amounts. I once heard a Muslim imam or religious leader speak about how the true jihad or holy war was in the human heart, in this struggle between good and evil. Solzhenitsyn says of the deadly camp establishment, "Who am I to judge?" As an officer of the Red Army in World War Two, he had led his

battalion firing away through East Prussia. The author also comments that if we haven't learned the lessons of Nuremberg in the 21st century, we will be "just like cavemen."

Growth in the spirit involves trying to move that line between good and evil in our hearts, and in the wider world. Lent is a time to pause and reflect on how we can deepen our spiritual lives, to take a break from the ordinary and go up on the mountaintop. Sometimes, for the six weeks of Lent which last until Easter, people give up something. Often it's a product that we'd better off without, such as wine or meat or chocolate. Sometimes people try to add something helpful or healthful into their lives, such as exercise, or letter writing, or a spiritual practice like meditation or prayer. Lent is also a good time to become better informed about our world, to reach out to others in need, and to try to be a better neighbor.

In terms of our own congregation, I will be organizing Wednesday evening worship services with talks on various aspects of death – how we die, financial issues related to death, and thoughts on the possibility of afterlife. In two weeks, we will have a special worship service with Cambridge Unitarian Universalist minister Thomas Mikelson on the subject of spiritual healing. If there is interest, we could have a group to fast together from the Good Friday Tenebrae service until Easter Sunday. You might also consider as a Lenten practice attending our Wednesday evening prayer group, or the spiritual book group, or a social justice committee meeting.

Fred Rogers won't be keeping Lent this year. He wrote, "There is a universal truth I have found in my work. Everybody longs to be loved. And the greatest thing we can do is let somebody know that they're loved and capable of loving." We don't know if this will be our last Lent. May we reflect on WWMRD – "What would Mister Rogers Do?"

May we reflect on what we want our lives to mean. May we seek to move that line in our hearts towards greater good.

