

Robert Galloway
Sermon for Examination
“All the Difference”
John 13:1-17
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When I was little my mother was very selective about what we could watch on television. It was primarily limited to PBS. Yet even then mom would only allow us to watch certain shows. There was certainly no Barney in our household. One of my favorite programs was Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. Fred Rogers would welcome you by song and he put on his “play clothes.” I was eager to see which shoes Fred Rogers would put on and what color his cardigan would be. Best yet, I wanted the trolley to arrive and take us to a new adventure in the neighborhood of Make Believe.

Just as you could count on Mr. Rogers to change his shoes and sweater you could count on my mother's voice to interrupt the show's introduction. You would hear her voice always remarking, “You know he was a Presbyterian minister.” Sometimes a parent's motivation is a little too obvious

I found that Mr. Rogers was not and is not just for children. He was trying to teach the world lessons about humanity and God's love. Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was remarkably progressive for its time. The show debuted in 1968 and cast the first regularly occurring African American character on a children's television show. This character was police officer Clemmons played by Francois Clemmons, a professional singer. In a recent interview, Francois reflected on how uncomfortable he was playing an officer of the law. Francois described growing up in what he described as the “ghetto.” He remembers the police sicking dogs on the people down the street and turning fire hoses on his neighbors. He stated, “I had a hard time putting myself in the role. I was not excited about playing Officer Clemmons at all.”

Yet in the interview, Francois went on to remember one specific episode. In the episode, Officer Clemmons walks up to Mr. Rogers. It is a hot day, Mr. Rogers is sitting in his front yard, with his shoes off, dress pants rolled up just above the ankles and is soaking his feet in a cool tub of water. Mr. Rogers invites Officer Clemmons to share in the soaking tub. Clemmons remembers, “My brown skin and his white skin were shown together.” When Clemmons gets out of the tub, Mr. Rogers began to dry his friend's feet. In the recording you can hear Mr. Rogers state, “Sometimes just a minute like this can make all the difference.”

This event was even more significant because of the time and it still seems relevant today. At that time in 1969, it was a year after Martin Luther King's assassination; the television was filled with scenes of racial violence and hate. Mr. Rogers had already done episodes on race and violence, to help his young viewers process the world around them. This episode debuted on the fifth anniversary of a wade-in St. Augustine, Florida. A few young African Americans tried to integrate a pool and the pool owner decided to pour acid in the water to force them out. Mr. Rogers may or may not have known the significance of the date, but even the event of a white

man and a black man sharing a foot tub and wiping one another's feet on national TV in 1969 was not lost on them. While they may not have been able to eat together in certain parts of the country, here they were enjoying true friendship and respect for the nation's youngest viewers to witness.

I hope the biblical interest is not lost on anyone, because it wasn't lost on these two. As we come to our scripture today, John introduces the thirteenth chapter and says, "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father." But, as we know he was not done teaching and serving. In the story, Jesus gets up in the middle of the meal and begins his ritual of washing the disciples' feet. This would have been shocking for the timing of the event, mid-meal, and for Jesus, the teacher, to perform such an act. Yet, he does it anyway. He is Jesus. He has more to show to the disciples.

We see the water of the basin. We could recall the waters of the basin as Jesus was baptized but it could be so much more. I believe it is not so much looking back at what has happened but what is going to occur. Jesus is looking forward to the cross. To be washed by Jesus means to be taken part of the cross. One must be washed by Jesus to take part in him. Poor Peter doesn't understand this. Jesus offered him love in action. A sign, a gift, an intimate moment together, but Peter refuses. Peter can't image his teacher would perform such a submissive act. And Jesus even states, "You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand." How many times in the gospels do the disciples not truly understand what is taking place before them? Jesus corrects Peter's refusal by saying "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me." Jesus is not trying to cleanse the disciples in a ritual bath of purification. He is trying to create a connection with each one. Jesus is making them his own. They are sharing this practice, so that the disciples may share in Jesus on the cross.

Francois Clemmons didn't know what Mr. Rogers was doing when he was cast on the show. Yet, in retrospect, Clemmons recognized the power of Mr. Rogers' decision. He realized Mr. Rogers was answering Jesus' charge to us. As Jesus stated, "So if I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." The two men helped fulfill these words. Mr. Rogers and Officer Clemmons lived these words out. They showed that a teacher is not greater than the student, and can still serve the student. They demonstrated this to generations. They were sharing a time together, each a child of God, filled with the Holy Spirit. They were joining in with Jesus and his disciples. And we are all disciples of Christ. We should accept what Jesus is offering. He has come to us and accepts us for who we are. Like Peter, Francois Clemmons was uncertain of what Mr. Rogers was doing. With the love of God, his eyes were opened. Even in his 70s, decades later, Clemmons still marvels at how that small moment on one episode could make a difference to himself, to the children, and to the adults watching.

If you were a fan of Mr. Rogers, now or previously, you may remember how Mr. Rogers ended the show. He looked straight in to the camera and right into your eyes and says, "You make every day a special day, just by being you, and I like you just the way you are." It made you feel that Mr. Rogers was speaking only to you and you were there in his home. I can only imagine that this was a portion of what the disciples felt. Jesus was at their feet and they were

sharing a deep personal moment. At the climax of our Scripture, it is as if the other disciples melt away into the background and just for a moment it is just Jesus and Peter, teacher and student, making a moment that would surpass their lifetimes. A moment we all seek to have with each other and with Jesus.

One day, Clemmons remembers watching Mr. Rogers record the end of the show. After the cameras were off, Clemmons approached Mr. Rogers and asked, "Fred, were you talking to me?" Mr. Rogers, "Yes, I have been talking to you for years, but you heard me today." Jesus loved the disciples, despite all their flaws, their misunderstandings, their demands for what they thought they needed. They were slow to realize who Jesus truly was. They often did not hear the words he had for them. Yet, Jesus still knelt and washed their feet. Jesus had been speaking to his disciples for years, and perhaps some of them heard him that night.

Sometimes we are Francois Clemmons, nervous and reluctant, unable to see what is happening before us. We are slow to see the love of Christ right before our eyes. Sometimes we are Peter, who misunderstands what is happening and in turn demands what they think is right. And only the words of Christ can guide us back to the truth. And then there are the glorious sometimes, when we are Fred Rogers, who could see the truth in what Jesus was doing. He took Jesus' command and fulfilled it. Mr. Rogers helped others see what Jesus has done for us. We are these people at times. We can unite with Christ through foot washing, respect, service, communion, and of course love. It will help us realize the love of God and the salvation through Christ on the cross. We don't know how long it took for Jesus to wash the feet of the disciples and the scene from Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood is only a few minutes long, but please remember, just a moment like this can make all the difference.