

2018 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women
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How many of you knew the song “Won’t you be my neighbor?” How many of you have grown up with the tv show *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*? How many of you who have no idea where this song came from or who Mr. Rogers was?

During the plenary yesterday morning, the *Horizons Skit* did a marvelous job on *Mrs. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. I got a little nervous when I learned we ended up coming up with the same idea. I believe the Holy Spirit had something to do with this. I originally wanted to add some Korean into it so I would change to my modernized Korean traditional clothes, my hanbok (한복), and sat on the bench to change to my indoor slippers that are very familiar to Koreans. However, I didn’t want to repeat that. At any rate, I would like to talk about Mr. Rogers and I hope my version of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* would provide another new perspective.

For those who don’t know about Mr. Rogers or *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, let me briefly explain. *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* was an American half-hour educational children’s television series that was created and hosted by Fred Rogers. It was a long-running television show, nearly 40 years on PBS, Public Broadcasting Service until August 31, 2001. Rev. Fred McFeely Rogers— aka Mr. Rogers—was a proud PC(USA) Minister of Word and Sacrament. He was born in 1928 and the news broke in February 2003 that Mr. Rogers had died, it moved many people to tears. He was one of the individuals who had the ability to connect with millions of people, particularly children, in profound and meaningful ways. He was not afraid to talk about difficult topics such as divorce, race and diversity, anger, gender equality at the level of children. Mr. Rogers changed to his famous zip-up cardigan sweater, sang same welcoming song and sat on the bench to change to his sneakers.

Many of you sing this familiar song well, but I had to memorize it for a few weeks since I did not grow up with this song. Although I could sing automatically any theme songs of my favorite children’s program in Korea.

Culture is like comfortable clothes. It is something that has lived with my body and through my life. As Mr. Rogers changes his clothes to be with his neighborhood children, we change into *our* clothes. There is a comfortable culture and community for each of us. It is something you just know without any logical reasoning or background explanation.

Navigating between Cultures

As a first-generation Korean American Presbyterian woman, I had to navigate between cultures all my life. I did not grow up with American culture. It took me a while to find my comfortable clothes in this country and culture.

I was born and raised in Korea to a middle-class family. I was a beloved daughter and sister in my family and faith community. My life turned to a new chapter when I met my husband who was a Korean-American U.S. citizen. As soon as I graduated from college, I got married and immigrated to the USA. It was such a bold and audacious move, across the Pacific. I left everything behind: my mom

and dad, sister and brother, relatives, friends, and teachers. I still remember crying almost every day from being homesick during my first months. To make matters more estranged, my permanent resident card's title read "resident alien card" when I received it. I was an alien from outer space! "Stranger" became my new name in this country.

The Greek word for stranger is *xenophon*, which means a person who does not share the mother tongue, and thus causes uncomfortable and uneasy feelings. Or *gerim* in Hebrew, traditionally translated into "sojourners," the people that, for whatever reason, had come from other places and settled temporarily or permanently in the local community. The Old Testament says a lot about *gerim*, for they are vulnerable.

I have had many vulnerable experiences as *xenophon* or *gerim* in my new home in the U.S. When I just started my seminary degree, M.A. in Biblical Studies one year after I arrived in the U.S., I was in a seminary discussion. I remember the class was discussing about Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. The professor, encouraging me to participate, asked "What do you think, Jieun?" My fellow students and professor looked at me with smiling faces. I responded, "I think . . ." and paused. I couldn't think of any words! I struggled, and a long and deadly silent air pressed on the classroom. And my professor wisely wrapped up the awkward moment and changed the subject. I was a bit embarrassed, but I felt ok. But I found myself starting to cry.

Tears came down on my face. I ran out of the classroom. A classmate rushed out after me, comforted me, saying, "How could she ask you like that?" But I could not blame anyone. It was nobody's fault. I was just hurt that I was not able to express myself in words. In fact, I wanted to become a journalist when I was in Korea. In that evening, I received many caring and supporting notes from classmates and the professor "You are in my prayers." I burst into tears one more time because of the outpouring of care from my new neighbors. I thought to myself that one day I would have my own voice to articulate my thoughts. I was a stranger, but I was nourished by the generous care of people.

As Mr. Rogers wore his comfortable cardigan to be with the neighborhood children, my colleagues and professors wore different clothes to be with me; paraphrased sentences if I didn't comprehend; they shared class notes; encouraged me to bring my tradition and so on. Gradually I was able to navigate myself between cultures.

It is interesting to note that Korean people express many things with "wearing," or "putting something on." When you are favored with someone, you are wearing grace or love (은혜를 입는다, 사랑을 입는다). Jesus came wearing flesh (예수께서 육신을 입고 오셨다). For us, wearing different clothes for different people is a sign of hospitality and care for the persons. We wear appropriate, welcoming, and approachable clothes to show hospitality. Clothes are sometimes an expression of generosity, in the case of Jacob dressing Joseph to show his special affection for him.

I found out that Mr. Rogers' cardigan sweaters were knitted by his mother. Just like his mother, most of my dresses have been sent by my mother in Korea. (Fortunately, I am so blessed to have my mom here as she is visiting the U.S.) She has been my personal shopper throughout my life from birth till now. It is her expression of loving and longing for me.

See the change of colors in each season. God clothes nature in different colors for each season to express divine love on us and on God's creation in the whole world. God in Jesus becomes flesh to be with us. God in Jesus wears flesh to be with us. It is indeed God's way to change clothes to deal with different people and different situations, especially for those who are vulnerable and estranged.

God's call building an inclusive and caring community

In the children's book, *Who Counts 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, and 2 Sons*, biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine and Rabbi Emeritus Sandy Eisenberg Sasso creatively retell three of Jesus' most popular parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. As young readers count to help the characters find what's missing, *Who Counts?* teaches that every one of us counts in God's eyes and that everyone should feel counted. It quotes "One sheep makes a difference. Without her something is missing. Now my flock is complete."

In our community, does each person (or sheep or coin) matter and are they counted? In our PW, does each person matter and are we counted? Yes!

Letty M. Russell depicts the church as round table, a symbol of hospitality and metaphor of gathering, sharing, and dialogue in her book *Church in the Round*. Like the Eucharist and the church that gathers at Christ's table, the round table is a sign of the coming unity of humanity. The word for hospitality in the Greek New Testament is *philoxenia*, love of the stranger. Hospitality means love of the stranger. Our *koinonia* is a gift that transcends real differences through participation in the mission and ministry of the church on behalf of healing the brokenness of the world, beginning with ourselves.

We may go out to a strange territory to serve a stranger, but it is very difficult to invite a stranger to our territory. It requires radical hospitality. You may go to a homeless shelter to serve, but it is difficult to open our home and church for a homeless to come. It requires radical hospitality.

My lawn mower broke the day before Easter last year. I asked the worker who cuts my neighbor's yard to cut my lawn, but he was busy on that day. Instead, he, without hesitation, allowed me to use his lawn mower—his means of living.

It was radical hospitality.

The Antioch Church in the 1st century installed a slave as one of its five leaders. Slaves in ancient world were not human beings, but things to be possessed.

It was radical hospitality.

An early Korean Church installed a butcher, who was on the rock bottom of the social order at that time, as its elder, and upper-class people attended the church as lay people. Korean society was a vertical society; social order and class was very important. It was a revolutionary action for the church to install a butcher or a woman as a church leader.

It was radical hospitality.

Arise and Shine!

Isaiah 60:1–3 is flooded with divine light: “Arise, shine, for your light has come; the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!” (v. 1). Darkness shall cover the earth, but upon the peoples “the Lord will shine” (v. 2).

What surprises the reader is the abruptness of the shift from doom and gloom to light and glory. Perhaps what is most surprising in this shift is God’s response to the people’s crooked ways and their sense of despair: they are not to mend their ways first, rather God comes, God erupts, God arises and shines forth in glory!

But this giving is not just for the remnant of Israel, it is not just for those who have returned from exile, but for all the nations. So, Israel must arise and shine God’s light for all the nations. The source of the light of Israel is not their inner light: it is the reflection of God’s light.

We’ve often seen during the Academy award that an actress or an actor receiving an award, says, “I give glory to God.” It gives us an impression that we give glory to God with what we have achieved or possessed. But Isaiah says that God’s light comes first, and we reflect on God’s light to others; that is the way to give glory to God. In a sense, we wear the light of God. We shall rise and shine, when we wear the clothes of hospitality as God always does.

God’s people throughout the generations have reflected such a way of God. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:22, “To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” Their imitation of God reflects the glory and the light of God.

Let us think about what it means for us to change our clothes to be hospitable for strangers in our life and our community.

While I was in preparation for this plenary speaking, I remembered one incident I experienced as I started working at the Presbyterian Center in the Office of the General Assembly as Church Leadership Connection Consultant about ten years ago. One of the scariest thing for me at first was phone calls. I called a constituent, I remember the person I called was a pastor. A lady received my call and I asked to speak with Rev. so and so. The lady put him on the phone and I overheard their brief talk. “Who is it?” “Someone with an accent.” Back then I must have been hurt. Yet I feel the lady’s description was correct. I may be someone who has an accent. However, I am not just someone with an accent. I am Jieun Kim Han, God’s beloved daughter with a beautiful Korean accent. And I don’t want to lose my strong Korean accent.

I portray myself as Korean-American Presbyterian woman; My hyphenated identity as Korean-American Presbyterian woman. The hyphen between Korean and American embraces the Pacific Ocean, my racial identity hyphenated embraces community of people who share many of my same experiences. As my friend and colleague in ministry Laura Cheifetz points out, racism kills and dehumanizes us all. However, the specificity of our racial identity, as people of color, in fact, is very good. Race isn’t bad. Racism is bad. Race gives us poetry. Along with her, I have a community of art and music and poetry and theology and worship.

Women—how sophisticated human beings we are! When God created a man first, he was surrounded by beasts only. But when God created a woman, there was at least one human being. I am proud to be a woman! I am proud to be a Korean-American / Presbyterian / Woman! God has given me such a beautiful identity along with the image of God!

Witnessing to the promise of God's kingdom

Let us go back to the metaphor of clothing.

How we live into the prayer we pray almost every time we worship: “Thy Kingdom come, . . . on earth as it is heaven.”

It was not comfortable for God to become a flesh, or in Korean expression, to put on flesh. But God in Jesus became or put on flesh to be with us. How can we, our community and PW to wear clothes to be with the vulnerable & estranged though it may be uncomfortable?

It is certainly uncomfortable for me to speak before you even in English. But I put on these uncomfortable clothes to encourage you to go beyond your comfort zone.

When I first arrived in the U.S., Ruling Elder Haesun Rhee, the wife of late Rev. Dr. Sygman Rhee who was the former Moderator of the PC(USA), encouraged me to work at a sewing factory to understand the life of immigrants as my husband back then was a seminary student who later became a pastor of Korean immigrant church. I graduated from a prestigious college in Korea. I didn't even know how to put thread through the eye of a needle. But I found myself sitting before a sewing machine to sew piles of shirts. It was uncomfortable and unfamiliar clothes for me to wear. But I also found myself being in solidarity with many immigrant women.

I congratulate the 30-year anniversary of the Presbyterian Women. What a journey of life-giving, transforming and empowering Presbyterian Women it has been as well as responding to God's call in this deeply wounded and troubled world! I pray and bless that the next 30 years of PW will be a more inclusive and caring community, going forward beyond our comfort zone. Are we ready and willing to wear clothes to be with the vulnerable and estranged though it may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar?

The darkness, and the captivity are over!

PW! Arise, Shine, Your light has come! Thanks be to God!

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