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Jeremiah 28:5-9
Psalm 89:1-4,15-18
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

June 28, 2026
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Mr. Rogers once said, *“The world needs a sense of worth, and it will achieve it only by its people feeling that they are worthwhile.”*¹ The lesson is so very simple...by extending our kindness to one another we create immeasurable opportunities for people to feel valued.

It’s that feeling of worth that I want to focus on this morning. The emphasis we place on human dignity and the ways in which we care for one another as a foundational expression of faith.

And so, I want to tell you a story. It’s one of those stories that has stayed with me over the years and it continues to teach me about dignity and worth. I hope it will do the same for you.

As many of you know, before coming to Grace, I worked in the Chaplaincy at the University of Richmond. My main role was taking students abroad to places of conflict in the world to consider where faith was working to build bridges in areas marked by pain and suffering. We visited community groups, government and military leaders, families and faith communities. And no matter what country we visited, there was one narrative that continued to emerge.

That was the importance of cultivating a shared experience of worth. Of taking little steps to build trust across lines of difference even in the midst of generational tensions, political divides, and religious polarization.

On one particular trip I was in Israel with eight students. They were Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim. One of my co-leaders was an Orthodox rabbi named Eitan. By all accounts, we were not your average tour group. But we traveled with a common purpose of learning from one another. We were committed to walking alongside one another and facing our toughest questions about what it means to have faith in an often uncertain world. And more importantly, we were committed to discovering what it means to value the worth of those who differ from ourselves.

One of my students, a female Muslim, had committed to praying at least 3 times a day while she was in Israel. She told me she wasn’t the most observant Muslim but on this trip she wanted to explore the roots of her religious tradition and find a renewed connection to her faith.

Our challenge as trip leaders was finding a place for her to pray as we traveled in spaces that might not always be hospitable for a young Muslim girl.

¹ Rogers, Fred. *You Are Special: Words of Wisdom for All Ages from a Beloved Neighbor*. New York: Penguin, 1995, p. 17.

We soon discovered that prayer space was hard to come by particularly in the Old City of Jerusalem where every nook and cranny was filled with homes and businesses, churches and synagogues. Few spaces were accessible to a foreigner wanting a quiet place out of public scrutiny. My student became discouraged.

That's when something truly remarkable happened. Our guide, Eitan, the Orthodox rabbi, offered to pray with our Muslim student. He committed to creating space for the two of them to pray alongside each other because as a rabbi in Jerusalem he had access to prayer space that she did not.

One day, they prayed together in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, the Orthodox rabbi and the young Muslim girl. In this one act, he upheld her value. He honored her worth. Their differences did not matter. The only thing that mattered was their shared humanity.

Eitan laughed afterwards saying they were quite the curiosity for the Jewish children running around in the neighborhood. I like to think that they were sowing beautiful seeds of understanding that day by their example of mutual respect. I would like to think that the children who watched in wonder will remember the day they saw a rabbi pray alongside a Muslim girl.

We will never know the result of their actions. I do know, however, that they showed us what it truly means to grow together, to take whatever steps you can as an individual to live out an example of love and compassion and caring.

Remember...*"The world needs a sense of worth, and it will achieve it only by its people feeling that they are worthwhile."*

This is what Jesus is teaching in Matthew. Jesus sums it up with one word...*welcome*.

By the time we get to our Gospel reading today, Jesus has been very clear...the work of welcome, of hospitality, is difficult. It is radical, life-giving openness in a world that would rather shut the door on difference. But Jesus calls the disciples forth anyway...to push open every closed door and to open every closed heart. To live the way of love. To take the risk. To be an example.

Jesus also reassures the disciples that no matter what opposition they may encounter, because they will, there will also be people who will say...come on in, you are doing good work and you are welcome here.

Because...*"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...."*

Henri Nouwen once wrote, "*Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines.*"²

Welcome, not judgement. Love, not hate. Conversation, not confrontation. Nouwen doesn't say that the dividing lines won't be there. They will. He simply reminds us that they should not hinder our unconditional care for one another.

There is a beautiful Welsh sonnet that reminds us...*God has not forbidden us to love the world.*³

The world, even those who differ from us, is an expression of God's glory. And that glory is full of worth.

In a time where we are inundated with messages of fear and division, where loving the world feels risky...I want you to remember that God's vision was for something so much more. Like the rabbi and the Muslim girl, our care for one another needs no qualifiers. But it will take our conviction to continue to seek God's sacredness in one another.

² Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. New York: Image (Doubleday), 1975, p. 71.

³ A. M. Allchin, *Praise Above All* (University of Wales Press), 1991, p. 37.