

Review: “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

“Everyone longs to be loved. And the greatest thing we can do is to let people know that they are loved and capable of loving.” – Fred Rogers

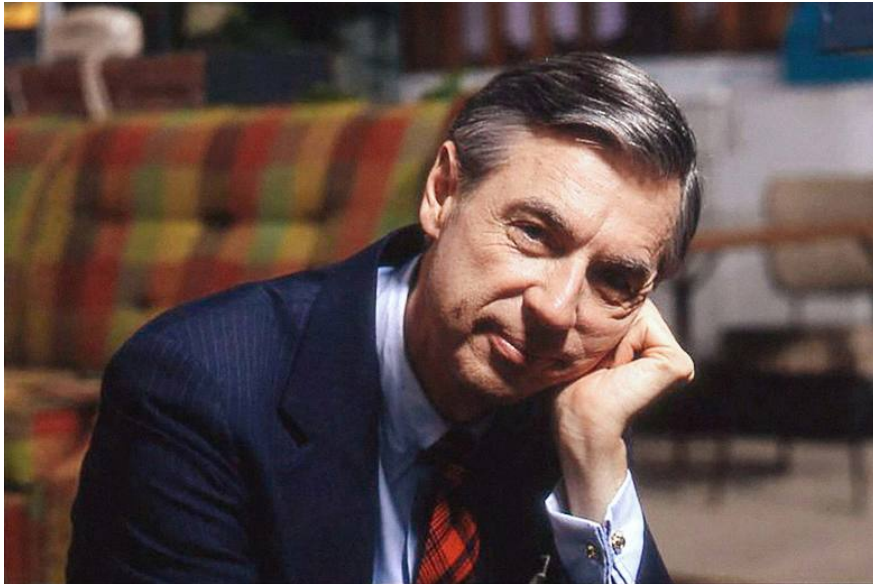
The Mr. Rogers I remember was a TV personality that had a warm and welcoming opening song and changed his jacket for a sweater and played with a trolley. He did voices in the Land of Make Believe and spoke gently and kindly to his audience and was good friends with people like Mr. McFeely. Thanks to him, I have known what a duckbill platypus is since I was five.

The Mr. Rogers of *Won’t You Be My Neighbor* I did not recall. And for that reason, among many others, this story needs to be told. God communicates to us so clearly through narrative. Our Bible is chock full of them. Biographies teach us things that ‘How To’ books never could. We need lives—real, heroic, inspirational lives—to help us make sense of this corrupt world. Fred Rogers is the modern example par excellence as to why.

Thanks to this documentary we get to see how big a visionary he was, seeing TV as the future before it was even the present. We get to see him fight for funding for it, using meekness to speak boldly and change the circumstances. We get to see him provide entertainment for kids that was wholesome and countercultural. We get to see him talk to children in a courageous, competent and congenial way about things like assassination, low self-esteem and anger. Things that seem daunting to talk about in private, much less in front of an audience. He taught against racism in as innocuous yet powerful a way as possible, in a time where it was terribly

needed. He taught that it was OK to be sad without being patronizing. He talked through issues about emotions in an emotionally intelligent way, to such a level that my educated and experienced teacher wife was blown away. She could not believe how much he knew about how to talk to children, especially since it was 40 years ago before a lot of modern research was popular. Mr. Rogers was ahead of his time and in many ways a genius.

Most of that was surprising to me. But the stories went deeper. Mr. Rogers was known for dealing with children, but he worked with adults. And he proved that you can speak the truth to someone about a very hard subject and still make that person feel deeply in their soul that you love them so much they see you as a surrogate father. We in the U.S., even in Christianity, haven't all figured this out. For this reason as much as any, I adore Fred Rogers. And until I watched this film, I had no idea.



If you have noticed that this documentary is rated P-13, I want to be clear that the previous paragraph is a part of why. The heaviness of real-world issues and interpersonal relationships isn't always for general audiences. Yet there are other things that cause it to be rated as it is. Though Mr. Rogers lived a mostly G-rated life, his story is told by

others. And as such, there were a few profane words in the interviews and a reference to a prank on set that is not something I would expect parent readers of REO would want small children to see. Also, Fred Rogers got angry at times about issues facing children in the US, especially when it came to what was on TV. And this documentary shows some of what Mr. Rogers hated.

My criticisms of this work are minor. I loved the music from the trailer and wish they had used it more. The transitions from story to story seemed a bit awkward at times to me, but another review I read said they were perfect so perhaps that is something I do not understand about documentaries. And finally, the cursing in the film is something at least at this point that has me torn. I suppose the point of this is for teenagers and adults to be inspired and to tell his story without many filters. Yet considering what his life stood for, I wish it were appropriate for kids. I suppose the kids still have his 1700+ TV episodes to watch.

Mr. Rogers talked a lot about love in his life. But he proved that while talking is easy and living is hard, it must be done if we want to make a difference. Love is unapologetically inconvenient. Mr. Rogers practiced it both in public and private, as valiantly and humbly as he could. At least according to those who knew him best.

I recommend this documentary to everyone who has been touched by Fred Rogers in any way, which would be millions of people all over the world, even nearly 15 years after his death.

Four stars out of five.