

My epiphany story involves grace, Mister Rogers, and Rev. Fred Edmonds.

I was raised Catholic and attended twelve years of Catholic school. I could give you the textbook definition of grace, but I never really felt it in my life or was a big believer that it even existed.

In recent years, I experienced the loss of an important relationship. Harsh words were spoken, feelings were hurt, and trust was lost. Over time, occasionally one of us would reach out...a Facebook message with a funny meme or a mention of an event going on in town, but nothing necessarily substantial and sometimes rehashing what had happened between us, which was rarely productive.

I had been very down and depressed about the situation and, to be honest, for a while was in a dark place. My lifelong coping mechanism to deal with upsetting situations and negative emotions has always been to push it down, which works great until it doesn't...and this fall it became clear that it wasn't working.

The night before Thanksgiving, Matt and I went to see the recent movie about Mister Rogers - "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood." Watching Mister Rogers always makes me think about Fred Edmonds, for several reasons, but mostly because people have often said that when Mister Rogers spoke on his television show it felt like he was speaking directly to you. This is how I often felt when Fred preached from the pulpit right here at Centre Church.

About a week after seeing the movie, I felt that I needed to hear a Fred sermon. A few years ago I came across the website of a church in Michigan where Fred sometimes provides pulpit supply, and on the website are recordings of several of Fred's sermons. I clicked on the most recent sermon, which was from last April, and it was a message that I needed to hear at that particular moment. I'm sure many of you will remember that Fred often spoke about the radical love of Jesus. In this sermon Fred spoke about depression, the radical love of Jesus, and how when this radical love gets into your heart it enables you to throw open the doors and do loving and courageous things that you didn't think you would be able to do otherwise. These words which had a profound effect on me were spoken by Fred, eight months prior, and about 800 miles away, but were exactly the words I needed to hear at that moment. It felt like he was speaking directly to me.

A few days after listening to the sermon, I planned to call Fred to tell him about this experience. Before I had a chance to make that call I received an email from Bob Pu telling me that Fred and Carol were in town through the weekend, and he suggested that I give them a call. We ended up getting together for breakfast on Sunday morning and then attended church with them, which was the first time Matt and I had been at Centre on a Sunday morning in quite some time.

In the following days, I prayed and thought a lot about our conversation with the Edmonds that morning, the strained relationship that I spoke about earlier, and our relationship with Centre Church. I had also been listening to several podcasts about Mister Rogers and his faith, and thinking about conversations I had with Scott about grace and reconciliation.

Then something amazing happened - I felt like I had a transformation. I honestly felt like the grace and radical love of Jesus entered my heart. I had an overwhelming feeling of peace and understanding around these issues and no longer felt anxiety, animosity, disappointment or hurt feelings. Those feelings were replaced with feelings of calm, understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation. To say this took me by surprise is an understatement. But as Pope Francis said in a recent weekly Angelus address, "Let us remember that God is the God of surprises."

This feeling of love and grace has extended to other areas of my life, and I realized that holding on to hurt feelings and grudges had a negative effect on my outlook on life and my health. Life is far too short to allow hurt feelings and grudges to keep us from being with people that we care about.

In many ways I feel like a new person, and several people in different areas of my life have commented on a change in me that they can't quite put their finger on. I'm not saying that I am suddenly perfect, by any means, but it's amazing how once grace gets in your heart your perspective changes about how a hurt can be healed.

I recently read the Esquire article, "Can You Say...Hero?" which was written by Tom Junod over twenty years ago and was the inspiration for the movie about Mister Rogers. I'd like to read a brief excerpt from the ending of the article that really explains how I feel.

Junod recounts the time that Mister Rogers asked him to join in prayer along with his minister, Deb. "We bowed our heads and closed our eyes, and I heard Deb's voice calling out for the grace of God. What is grace? I'm not certain; all I know is that my heart felt like a spike, and then, in that room, it opened and felt like an umbrella."

My heart had felt like a spike, probably for a lot longer than I'm willing to admit, and now it feels like an umbrella.