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Practicing Kindness
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Zechariah 7:9-10

The sermon today is about kindness which on one level seems trivial when in the last week there have been three more mass shootings in the United States. Obviously, something is seriously wrong. We're reminded again and again that ideas influence words and motivate actions for good or for evil so let's listen to some good and important words from the Lord that come to us through the prophet Zechariah. *Zechariah 7:9-10* sums up how kindness looks in thinking, speech, and behavior in words we're wise to heed, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: **render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.**" We can all ponder how well we're doing those things individually and as a nation. If ever there was a time when more kindness is needed it's now.

This is our fifth Sunday on the fruit of the Spirit – how are you doing? Are you seeing growth in the garden of your life of love, joy, peace, and patience? How can you tell? Can people around you tell? On Wednesday I went to have blood drawn for testing in advance of my annual physical which is in four weeks. The lab will be checking my blood for sugar, cholesterol, and a host of other things. As I sat in the chair it occurred to me how cool it would be if we could check for the fruit of the Spirit like we check blood. "We got your report and your joy and peace levels are in range, but we're concerned your patience is extremely low and your kindness definitely needs a boost."

As with so many of the fruit of the Spirit, **kindness** is greatly needed in our communities and our society. **Kindness is the quality of being friendly, generous, considerate and treating people with respect.** The opposite of kindness is someone behaving in a way that is mean, selfish, rude, disrespectful, or violent. Kindness is often quiet and behind the scenes. Those who are unkind are often, loud, obnoxious, insulting, and demeaning of others. Obviously, someone who acts that way on a regular basis is lacking in kindness, the fruit of the Spirit, and the presence of Christ in his or her life.

In years past, there was a bumper sticker I saw fairly frequently, "Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty." I don't see it as much as I used to. What is meant by random acts of kindness? The owner of a drive-through coffee business, was surprised one morning to have one of her customers not only pay for her own order but also for the order of the person in the car behind her. It put a smile on the owner's face to tell the next customer her drink had already been paid for. The second customer was so pleased that someone else had purchased her coffee that she bought coffee for the next customer. This string of kindnesses – one stranger paying for the mocha of the next customer – continued for two hours and 27 customers.

A popular movie in the year 2000 was *Pay It Forward*, with Haley Joel Osment as a junior high student and Helen Hunt as his mom. The film shows the exponential impact of a few acts of kindness done with nothing asked in return except that the beneficiary try to do something kind for someone else, that they “pay it forward” and keep it going. God calls us not just to random and occasional acts of kindness, but to kindness as an intentional, purposeful, routine part of our living as followers of Christ. God wants us going about every day of our lives alert to opportunities to practice kindness – to be friendly, generous, considerate, and respectful.

God’s Kindness

Think about how you picture, imagine, or conceive of God – is kindness one of the first words that comes to mind? We often think of words like powerful, mighty, holy, and loving, but God is also kind. ***Psalm 145:17*** says, “The Lord is just in all his ways **and kind in all his doings.**” God’s posture toward us, and not just when we behave well, is often one of kindness. For many of us, it’s easier to be kind to people who are grateful and kind in return. It’s not as easy to be kind to people who behave badly or act like disobedient children, but God is frequently portrayed as kind even in those times. In ***Hosea 11:4*** God is lamenting like a loving parent over the refusal of God’s people to live God’s way. “I led them with cords of human **kindness**, with bands of love. I was to them as those who lift infants to their cheeks, I bent down to them and fed them.” Hosea asserts kindness is part of who God is and how God acts, even when we’re unaware of it or don’t appreciate God’s kindness.

In the New Testament we hear Jesus describe how kind God is in *Luke 6.35-36*, “But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; **for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.** Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

In the passage from *Romans 2.1-11* that we heard earlier, Paul tells the church, “Or do you despise **the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience?** Do you not **realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?**” Paul is asserting that God is kind to us in the hope that we will stop living selfishly and turn our lives over to God’s loving guidance and direction. We’re called to imitate and embody the kindness of God. Part of growing in Christlikeness is that we’re kind to others even when they’re not kind to us; this is a mark of Christian spiritual maturity. The Apostle Paul explains how this contrasting behavior looks in our lives in *1 Corinthians 4:12-13*, “When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; **when slandered, we speak kindly.**” This is how a true follower of Christ acts and speaks.

Our Kindness

Even if we're operating from selfish motives, it's wise for us to be kind. **Proverbs 11:17** states, "**Those who are kind reward themselves**, but the cruel do themselves harm." Brittany Feldott noted in a recent sermon how researchers have learned that, "those who gave love either through volunteering, or random **acts of kindness** or financial giving—what they call pro-social behavior, or altruism—had improved health outcomes. In fact, in many cases, they outweighed the benefits of those who received that care. A variety of studies have noted that **kindness** stimulates production of serotonin, which is associated with happiness; produces endorphins, which are the body's natural pain-killer; and reduced amounts of cortisol, the hormone associated with stress. Kindness also releases oxytocin [oxy-tow-sin], which helps lower blood pressure, and some studies found that **participating in random acts of kindness for a month** led to fewer symptoms of severe anxiety. Kindness and generosity led to reduced pain, increase happiness, decreased stress, and decreased blood pressure. And if that weren't enough to practice kindness, studies have found that kindness can even prevent the acceleration of aging at the cellular level—that is, kindness protects folks from early death." Practicing kindness usually results in our feeling better physically and feeling better about ourselves because we've brightened someone else's day, helped to lighten their burden, or given them hope.

I don't think it's a coincidence that **patience and kindness** are next to each other in the fruit of the spirit and that they often go together in many other passages such as when Paul is commending his ministry team and their (*2 Corinthians 6:6-7*), "purity, knowledge, **patience, kindness**, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God." In **Colossians 3:12**, "clothe yourselves with compassion, **kindness**, humility, meekness, and **patience**." **1 Corinthians 13:4** "Love is patient, love is kind." Pastors and teachers are admonished in **2 Timothy 2:24** to remember that, "the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome **but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient**."

Throughout my life, growing up in a pastor's family, and in almost 30 years of ministry as a pastor, my family and I have been the beneficiaries of incredible kindness, generosity, and love by countless Christians. Just in the last few weeks, people have done many kind things for us; from sending us cards to giving us vegetables, flowers, fish, cookies, or taken us fishing. It touches us deeply and we're thankful to you and grateful to God for all your loving kindness. Kindness doesn't have to be expensive or elaborate, although it can be. Purposeful kindness can be as simple as committing ourselves to helping a neighbor, sending a note, making a call, making some cookies or a meal, sharing some time, offering physical assistance, the list is endless.

William Barclay a Scottish minister and author wrote, "**More people have been brought into the church by the kindness of real Christian love** than by all the theological arguments in the world, and more people have been **driven from the church by the hardness and ugliness** of so-called Christianity than by all the doubts in the world." **We don't have to be theological**

giants to practice kindness; we just have to act and speak kindly on a consistent basis, to all people, at all times, in person, on social media, whatever the context.

Many times, when the word “kindness” or “kind” is mentioned in the Bible it’s used in reference to the poor, to those who may need kindness more than others. ***Proverbs 14:21, 31*** warns us, **“Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor. Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.”**

It’s hard for Jill and I to believe we’ve been married for thirty years. Many years ago, when we were young, we were in England and went to see a musical in London’s theatre district. After the show ended around 11:00 p.m., theatergoers poured out into the sidewalks and street and as we came out, we saw a man stagger into a table and fall to the ground. As we were getting closer, he picked himself up, managed a few more steps and went down hard on the bricks again. Meanwhile, hundreds of people were going by him and no one offered him any assistance. We approached him and he was bleeding a little from his fall. We asked him if needed help and through his accent and drunkenness we managed to figure that he needed to get back to an Underground station called Piccadilly Circus. We got him to his feet, and I wrapped my arm around him to steady him and we walked to the nearest Underground stop. We must have made an interesting sight, two young Americans dressed for the theatre and this poor, dirty, and quite aromatic street person because even though the sidewalk, the escalator down to the Underground, the platform, and the train were jammed packed with people, they parted like the Red Sea when they saw or smelled us coming. We got some very interesting looks from people, not all of them kind.

On the train the man was expressing his gratitude to us for our kindness and said he wanted us to meet his friends. I have to confess I was a little bit nervous about that prospect. We got off at his stop, came up an escalator, and as we stepped off, a man saw us coming and with a concerned and somewhat puzzled look on his face approached us. He asked if we were with a certain agency, we said, “No.” “Are you social workers?” “No,” we replied, “we’re Christians.” The man seemed surprised and relieved.

Meanwhile our new friend was anxious to introduce us to his friends, a group of about eight to ten street people gathered in a kind of semi-circle in a corner near a wall in the train station. They thanked us gratefully with smiles all around for bringing their friend back to them. In an act of great kindness on their part, they offered us a drink from their bottle of wine which was all they had to give. I thought about how Jesus took wine, and after giving thanks he gave it to his friends, and all of them drank from it. It was truly an act of communion on their part. There was a special feeling about that experience and Jesus’ presence with us that Jill and I will never forget. And all we did

was to try and be kind to a man who needed help and he and his friends offered their kindness in return.

Mother Teresa wrote, “We will never know all the good a smile can do. We speak about our God who is good, merciful, and compassionate. Are we a living token of that reality? Those who suffer – Can they perceive in us that goodness, that forgiveness, that living understanding? May no one ever come to you without going away better and happier. **Everyone should see kindness in your face, in your eyes, your smile.**”

Sometimes we may think or feel that some spiritual things are beyond us or we just don't get them. We look at someone we respect like a Mother Teresa and think, “I could never reach that level.” But the beauty of kindness is it takes no formal education or specific training or expensive preparation. It simply requires being kind and kindness often leads to more kindness. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. God has told us, what is good; and what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, to walk humbly with our God?

Blessing *Proverbs 21:21*, “Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor.” “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” *Ephesians 4:32* You will never regret being kind.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

Kindness is the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate; treating people with respect. Why is practicing kindness important in our relationships and a necessity in civil society?

What does the Bible tell us about the kindness of God? In *Romans 2:1-11*, for example, what is the purpose of the kindness of God (see especially verse 4)?

According to *Romans 2:5-11*, what are the consequences of failing to be kind and to do good? Do you believe Paul is right? If so, how do these verses motivate you in terms of being kind and doing good?

Numerous scientific studies have proven the health benefits of routinely and purposefully practicing kindness. Listen carefully to the sermon for what kindness increases and decreases for us that impacts our health and attitude every day.

Proverbs 11:17 states, “Those who are kind reward themselves, but the cruel do themselves harm.” Why is this true?

Our theme text is *Zechariah (7:9-10)* “Thus says the Lord of hosts: render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor;

and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.” How are you living out and responding to what the Lord says here? Would the Lord say you are doing these things? What can you do to be more obedient to the Lord’s command in *Zechariah 7:9-10*?

How will you grow in practicing kindness this week?