

BE YE KIND
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Sunrise Presbyterian Church
June 26, 2016
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It seems rather naïve to be preaching a sermon on *kindness*. "Be Ye Kind" I learned in primary Sunday School. "Be kind to one another" I was taught in Girl Scouts. Throughout my childhood I repeatedly heard the words from the King James Version of the Bible - "Be Ye Kind." BUT in the summer of 2016 the words "Be Ye Kind" seem a bit daft and hopelessly naïve. Really - kindness?

People are much more interested in saying what they think - without the benefit of any social filters. I saw a picture of a billboard this week: "Make America White again." Clearly the sign reflects the depths of what someone thinks minus any filters for decency. Our culture values the brash - the bombastic - the mean - the clever - comment. We love to hear someone just "tell it like it is." Usually that telling involves great ugliness of truth which might be better left unsaid. We are becoming callous to such language.

The apostle Paul reminds us about the power of language and action. In Galatians he writes about what it is to find freedom in Christ. Be sure to use your freedom to love one another, he cautions the people - and do not use your freedom to bite and devour each other. If we do that, Paul says, we don't follow God's Spirit - instead, we follow our lead, we often end up with strife, jealousy, envy, divisions and hatred. These are not the fruits of the Holy Spirit. These are not the desire of God for us. These are not the foundation of community. And yet, they are what we tend to be choosing for ourselves.

But Paul would have us choose another way. He reminds the Galatians and us that the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace and patience - and kindness. Paul reminds us that kindness is a fruit of the Spirit.

Every week I listen to Krista Tippitt's podcast. Each week, Tippitt presents an in-depth interview with a wide variety of people which touches on spiritual and theological themes in our culture. She's been particularly troubled by the increasing coarseness of language in our society. She often muses that our emphasis on "tolerance and diversity" in the 80s has not made us a kinder and gentler people. Instead, we seem to have become more exclusive and more reactionary. She often asks guests which *virtue* we need to cultivate in order to soften our coarseness. *Kindness* is high on her list. She ponders how we might teach kindness and encourage one another - to be kind. It's worth thinking about.

I thought about kindness a great deal this week. I never would have made it through the week without the many kindnesses from my friends and neighbors. Upon hearing about my injury, one friend came to water plants - another to take me to the doctor - another to pick up groceries - another to fix a meal - and yet another to sit and talk. I was much blessed in spite of my pain. There were so many tasks I could not do myself. I needed help. It came in the form of kindness.

Poet Naomi Shahib Nye writes: "Before you know what kindness really is/you must lose things... What you held in your hand,/what your counted and carefully saved,/all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness."ⁱ

I realize that as much as I usually appreciate daily kindnesses, I would have never known this depth of appreciation if I had not lost the ability to walk. I had to lose my mobility - my plans - my simple hopes for the weekend and week - I had to lose that in order to understand the depth of kindness.

Parker Palmer notes that "so many people have used their own wounds to become 'wounded healers,' Instead of growing bitter and passing their pain on others, they've said, 'This is where the pain stops and the love begins'. They've become better able to offer understanding and compassion to others - not in spite of their suffering, but because of it."ⁱⁱ

Our suffering can easily make us bitter. It can easily turn us to cynics. Suffering can easily lead us to violence and revenge. But it doesn't have to - we can choose instead to nurture kindness and to seek the fruits of love and mercy. Palmer writes, "in a world that can be as heedless and heartless as ours, kindness must grow from deep inner roots if it is to stand strong and be sustained."ⁱⁱⁱ

Nye's poem echoes such thoughts:

"Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
You must know the sorrow as the other deepest thing. . .
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
Only kindness that ties your shoes
And sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
Only kindness that raises its head
From the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
And then goes with you everywhere
Like a shadow or a friend."^{iv}

Kindness makes us stop and pay attention - kindness leads us to notice the person offering - but kindnesses rendered can help us to understand the need for kindness in this world. One of Tippet's interviews told the story of a New York City woman who threw a coat over her nightgown to take the dog out late in the evening. Stepped out of her apartment - and was found in a pool of blood by a neighbor she did not know. She recalls nothing from the evening of her accident, but she knows this - "I had been saved because of the kindness of strangers, even in this city thought to be so heartless." The neighbor carried her inside - called 911 - administered first aid - found her keys and took her dog back to her apartment and fed him. He called her brother and arranged to get him her keys. For weeks people in her neighborhood that she had never noticed - cared for her. She notes that it is "the kindness of strangers that has soothed my soul. Now it is my turn to pay it forward."^v

Pay it forward - Paul doesn't use those words - but that is what he means when he speaks of the fruits of the Spirit. We have known God's great kindness - we may have known great kindness from friends or strangers - but kindness received begs to be paid forward.

Yes, it is a bit naïve to think on kindness in the middle of the angry and mean-spirited words of our time - but kindness is something we can each offer. Kindness is a gift that requires no money - no education - no prestige. Kindness is an incredibly powerful and important cultural value - and Christians in particular, are called to bear it in our lives.

Let's pay it forward. It matters more than almost anything. Kindness is stronger than all the harsh talk. Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Naomi Shahib Nye, "Kindness" in "The Grit and Tender-Gravity of Kindness, by Parker Palmer @OnBeing.org.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Jane Gross, "The Demonstrated Kindness of Strangers in NYC" OnBeing, 12/13/2015.