Won’t You Be My Neighbor?
Matthew 8:5-13

Introduction:
I have a candidate for most persistent TV host.
Any guesses?
It’s the late Fred Rogers.
As the host of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* he, for decades, made the same invitation.
You know it well I’m sure.
“Won’t you be my neighbor,” he asked, “Won’t you be my neighbor?”

Of course, Fred Rogers was hardly the originator of neighborliness.
It is also at the center of how Jesus encourages us to treat others.
Radical hospitality we call it.
But how did Jesus himself manage it?
What can we learn from his interactions?

In the story we just heard we get to find out.
By looking at this interaction between Jesus and a Centurion we can discover what it means to make the invitation “Won’t you be my neighbor?”

1. Acknowledge the situation.
Recognize that there can be a gulf between one person and another.
There are people we don’t view as neighbors as readily as we do others.

Sometimes when we read the bible we more or less lump everyone together.
In our imaginations they are all dressed in bathrobes quite indistinguishable from one another.
But that isn’t an accurate way of looking at them.
In our episode Jesus and the Centurion are not just strangers to each other.
They are strangers who could have experienced considerable antagonism with each other.
The Centurion is a Roman army officer.
He is not only a foreigner; he is a foreigner who has been part of an invasion of Jesus’ country.
What’s more he’s also likely to be a pagan; as a soldier he’d have pledged allegiance to the divinity of the emperor.
From the place Jesus stands, there can have been few less likely to be considered a neighbor than this man.

Clearly our situation is not like the one Jesus faced.
We’ve not been conquered.
We don’t have foreign soldiers harassing us.
But we can still experience tensions between ourselves and others.
Like it or not there are some we can feel are not our kind of people.
One tension that is often present is between us and Moslems. Yes, we can intellectually accept that Moslems are people just like us. We can resist attempts to demonize them just because of the actions of a few. But they are still strangers to most of us.

Then there are tensions over sexual orientation. Again we can want to have the best will towards people whose sexual orientation is different from ours. But we know too that its often not easy. There’s still a gulf between their experience and ours.

Or how about socio-economic divisions? How many of us are entirely comfortable engaging with those who are down and out whatever their religion or skin color?

No, I’m not saying there’s anything malicious in our view of others. We might well not like the divisions and we might well want to do something about them. And yet, we know they exist. There are people we don’t treat as neighbors quite as readily as others. So, one step in becoming more hospitable is to acknowledge the situation.

2. **Notice the opportunities.**
Be alert to those times when bridges open up between us.

In the story the opportunity comes as the result of an illness. The Centurion is worried about a young man in his household. In our translation the young man is termed a servant. There are others that call him a son. One even hints at a lover. Whatever the specific relationship, however, what the illness does is give the Centurion the opportunity to reach out and Jesus the opportunity to reach back. They both are alert to this bridge that has opened up.

There’s no doubt that a crisis often can be a powerful motivator towards connection. I am in need or another is in need and that can be enough to link us. But it’s hardly the only bridge. There are plenty of other ways that the opportunity comes as well.

Last December we moved. Our new neighborhood is a typical suburban development. It is made up of single family homes. There are wide roads, spacious level sidewalks, even a park. Before we moved we hadn’t seen much of the other residents. It was December, the days were short, there was a lot of rain.
As the days lengthened, though, and we saw more of the other people we realized something.
We live in a racially mixed neighborhood.
There are African American families, Asian families, Middle Eastern families.
Not only that, but quite a number of us are clearly immigrants.
There are accents and languages galore.
What an opportunity.
Perhaps the accident of relocation can open up a bridge between us.

Now it could be that you also are in that kind of situation.
Your literal neighbors give you a new kind of person to connect with.
Alternatively maybe your opportunity is in the form of a new coworker or the clerk at Safeway or a shared interest in fishing.
There are all kinds of possibilities.
What is important is that we see them.
An important step in inviting people to become neighbors is to be alert to those times when bridges open up.
Notice the opportunities.

3. Pay attention.
Don’t make assumptions or settle for stereotypes.
Take time to listen.
Get beyond superficialities.

In the story the case for listening is pretty clear.
The Centurion asks for help.
Jesus says he’ll go to the house.
The Centurion says you don’t have to.
What’s going on here?
One way of reading it is to see Jesus as making an assumption.
The Centurion has a problem;
His usual response is to go in person;
The Centurion shows him a different way.
Another interpretation is to see the Centurion as already having learned something about Jesus’ culture.
He knows that it would be against the religious practices then in place for Jesus to step into the house of a man like him.
So he takes steps to save him embarrassment.

Who knows which interpretation is correct.
Whichever it is, though, it’s clear that listening changes the dynamic.

Now, of course, listening is good advice in any relationship.
It doesn’t matter who it is or how long we’ve known them, paying attention is essential to valuing someone.
Spouses take note!
But it’s particularly vital when we want to cross a barrier.
Understanding who each other is, what hopes and needs we have, is vital.

This year something rare happened: I had a birthday party.
It was the first in I don’t know how long but it was the big 6-0 so we had to make a fuss.
What we told the guests was that it would be our version of a British Tea.
Now, what do you hear when you hear the word “tea.”
Probably you think of that brown liquid that, between you and me, I can’t stand.
What do I mean by the word?
I mean sandwiches and cakes and sausage rolls and hopefully some scones and cream.

OK it’s not the biggest difference in the world.
It can easily be clarified (and it was).
But sometimes misunderstandings between religions and cultures and races and classes can be profound.
So take time to listen.
Pay attention.

4. Expect to learn.
Anticipate that the other person will contribute to your life.
Be aware that God can speak through them.

Did you notice how Jesus’ reaction to the Centurion is described?
It says he was amazed.
Jesus, the son of God, the one who we see as the center of our faith, was amazed by what he saw in this Centurion.
He learned something.
He experienced the unexpected.
His world was changed.

Often the way we approach someone we see as the other is as a one up, one down kind of relationship.
We are the Christians, they are the non-Christians.
We are the haves, they are the have nots.
We are the givers, they are the receivers.
The fact is, however, that most genuine communication is two way.
Sure they can learn from us.
But we can also learn from them.

One of the most venerated religious leaders in the world is the Dali Lama.
Almost universally he is regarded as a man of great spirituality and integrity.
People pay attention to his words.
We listen for his wisdom.

But his acknowledged spirituality can be a bit of a problem for us.
He’s not Christian.
He’s a Buddhist.
How can a non Christian have such spiritual insight?
How can we be learning from someone who is the other?

Perhaps the answer is in what a wise Christian leader once said about another non Christian.
When asked about his advocacy of the teachings of Mohandas Gandhi, the great Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones had a ready response.
“God sent this non Christian to show us Christians how to be more Christian.”

The fact is that God can speak through anyone.
As we become neighbors anticipate that they will add to your life.
Expect to learn.

5. Anticipate the promise.
Glimpse what our experience shows us of the future God has in store.

After Jesus expresses his amazement and recognizes the faith of the Centurion, he has a follow up statement that is in itself amazing.
Did you catch it?
Here’s what he says.
“I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.”
Many will come from east and west and will eat in the kingdom of heaven.

What’s he saying?
In part he’s asserting that the Kingdom of God is inclusive.
He’s saying that it’s not restricted to any one group.
God’s embrace is radically open to all comers.
But he’s actually going further.
He’s claiming that inclusivity is the key value of the kingdom.
God’s not just open to people from everywhere.
God wants us to be open as well.

One way we can treat outsiders is to expect them to become like us.
We welcome you as long as you conform to our ways.
You can be in our church as long as you don’t want anything different.
You can be in our community as long as follow our rules.
You can be in our country as long as you adopt our culture.

A different way to treat outsiders is to see them as bringing us enrichment.
We welcome you and we hope you will expand our lives.
You can be in our church and show us how we can do a better job of responding to your hopes and dreams.
You can be in our community and help us see new ways of doing things.
You can be in our country and give us the benefit of your experiences and insights.
There’s an old paradox you sometimes hear.  
I can tolerate everything except intolerance.  
There’s something like that with God.  
The only way you are excluded from what God offers is when you cut yourself off.  
The kingdom of God is open to all.

One of the results of practicing radical hospitality is that it gives us a glimpse of the future God has in store.  
It helps us anticipate the promise.

**Conclusion:**  
We live in a world where the divisions are significant.  
Politics, race, religion, sexuality and class are all locations of separation.  
But there are also opportunities to bridge the chasm.  
As the encounter between Jesus and the Centurion shows us, there are indeed ways of practicing radical hospitality.  
We can continue to ask “Won’t you be my neighbor?”