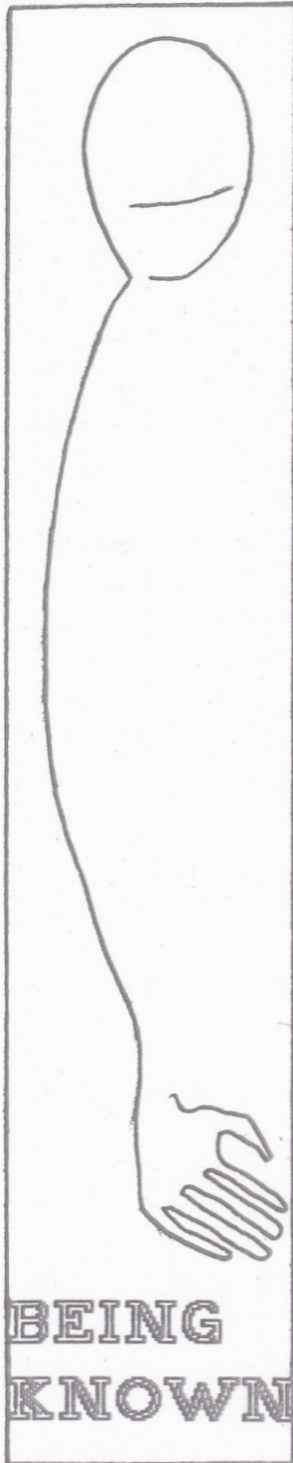




SPRED

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“Love isn’t a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like ‘struggle.’ To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is right here and right now.” —Fred Rogers

Fred McFeely Rogers, commonly known as **Mister Rogers**, was an American television host, author, producer and Presbyterian minister. He was the creator, show runner and host of the preschool television series *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*, which ran from 1968 to 2001. Unlike other children’s television shows, which emphasized cognitive learning, the Fred Rogers series focused on the emotional and social needs of young children. Fred Rogers valued the child’s developing psyche, emotions and sense of moral and ethical reasoning. He highlighted sharing, civility, tolerance and self-worth at a gentle, assuring and leisurely cadence.

The warm memory of this unique and treasured television series came to me through the recent sharing of this simple quote. I recall my own children gathering faithfully to be caught in the wonder of his characters. His stories and his simplicity became the gentle bedrock for their growing values and respect of others. His message of love was presented as an active endeavor—something requiring resolution and work. It recognized the human tendency to judge and see differences as something to fear and reject. Mr. Rogers offered the encouragement to embrace differences and find graces in the other, even when the encounter is uneasy. The interplay can be surprising and rewarding.

I believe that love is not naive. It is not a Pollyana approach to life. We work at it. Friendship is born of attraction. It occurs when we feel a draw to another. It stems from magnetism between like-minded people. Love, respect and acceptance are a decision. It is a mindset to look beyond the veneer of the other and search for the treasures inside. It requires time, patience and humility. It calls for personal conversion.

The call to participate in a SPRED community is a summons to love. It is a moral and faith-based decision to enter a sacred bond with people, young and old, from all walks of life with varying abilities and everyday life challenges. SPRED is an invitation to explore the wonder and mysteries of the stranger—both catechists and friends. It draws people, stirred by conscience, to make the bold move to respond to the call to BE church for all. We recognize ourselves as all the people of God—weak and strong; broken and beautiful. These are only perceptions. Each of us is created in God’s image in the outpouring of his love. Relationships are vital in drawing us to be who we are called to be. Whether we take a biblical or theological approach to welcoming others into the relationship at the table of the Lord, it goes beyond inclusion to belonging. It is about the imperative to love. Love has a personal price.

“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served.

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There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to everyone for their service. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each one, for the good of all." —1 Corinthians 12:4-7

As I dwell on this passage, I am keenly aware that there is a complete absence of any terminology that implies them and us. It does emphasize the uniqueness of each being. There is no indication of better or worse; but varying gifts to be shared by all and for all.

I value a collection of treasured photo albums and a prized slide presentation of catechists and their companions who have graced the SPRED communities of Queen of Angels parish over the past 45 years. As I ponder each person; hear the echo of their laughter and the tentative whisper of more gentle voices, I am keenly aware that each portrays a notable singularity, unencumbered by judgment or labels. It is a kaleidoscope of multiple personalities—playful, shy, mischievous, stubborn, silly, serious, quiet, vocal, silent, reflective, moody, intense...and the list goes on. Of course, these character traits are the collage of catechists and partners in a colorful masterpiece of intermingling personalities. The list reveals neither ability nor disability. Instead, it highlights oneness in our uniqueness.

A SPRED community is comprised of those who hear the call to BE church for all. Volunteers gather to explore the possibility of a place without judgment; a place of people gathered to open their hearts and souls in the quest for sacred communion. The call of catechists and their companions is a recipe for a delicious mix of personalities, mannerisms, quirks, talents, weaknesses and mystery. Some experience the natural attraction of friendship with one or another, while all wrestle with the call to move beyond charitable acceptance to embrace deeper relationship fostered in respect and culminating in love. Formation of a faith community is a gentle process. The profile changes with the comings and goings of each catechist and friend. The work is ongoing, but the prize is precious.

Recently, I have been pondering the reflection of Amy Jacober in her book *Redefining Perfect*, which explores the interplay of theology and disability.¹ She professes a move beyond the portrayal of the guest to consider the concept of an equal and valued member of the community. She anchors her theological premise in real life experiences. The interplay draws one to move beyond categories and titles that build prejudicial classifications of abled and disabled—the whole and the broken. Her poignant conclusion admits the realization that we are all a work in progress. She offers God's vision of perfect.

"It's not about requiring others to look like me, sound like me, think like me. It is about making room at the table and doing the slow and beautiful work of getting to see the glimpses of God in all those he created. For our Friends, this means not only knowing in the depths of their being that they are valued, but that the community that surrounds them knows this, too, and acts accordingly. That is perfect."

Being Church is an intentional act. I imagine that God's vision is that we must rely on one another to become whole—to become the fullness of the Body of Christ. In the process, we inevitably bump into our own imperfections. We discover that perfection does not mean flawless or hopeless. The gathering of SPRED catechists and friends is open to welcome the stranger. As the call to community draws people from all walks of life, promising a blend of men and women of all ages. It includes people of all ethnic backgrounds, economic status, education, gifts and challenges. The portrait morphs with the coming and goings of each catechist and friend.

As members of the Body of Christ, we respond to the imperative to love all our brothers and sisters. Becoming Church is a communal action. We are called to reach out to help one another to become the best that we can be. Love is not tolerance, but the embrace of difference and the discovery of the surprise that is at the heart of that deliberate act. Acceptance is the embodiment of love. It is a journey toward wholeness.

If love is the imperative of *becoming Church*, it requires more than a physical change to a building. We preach about inclusion, acceptance and love, yet in the real world we hesitate to sit in the same pew as a person of a different appearance or grimace at an unfamiliar sound. Why does personal discomfort allow anyone to drive others away?

After more than a half century, why do parishes hesitate at the offer to host a SPRED community? Why do faithful members of the church turn away from an invitation to make an intentional decision to break down barriers and embrace the possibility of love? In the work of renewing our church, we hear the call to welcome the stranger as an act of conscience, an act of faith. As the Body of Christ, we strive to free humanity from the perception that any person holds the right to be selective about those who are called as God's people.

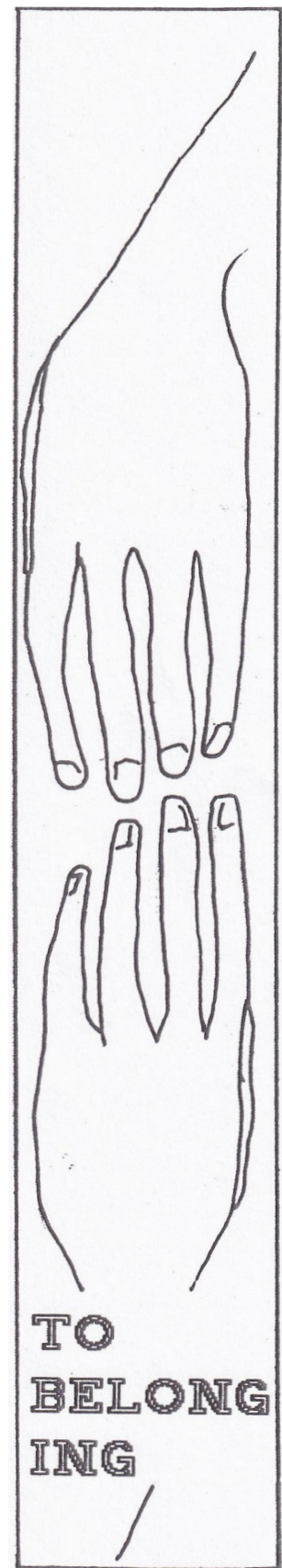
I believe that the vitality of the Church depends on the birthing of intentional small communities of faith to begin and further the work of love. Change on a small scale with serious intent and a purposeful mission has the possibility of inspiring others. As members of SPRED communities model a welcoming and faith-filled stance that all are welcome at the Lord's Table, a pebble is cast to stir ripples of hope. Through the grace of the sacraments, God bestows each of us with the courage to take the risk to fall in step with others, uncomfortable as that may be at times. As volunteers break the myriad of excuses disguising real fear, change will come.

Each SPRED community formed patiently and deliberately within the heart of a parish has the happy potential to awaken life giving conversion. Building and maintaining a small community of faith takes patience and determination and the welcome grace of God. SPRED communities make the intentional decision to move beyond charity toward genuine relationships grounded in making room for love, joy and peace. We are different but the same—all created in God's image.

“Part of the problem with the word *disabilities* is that it immediately suggests an inability to see or hear or walk or do other things that many of us take for granted.

But what of people who can't feel? Or talk about their feelings? Or manage them in constructive ways? What of people who are not able to form close and strong relationships? And people who cannot find fulfillment in their lives, or those who have lost hope, who live in disappointment and bitterness and find in life no joy, no love? These, it seems to me, are the real disabilities.” —Fred Rogers

Julia Hess
Chicago SPRED Community Religious Worker



1. Amy E. Jaconer, "Redefining Perfect," *The Interplay Between Theology & Disability*, Castle Books, Eugene OR 2017.

CHICAGO SPRED CALENDAR**SPRED Center:** 2956 South Lowe Avenue**Training (Orientations) 2023**

SPRED Center, Contact: 312.842.1039

General Orientation (2-1):

Feb. 11, 18, 25, 1 – 6 p.m.

Role Orientation (3-1):

March 11, 18, 1 – 6 p.m.

English Helper Catechist Orientation:

March 4, 1 – 6 p.m.

Spanish Helper Catechist Orientation:

March 25, 1 – 6 p.m.

Observation, SPRED Center, 312.842.1039

6–10 Group, Feb. 13, 27, March 13, 27, April 24, May 8

11–16 Group, Feb. 14, 28, March 28, April 25, May 9

17/21 Group, Feb. 14, 28, March 28, April 25, May 9

22+ Group, Feb. 13, 27, March 13, 27, April 24, May 8

SPRED Family Liturgy, SPRED Center

Spanish: 11 a.m. Jan. 22

English: 11 a.m. Feb. 5

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