

Welcome

James 3:13-18, Mark 9:30-37

Center Church, Hartford, CT

September 23, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

(Sing) It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood; it's a neighborly day for a neighbor, would you be my, could you be my? It's a neighborly day in this beauty wood, a neighborly day for a beauty, would you be my, could you be my? I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you. I have always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you. So, let's make the most of this beautiful day! Since we're together we might as well say, "Would you be my, could you be my, won't you be my neighbor?!"

There are no words of welcome quite like Fred Rogers gave us every time his show "MisterRogers Neighborhood" aired. I well remember my own children, my nieces and nephews and friends' children being utterly captivated and drawn in by his openness, gentleness, and respect for them, for their questions, for their struggles and joys. He embodied what we read in James today, "gentleness born of wisdom." If you have not seen the recent documentary about him ("Won't You Be My Neighbor?"), please find it!

How I wish that every child, every adult, in this country, or in the world experienced that kind of welcome every day. Wherever they go in the world. Whatever social media outlet they frequent.

But it is not so.

The African-American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates addresses his teenage son about what it is like to be unwelcome in many parts of America because of race. (See pp. 11-12 in *Between the World and Me*).

Also, in August, the Vietnamese-American actress Kelly Marie Tran (who appeared as Rose Tico in "Star Wars: The Last Jedi") published an Op-Ed in the New York Times in response to the horrible racist and misogynist things that were written to and about her on social media after the film came out. She dropped all her social media accounts, and then wrote this: "Their words reinforced a narrative I had heard my whole life: that I was 'other,' that I didn't belong, that I wasn't good enough, simply because I wasn't like them...And as much as I hate to admit it, I started blaming myself. I thought, 'Oh, maybe if I was thinner,'"...and, worst of all, 'Maybe if I wasn't Asian.' For months I went down a spiral of self-hate, where I put their words above my own self-worth...I am not the first person to have grown up this way. This is what it is to grow up as a person of color in a white-dominated world. This is what it is to be a woman in a society that has taught its daughters that we are worthy of love only if we are deemed attractive by its sons. This is the world I grew up in, but not the world I want to leave behind." Those are just clips, and I commend to you the whole Op-Ed.

I could share with you the words of people in the LGBTQ community that would sound like these, or words of Hispanic, Middle-Eastern, recent immigrants, disabled or mentally ill Americans. So many of them, like Tran, saying that "welcome" is not in the vocabulary of this country for them, in the words of Bruce Springsteen, "the first kick I got was when I hit the ground."

Jesus said to his disciples, "what were you arguing about as we traveled?" But they were silent, because they'd been arguing about which of them was the greatest disciple! Jesus knew that. So, he took a child, a little child. This was extremely symbolic, because little children were the lowest ranked people in Jesus' society, with no voice in their own lives, and no power at all. Jesus lifted that child up in his arms and said, "Whoever welcomes one child like this one welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, is welcoming God."

Jesus is not talking just about what you do the first time you meet someone new, or invite someone to your house or to the

church. Jesus is talking about living a life where you are less concerned about your own greatness than you are about making sure that every child you come across is respected, cared for, treated with love, and seen as the embodiment of the holy: welcomed.

In our society these days, the place of least welcome for children, youth and adults is often social media, and people of all ages spend a lot of time on social media. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and so many I can't keep up with the names. I find some social media very helpful. But I fear for those, like Kelly Tran, like Dr. Ford, the woman who has accused Judge Kavanaugh of sexual assault, who has been so hounded on social media with hate and death threats that she has had to go into hiding. It's not just the President saying hateful things on Twitter; it's people from all political and social views. It has become a bully pulpit for bullies of all kinds.

Social media is not going away, any more than television did. Fred Rogers started his show because he wanted TV to be a more welcoming place for children. Like Fred Rogers, those of us in this room who use any kind of social media can commit to sharing words of love and care and welcome, and to teach our children and youth to do the same.

But I think we need to do more, as individuals and as a church. We need to build a welcoming way into everything we do here. It's not always easy, because sometimes we have to overcome both our own biases, assumptions and prejudices, as well as people who sometimes make it hard for us to welcome them, who may not treat **us** with an attitude of welcome. For those people, like a colleague of mine says, our attitude needs to be "more grace required." By picking up a child, Jesus makes it clear to the disciples that it is those without power or voice in their world who need welcome most. And it is by welcoming them that we make this church, this city, and America, great.

Let's face reality: from the Puritans to today, America has never been "great" about welcoming others who are different in any way from whoever is in power, despite that poem on the Statue of Liberty. Fred Rogers was an anomaly, not the norm, then and now. He was the gentle radical, who broke barriers like sitting with a black man as they both put their feet in a baby pool, at a time when many black children were denied entrance to public and private pools in this country. As an economically and educationally privileged white man, he used his privilege to lift up children and anyone else who might be looked at as "other." He led a resistance in the world of television that changed children's television, among many other things.

Friends, whoever we are, there is someone with less power and voice than we have. We are called to be great by seeing Jesus in them, seeing God in them, and then doing what we can to lift them up and love them. **Daily, we are called to the powerful resistance of welcoming.**

We are about to sing hymn #309. Please turn to it now, because I want us to look at the words before we sing them, so we might sing with deeper understanding and meaning. (go through hymn).

The powerful resistance of welcoming in the name of Jesus.
Amen.