

## **"FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT: KINDNESS"**

Galatians 5:22-23; Hosea 11:1-4, 7-9; Matthew 20:29-34

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I think about Doc Flom, the old doctor around the corner from our first apartment who treated us for free because we didn't have health insurance or money. I think about Mrs. Mosier, who gave each of our young daughters a card, some sweet treats, and \$5 on every holiday of the year. I think about the teenage boy from down the street who came and helped Jerry shovel snow one day last winter. I think about Lorie who takes time to tell me about it whenever she comes across a book she thinks I will like, and Mary who is such a good listener, and Paula who brought us some treats one day last week when she knew we weren't feeling well. Kindness may seem like a small thing, but it means so much more. It's a gift.

Think for a moment about what it's like being with a truly kind person.

Kindness blesses. Kindness heals. Kindness makes space. Kindness connects. Kindness lifts you up. Kindness lets you breathe. Kindness opens your heart. Kindness makes you want to be a better person.

Mark Twain said, "Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see."

Goethe said, "Kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound together."

What else can we say about kindness?

It's probably important, first, to say a couple things that kindness *isn't*.

Sometimes we confuse kindness with mere niceness or politeness, but kindness is more. Kindness is deeper, more honest, and less concerned about social norms or expectations. A lie might be thought polite but is often not kind. A pretense of caring might be nice but it's not kind. Ignoring destructive behavior isn't kind. Being kind only when we think others will approve isn't real kindness. Being kind only for what you might get in return isn't kindness.

Genuine kindness is more than saying or doing nice things. It's also *how* you say and do them.

It's also the spirit behind what you do and say.

Gail Griffin, local writer who was our Art Festival poetry juror las year, wrote this about

*kind-ness*: "I remember learning in my college Shakespeare course that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it retained some of its original sense: *being of one's kind*, being of the same ilk. To be *kind* was to be *kin*, to behave with another person as if you were related." (p. 59)

Gail's observation helps me kind of zero in on just what we mean by kindness, how it's a little distinct from words of similar meaning like love, patience, or generosity. I think it's this: Kindness recognizes a common humanity with others, and reaches out to make a connection, maybe only a brief one, but a connection that affirms solidarity or lifts someone else up.

For me this relates to the picture of kindness the prophet Hosea paints for us: a mother, lifting her child up in a cheek-to-cheek embrace, leading her children gently by the hand, faithfully tending to their needs, loving them through everything... and always there is this bond. Hosea's picture is an image of God, of course - reminding us that human kindness is a reflection of God's kindness to us. This picture reflects how we learn kindness, as well ... from the kindnesses we experience, both from God and from the people who've transmitted God's kindness to us.

We can learn kindness. We can practice it. We can choose it. As the 18<sup>th</sup> century writer Samuel Johnson said "kindness is within our power, even if fondness is not." You don't have to know someone or like them or agree with them or approve of what they do in order to be kind. Sometimes people justify withholding kindness on those sorts of grounds, sometimes even claiming that religious reasons compel them to do so. I'll just say simply that this is nonsense. It makes a mockery of God's kindness to us. It shows a disdain for the truth that all people have worth in the eyes of God

Some people claim that we can change the world one act of kindness at a time. I'm personally more than a little dubious about that, but it's certainly true that "you can accomplish by kindness what you cannot by force" (Publilius Syrus). Kindness can help someone feel seen and valued; it can offer hope and encouragement; it can lighten someone's burden or ease their pain; it makes a connection between people; it can head off conflict or change a perspective.

Kindness is good for us. Studies show that a gesture of kindness – even something as simple as a smile - reduces anxiety, for the person who gives it as well as for the one on the receiving end. Kindness begets kindness; even a small kindness can have a ripple effect.

Kindness is enjoying a bit of a cultural "moment" just now; maybe because so many people are feeling a lack of kindness.

There is a whole organization dedicated to promoting kindness. It conducts kindness research, offers a kindness curriculum, and even allows you to log-in and record your acts of kindness. Lots of books, podcasts, kindness kits, and phone apps are available to help.

A day in November is designated as "World Kindness Day," intended to encourage people to practice "random acts of kindness" not just on that day but on other days.

Quotes about kindness are heard and read everywhere, and many of them are worth repeating:

"Be kind - everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about." (Wendy Mass)

"No act of kindness is ever wasted." (Aesop)

"Kindness doesn't cost anything."

"In a world where you can be anything, be kind."

And yet, the culture we live in is in many ways not oriented to kindness. Insults are a staple of comedy. Name-calling is all over social media. We engage in a great deal of what some have termed "punching down" – expressing resentment, judgement, and hostility toward those who are poorer or more vulnerable. Some cities put out park benches specifically designed so that homeless people can't stretch out on them to sleep. Many people barely see those who serve them in stores and restaurants, let alone say "thank you," or take a moment to chat. As a society, we are big on the notion of everybody getting what they deserve but not so big on cutting each other some slack. We've probably all experienced the cold indifference of a bureaucracy that has no interest in hearing what we need or helping.

No wonder there is such a great longing for simple kindness. No wonder that there are individuals and groups who've decided to make it their mission to promote kindness, to make it a part of school and business cultures, to brand it as cool, meaningful, healthy, and beneficial, and to help people see that they can choose it, that it can be taught and learned. We need it. I bet not one of us doubts that.

More kindness would make our daily interactions, our workplaces, our media and social media, our politics and business, our church, our families more healthy and happy. Nor do we doubt that kindness is possible, or that anyone – *anyone* - can practice it. Kindness is not hard to understand. Most of the time it's not any harder to be kind than unkind. Simple, right?

Yes. And no. Anytime we find ourselves assuming that something is simple and that we've got it, we probably should pause and think about it, just to make sure.

In her book *Sitting Pretty*, Rebekah Taussig, teacher and writer who has used a wheelchair for mobility since childhood, has a lot to say about her experience of kindness. She says, "I've found people's attempts to Be Kind can be anything from healing to humiliating, helpful to traumatic." (p. 169) She tells about strangers who

insist upon helping her do things and the pressure she feels to let them, even when she doesn't need or want help. She describes a woman in a coffee shop offering an unsolicited prayer for her to be healed and walk. People randomly hand her money. A couple who happily opened a door for her got grumpy when she in turn opened a door for them. They were glad to be kind, but she was supposed to be a grateful recipient, not someone able to be kind in return. She says, "All my life I've been a kindness magnet." Ouch! Nobody wants to go through life as a "kindness magnet."

Taussig isn't against kindness, and doesn't want to discourage anyone from being kind or helpful, but she suggests that we need to "complicate our understanding of kindness" a bit. See it from other perspectives. Examine our own motivations. Think more broadly about what kindness is: inclusion, listening, respect, acceptance, enhancing another person's dignity, looking beyond a moment's gesture for ways to make a lasting difference.

How do we embrace kindness without an attitude of superiority? How do we take care not to make it about ourselves? How do we make sure our kindness is respectful and doesn't make someone else feel small or helpless? How do we resist proffering the help we feel like giving rather than the help someone actually needs?

We probably can't do better than to take Jesus as our example. The gospels are full of stories of Jesus' kindness to the people he encounters. It's not just that he heals and feeds people. It's that he *sees* them, listens to them, understands their needs, shows them respect, makes a place for even folks others believe should be excluded. You see it in the story we read about the two blind men. Their need is obvious, isn't it? But I love that Jesus pauses and asks them what they would like him to do, before he heals them. That is almost a greater demonstration of kindness than the healing itself.

Sometimes we can be so eager to do a kind thing that we forget to find out what would genuinely be helpful. Sometimes we unconsciously relegate other people to supporting roles as recipients of our kindness. Lists of "kindness ideas" or a day celebrating "random acts of kindness" can easily slip into this mindset.

Things like that can be a good start, of course – great ways to learn to practice kindness, teach the habits of kindness to kids, build a corporate culture of kindness, think creatively about it.

But it's not so good to stay there. We can't forget that true kindness comes from a deeper place. It's good to do kind things, it's better to be a kind *person*.

And it's also important to let the impulse to kindness enlarge our compassion beyond the merely personal. That way we don't get seduced in to overly-simplistic ideas like "all we need to do is be kind to each other." In fact, the sum of all our personal and individual words, acts, and attitudes of kindness is not enough to do things like make public space accessible for people with disabilities, eradicate systemic racism, build affordable housing, or reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Kindness can't take the place of

education, a good job, therapy, medical care, a host of other things that people need – although kindness can make all those things better.

Even effort to make our systems and institutions more kind, responsive, and people-centered does not eliminate the need for real knowledge, hard work, policy change, resources, and the like. Those things are not unrelated to kindness; maybe we'd say they are a logical extension of kindness. But they sure aren't simple. To suggest that they are is... well, not kind.

One of the things we seem to discover more and more as we delve into the fruits of the Spirit is that each one of them is both a beautifully simple idea and a richly complicated reality to live into. We are seeing how intertwined these fruits are. You can't practice real kindness apart from love, apart from a generous spirit, apart from a desire for peace, apart from a gentle humility. And not one of these things can be achieved in five easy lessons or defined by a list of tasks. Not one of the fruits of the Spirit comes easy to us all the time. We have ways to stunt their growth and limit their expression. And we also have the power to nurture them, dig into their wisdom, allow them to correct us, receive them gratefully, give them away, let them live in us. Today I hope we can let kindness live in us. I hope that kindness may be – by the power of God's Spirit, not the occasional good deed, but a way of life. I hope that that we may look at our sisters and brothers, at everyone we meet, with the kindness of Jesus.

Resources:

Gail Griffin, *Grief's County*

Rebekah Taussig, *Sitting Pretty*