

**“Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. – Thomas Merton**

Keith’s WALK speech 2019

Good morning and welcome to the 17<sup>th</sup> Good Works WALK!

- *It’s been a long cold lonely winter....*

Homelessness in our community is a “we” problem. The solution to homelessness is a “we” solution. Welcoming strangers requires a “we” solution. It is something we at GW do through the Timothy House, but it is sustained through community. Thank you!

### **Welcome to the neighborhood!**

WE ARE here today because we care about our neighbors and we want to love or learn to love strangers. The bible uses many words for the stranger. Sojourner, alien, Immigrant.

**Stranger** in *our* context: often economically impoverished, without a home, excluded, doesn’t feel like they fit in. Struggling to trust others they don’t know. Looking for ways to escape the pain of rejection (like we all are) Dependent on others and doesn’t like feeling dependent. Seeks dignity and opportunity. Often feels oppressed and “locked out” from the path way of HOPE and opportunity.

Maybe Bob Dylan, the secular prophet of the 1960s said it best:

*How does it feel, how does it feel?  
To be without a home, no direction home.  
Like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone*

And some of us feel almost “automatic” mistrust and fear of strangers.... oftentimes resulting in derogatory language and insults.

The Good Works Community, we are all very grateful to each of you who participate in the WALK and in the community of HOPE. So many of you and so many different expressions of FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE.

As Christians, our community believes not only does God commands us to love God and love our neighbor, but this “fits” the way we want to live our lives. At Good Works, we have formed a community of learners, a community that has been learning how to love for 38 consecutive years. Beginning ..... with providing a place for people to live years before we heard of “the homeless” to today.

Our focus today is really what we have been focusing on since the first GW WALK in 2003: **Loving and welcoming strangers.**

When some of us were kids, our parents taught some of us *not to talk to strangers*. Well... okay, but now we are adults and I’m telling you it is the right thing to talk to strangers. Maybe we can just begin by saying “hello, what is your name”?

We begin by a warm welcome and move toward being attentive to the people in front of us. Later, we move to serving in some deliberate way and then, in some cases to friendship. It’s okay to start at “arm’s length” and move in slowly. It is wise to be cautious. Most of us are cautious when we begin new relationships with people we don’t know. But don’t get stuck there.

**These words: Love God. Love your neighbor. Love the stranger. For me, these words ... helps everything else in my life make sense.**

After saying “Welcome to my neighborhood”, Fred Rogers later said: **“Love is at the root at everything, all learning, all relationships, love or the lack of it” To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is.**

One of the big things about being human is to meet and learn to accept people who are different from us. Go to the poor or to those who feel excluded, and seek to discover the **beauty** in the other person

What Good Works does is create structures for neighbors to meet strangers. To express friendship and hope and love. ... and to seek out and receive the gift, the treasure in these relationships that we can not initially see. This treasure, these relationships.... One of the many things that Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos cannot buy.

The Timothy House, Friday Night Life, Neighbors Helping Neighbors and the Transformation Station are examples of these structures. I believe that it is the role of leadership (in every community) to create structures through which neighbors can form relationships with strangers.

Kindness can be expressed by anyone who opens their heart to people who are different from them.

How do we inject HOPE into our world? Create and organize or participate in structures which welcome strangers in your community.

Radical kindness. Today our intention is to lead once again the way for all of us to practice radical kindness!

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Love is at the root of everything. The greatest thing we can do is to *help someone know that they are loveable*. And we can do that if we are willing.

And when we step out and love a stranger, we are participating in a divine conspiracy to alter the course of the world of someone.

Loving the stranger is seen by some as “an act of subversion”. And this may be true. And so... you may be participating in an act of subversion today with the idea that strangers have value because they are made in the image of God.

You are standing for truth and justice when you welcome the stranger.

Are you willing to cross social boundaries? Maybe the most subversive act you will commit this week is to sit and eat with someone who is not like you.

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A stranger is a stranger as long as I choose to keep them a stranger. The point of loving the stranger is to move into a relationship of neighbor and friend. As long as we nurse stigma's and stereotypes and keep the

stranger as someone separate from us, that is who they will always be. But when we welcome them into our lives, we invite them into a completely different experience with us.

**Your mission (should you choose to accept it) is to seek out one person in 2019 who is a stranger and make them a friend. Will you do that?**

Welcoming strangers can be seen as scandalous or bad but this is nothing new. It has always been a new idea to shake up the status quo and include people who are easily pushed to the margins.

The backdrop in the culture today is division. And we put up our arms and ask “but what can I do”. I’m telling you to love a stranger. Begin a friendship with someone who you see as different from you. If you don’t know where to start, come to Friday Night Life!

Our shift in using the better language is a first step in learning to love a stranger. We don’t bring a person down to their circumstance. We separate the person with our language from the thing that has happened to them.

A lot of people think the risk is too high. Each of us must work with this. We can’t bring a person into a community unless we have a community to bring them in. We soon find out that welcoming the stranger requires that we have a community to bring them to that is safe and where people share this value of welcome. It can’t be just you *but it can begin with you*. Are you a part of a community who believes it is good and right and just to welcome strangers?

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Has the value and vision for individualism created the back drop of why we don’t welcome strangers?

One of our former “strangers” here today, who stayed at the Timothy House almost ten years ago (Buddy) and later became our friend said this: “People who are invited in and shown love and compassion and who are known are not dangerous.”

Hurt people hurt people. Loved people love people

Dehumanization: It is so easy to voice forms of dehumanization.  
(Columbus Ohio story)

### Conclusion

Song: Stranger in the night, what are the chances?

WILL you choose to love people you don't "naturally" like? Will we love people who have been trashed by others? This is spiritual maturity. This is what it means for me to be a human being.

You are here today because you care about your neighbors and you want to love strangers.

And so...

### **Who will rise up and lead the way for us?**

If you see injustice and someone being mistreated in your community and it doesn't bother you, there is something wrong with you.

In the Good Samaritan story recorded in the book of Luke (in the bible):

Jesus tells a story in answer to the question "who is my neighbor". In the story, a man is taken advantage of, robbed and beaten by people because he was in circumstances beyond his choices. Two religious men pass by. I believe that they may have been teaching a seminar that day and were running late. The seminar title? I was wondering that too. It was "How to help people who have been beaten up on the side of the road". I will have more to say about that on another day.

A third person stops and it is the very person voted by his high school classmates "most unlikely to stop". He was racially and socioeconomically different and had probably experienced some discrimination himself.

Here are the three reasons why he stopped. They are the same three reasons you and I will stop. (1) Because he saw him. LOVE begins with seeing, noticing, recognizing and perceiving. (2) Because he had read some books, heard a few really good sermons and lectures and he realized it was time .... he was finally willing to get off his donkey (3) Because he understood that his own healing was hidden in intentionally reaching out in love and service to others. Yes, our own inner healing is indeed tied to serving others.

Which one are you? The one always who passes by? Or will you stop? Are you someone who wants to stop but needs others to stop with you? Then the first step is to ask for help?

I close with some questions to ponder:

Where are the young people who will lead us in the way in love? Where are the 22-year old's who will rise up and show a generation the way to love strangers?

Where are the MLK's of today in this town, willing to step out to represent those who have been pushed to the margins and excluded in their own community because of their poverty and true sense of helplessness.

Where are the radicals who will teach all of us how to love in deed and word?

Who are the innovators? The innovators of love?

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.

Keith Wasserman  
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