

“A Rose in the Wintertime”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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Well folks its 2017. For many people and for many reasons, 2016 has been declared a terrible year. From the deaths of beloved celebrities such as David Bowie, Prince, and Carrie Fisher to the election of a racist, sexist, xenophobic man as president, many have declared their readiness to leave 2016 behind. So, here we are. 2017.

Is it different yet? In truth, more beloved celebrities will die this year. And, as Donald Trump and his chosen administration takes office in a few weeks, their power will likely increase the actual harm to both people and the earth. Seen through this lens, 2017 will, I fear, be worse.

But rather than accept this defeatist lens of inevitable darkness, I want us to consider in what ways 2017 *can* be a shift towards a better world.

Making things better is in the air, of course. This is after all the season of the sacred rite of making resolutions. Losing weight. Getting fit. Commitment to daily meditation. As well as, quitting smoking or another harmful habit. Businesses that cater to such resolutions are standing by waiting to take your money ... I mean help you with your goals.

Despite my efforts at humor, I commend such resolutions when they inspire a person to take concrete actions to make a positive change in their lives. While there may be nothing magical about the date of January 1, the ritual of reflection and resolution seems to be an important part of our self-aware lives. And, in some religious traditions, this process is central. For example, the high holidays of Judaism are marked by Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In this way, the Jewish new year begins not only with celebration, but also with a religious ritual of self-reflection, reconciliation with those you have harmed, and resolutions to move in a better direction in the coming year.

As we begin a new calendar year, perhaps you're already been reflecting upon what you might do differently in the coming weeks or months. Or perhaps you've given up on New Year's Resolutions as useless years ago. Whether you are pro-resolutions or anti-resolutions, this morning I would like to suggest an intention for the new year that might bring us all to a better place. The intention of being a kinder neighbor.

Inevitably, suggesting this immediately raises the question, “who exactly do you mean by my *neighbor*?” To which I offer a cryptic “yes.” Yes, your neighbor is the person you’re thinking about as you ask the question. The family who lives across the street who keeps to themselves. The clerk in the pharmacy where you pick-up your prescriptions. The neighborhoods you commute past on your way to work. The homeless and hungry who stand at the intersection or sit in a doorway.

Yes, loving your neighbor, is the kind of stuff minister’s say, isn’t it?! We know it’s an important marker of good ethical behavior. But, we also know, well, we pick and choose who are neighbors are or when it’s convenient to help them. So what’s different today?

Today it is 2017. Today we are living in a deeply divided nation. A nation in which public discourse has been corrupted by incivility as well as a toxic distrust of the news. Today we are awakening to a new year that portends a high degree of uncertainty. We’re not certain what changes the new administration will attempt to make or be able to make. We’re not certain what actions those in our nation who feel emboldened by rhetoric of hate might take. We’re not certain what role we may end up playing or how we might be called upon to respond to this changing world.

With all this uncertainty, perhaps the wisest course of action is to rely upon the old wisdom that has survived through millennia of strife and division. Perhaps what we need most right now is to reach out for and hold fast to the ancient teaching to love one’s neighbor.

As a child of the 70’s, thinking about what it means to be a good neighbor often brings Mister Rogers to mind. For thirty-three years, *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood* appeared on Public Television. I suspect many of us or our children or grandchildren have seen some episodes of the show. Despite its great success on television, the show actually emerged out of Mister Roger’s *dislike* of television!

In a [1998 profile on Rogers in Esquire](#) magazine, Tom Junod describes the reason for Rogers’ dislike of television. Junod writes,

“[Rogers] came home [from college] to Latrobe, Pennsylvania ... and his parents, because they were wealthy, had bought something new for the corner room of their big redbrick house. It was a television. Fred turned it on, and as he says now, with plaintive distaste, “there were people throwing *pies* at one another.” He was the soft son of overprotective parents, but he believed, right then, that he was strong enough to enter into battle with *that*—that machine, that medium—and to wrestle with it until it yielded to him, until the ground touched by its blue shadow became

hallowed and this thing called television came to be used "for the broadcasting of grace through the land."

Rogers lost this fight, Junod adds. Television has become a 24/7 stream of pie throwing and worse. And yet, for decades, Rogers fought to bring a different kind of message through the medium of television. By teaching us how to be good neighbors, Rogers brought grace.

Being a good neighbor begins with knowing your neighbors. In addition to daily visits from the postal carrier, Mister Rogers takes the children to explore all different parts of the neighborhood—the doctor, the school, the opera, a grocery store, a dairy farm, and all kinds of factories to explore how stuff is made. Mister Rogers not only goes to many different places in the neighborhood, he also takes the time to meet many different kinds of people. He talks with a boy in a wheelchair, a blind saxophonist, frequently meets with the African-American [Officer Clemmons](#) (who was played by an openly gay actor), and takes a special visit to Russia...during the Cold War.

Throughout the show, Rogers sends a clear message of belonging. To each he shows respect and curiosity about who they are and what they can do. Episode after episode he sends a message of grace—a message that each person is loved just as they are.

Some would say that *Mister Roger's Neighborhood* doesn't represent the "real" world. Heck, it's just a kid's show, right?! Yet others have suggested that the intent of the show, of the man behind the show, was to be the antidote to that other world. To those who would accept and even promote violence—even of the pie-throwing variety, Rogers portrayed scene after scene of mutual respect and kindness.

We too are in need of an antidote. An antidote the reality of hateful rhetoric and policies that aim to demean and exclude those who are different. We also need an antidote to the fear or disgust that might pull us to safely retreat within circles of like-minded folks. We need a way to be in the world that doesn't shirk from the challenges, but also holds fast to an ethic of love and kindness.

When we gather in religious communities—whether here, Sudbury, Framingham, or beyond, we do so because the world *is* a tough place and we need not only moments of respite and renewal, but also some insights on how to survive. Sometimes we're thrown into confusion by grief or a bad diagnosis. Sometimes it's something good that disorients us such as how to care for this infant who suddenly depends upon you for its life. And sometimes it is the political situation of our shared life that can unsettle one's view of the world.

Perhaps like many of you, I stayed up late on election night into the early hours of Wednesday. After finally sleeping a few hours, my alarm brought me back into the unfolding events. There was much to do and so after a bit of work at home, I left the house to head here to First Parish. Given the short night, I first stopped for coffee.

I'm not my most coherent before coffee. Nor am I my most patient. And so when I walked into the coffee shop and discovered a long line, my irritation began to rise. I could easily have stood there internally fuming about what clearly must be the incompetence of the staff to engender such a back-up—or, maybe it was the inept manager who failed to appropriately schedule adequate staff. Such was the critical voice that rushed into mind to take control. Instead, two words came to mind, "Be Kind."

With no complex forethought, I made a choice about how I wanted to be: kind. If hatred of women, same-sex love, black and brown skin, immigrants, and so many others was going to be accepted and promoted, then I . . . I wanted to choose kindness.

I can't say that in the intervening weeks that I've perfectly kept my resolution. Irritation emerges—especially to drivers with whom I share the road. But, I do keep coming back to these two words: be kind.

Kindness is an effort to be considerate. Kindness seeks to interact with another in ways that respects their worth and dignity—that does not dehumanize another through indifference or blind rage. At its best, kindness is an expression of empathy and compassion. Kindness sees the other person as a person and seeks to show respect, perhaps even care. Kindness makes space for the other car to merge in front of you. Kindness tries to meet the eyes of a store clerk with a grateful smile. Kindness is helping another by holding the door, offering to bring over a meal, or sending a check to share resources you know will make a difference.

Now I know that calling for kindness can also be a way to defang cries for justice. Especially for women, the expectation of kindness—of *niceness*—can feel like a spiritual corset inhibiting our feelings and behaviors. Kindness can sometimes seem to forestall calls to action. In a dangerous and unjust world, is kindness enough?

On its own, kindness certainly may not be—nor could it be—the only orientation we bring to our interactions with others in the world. Sometimes we simply fall short of its ideals with our irritability, anger, or one of the many other very human responses to being in relationship to others. And, sometimes, the danger at hand is too great and merits a swift and clear defense that may hurt another. Although I might argue that even in such

moments of defensive response, we might still strive to refrain from demeaning another's humanity. And there are most certainly times when injustices call for us to push hard for a change in ways that may feel unkind to those who seek to retain their power.

Life is complicated and our problems complex. No one response or strategy will adequately build towards a more loving and just world. But in a world of violence that stretches from an ill-tempered honk at a stop light to a demeaning epithet tossed at a passerby to the battering of an intimate partner or the bombing of nations, we also need an antidote to all the destructive forces around us. We also need kindness to assure ourselves and others of the worth and dignity of human life. We need kindness to foster trust in other humans—to send a message that not everyone seeks harm. We need kindness to help build connections and community.

It's 2017. The start of an uncertain year. In many ways, it feels like winter. Not only have the temperatures dropped and snow fallen, but the social climate of our nation feels chilled. In the chorus of the hymn, *Come, Sing a Song with Me*, the singer invites others to join in a shared song. The chorus promises the singer will bring hope, a song of love, and a rose in the wintertime. Recently a congregant sent a photo to me of a rose literally blooming in the wintertime. (You can see the photo on our Facebook page.) Such an image conveys a powerful message of hope and of resistance. The colorful rose blooming is the antidote to the gray, lifelessness of winter. So also, kindness to our neighbors can be an antidote to hate and civil division. Such kindness reflects the goal of Mister Rogers to express grace—to send the message that each person is loved.

So may it be.
Amen