Sermon: Not Fear, But Kindness
Sunday, March 15, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

Today is Sunday March 15. On Sunday March 15, 2020, about 50 of us gathered in this sanctuary as the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic was about to wash over Massachusetts. We sat far apart from each other; we didn't yet know to wear masks. We gathered together to give each other courage, hope and love in the face of the unknown. That afternoon, Governor Baker closed schools and prohibited gatherings of 25 or more people in the state. The next morning, all of us—ministers, teachers, parents, children, physicians, nurses, emergency responders, essential workers, workers of all kinds, elderly people, immunocompromised people—all of us began to learn how we would live for the next season of our lives.

In many ways I count myself very lucky during that time. As a religious worker, I was not prohibited from coming to the church, and since I have my own office here I was able to have a private and quiet place to work when I needed to. I was housed and fed; we never ran out of essentials or couldn't pay a bill. I was not providing front-line care to Covid patients in a health care setting. I was in the large group of ordinary people making do. My work was trying to lead an organization in a way we never had before and for which we had no training or experience. What I remember most about those first months of the pandemic was the foreshortening of time. I am used to measuring time by church years, broken down into weeks. During the week leading up to March 15, 2020, my planning horizon shrunk to about 3 hours. I felt acutely that when I did not see all of you, or hear from you on e-mail, or see you on a Zoom screen, that

you might be sick or in need and no one would know. You did amazing work to care for each other, but it seemed to me the threat of illness and collapse breathed just outside the door. The world became small. Time became small. My own heart became smaller, trapped inside the fear and worry of the time.

As the months went on, church leadership for me became less about nurturing and loving community life, and more about accomplishing tasks with some online community thrown in. How will we improve the live-stream? How will we handle church meetings? What about funding? What about outdoor youth activities, or the timeline for reopening? The “why” became the “how” of accomplishing these tasks. And I began to notice something in myself, something I’m not proud of, something that showed up here at church and in my personal life. All the worry, and the uncertainty of “how” we would do things, made it harder for me to show up as my full and authentic self in human community. I was afraid of what might happen next. The fear sapped my kindness. Too often, my reaction became, “What is going to happen next, and how can I protect myself?” instead of, “What is happening right in front of me, and how can I offer it compassion?”

I wonder if you see yourself in my story. It might not have been the pandemic for you. It might be a trauma you lived through, that left you uncertain and afraid when something unexpected happens. It might be living a life that doesn’t have enough of something you need: money, intimacy, health, or lovingkindness. It might be a loss from your childhood that allows a certain fear to rear its head like a monster and roar between you and your kindness. I wonder if you have ever found yourself unable to be

as kind as you want to be because you are afraid. I wonder if the unkindness you may have experienced comes from someone else's fear.

At our annual meeting in January, I told you that one of my goals for First Unitarian Church in the coming months and years is to foster more kindness. Not to say we aren't kind now; but I believe that focusing on kindness will yield fruits of the spirit for the church. Our covenant calls us to unity; our mission invites us to fellowship. Kindness is not the same as "niceness"; kindness is about showing one another loving regard.

In English, the word "kindness" shares a root with the word "kin." Our connection to family and tribe, the ones with whom we sit around the fire at night, goes back deep into our evolutionary past. Early humans, living at the mercy of the natural world, and only in close contact with those who lived nearby, needed a way to distinguish safety with those they trusted from fear of those they did not know. We are wired for fight or rest. We still seek comfort in our families, even if, for some of us, our families were not places of safety. Family is one vision of kindness, but it may not be enough.

Empathy researcher Brene Brown tells a story about a woman who experienced a fraught sort of kindness in her family of origin. The woman, Claudia, had a sister Amy who suffered from depression and alcoholism. Family get-togethers were hard. Amy's parents wanted togetherness with their daughters—if Amy showed up for dinner, everything would be okay. Amy's sisters wanted honesty and healing for Amy: togetherness was not the answer, treating her addiction was the answer. Although Amy had a place to live, she knew she couldn't control her drinking alone. Amy asked to move in with Claudia; Claudia knew she couldn't be responsible for her sister's healing.

Claudia wasn't sure what kindness was for Amy. But she did know the answer lay in some kind of compassion. Claudia told Brown,

> It's so hard to be face-down on the arena floor, but if you open your eyes when you're down there and take a minute to look around, you get a completely new perspective on the world. You see things that you don't see when you're standing tall. You see more struggle—more conflict and suffering. It can make you more compassionate if you open your eyes and look around while you're down there (138).

Family builds closeness and love. Yet expressing that love doesn't only mean being nice to one another. Kindness doesn't mean taking care of others the way we take care of young children. It means showing them the compassion and understanding we would want in their place.

Not all languages connect "kindness" to "family.". We heard Jesus teach the golden rule in our scripture passage this morning. Jesus doesn't use the word "kindness," but it does appear in other writings in the Bible about Jesus' community. In Greek, the word we translate as "kindness"—when we hear, "love is patient, love is kind," for instance—is a word that means "well fit for use," or "what is really useful." Instead of thinking "kindness means treating someone like they're my child or my responsibility," this word invites us to think, "kindness means offering someone what is really useful to them." This is what I hear in the golden rule. I have heard this called the Platinum Rule: do unto others what is best for them.

It's there even in the Golden Rule. Take the kind act of making someone dinner, for instance. My son's favorite dinner is lemon-sardine garlic fettuccine, where pasta is

tossed with a lemon-garlic dressing, and then combined with parmesan cheese, parsley, breadcrumbs and sardines packed in oil. Yes, sardines. When he was young he called it “worms pasta” because the fettuccine was shaped like worms, and we have all learned to love it. But it wouldn’t be kindness for him to insist on serving you worms pasta for dinner, if he hadn’t asked whether you even liked sardines. The Golden Rule is not about imposing our will on others. It involves asking what is good for others, what is fit for use for them, and listening to what they say in response. It is not so much about solutions, and more about a relationship that makes human flourishing possible.

It’s interesting that Jesus, of all people, gives us the Golden Rule. Jesus was not always nice. He is often fed up with his disciples, who, in many stories, seem to be afraid of him. The same man who says “Ask and it shall be given to you” in this passage tells a rich follower that he must give everything he has to the poor if he expects to have an authentic relationship with God. He defies social norms. He shames the powerful when they would throw stones at a woman weaker than they; he insists that the truth will set people free, even when the truth is uncomfortable. He gets in the face of unjust authority. He allows his anger and frustration to show. Jesus was not “nice.” He demonstrated a different kind of kindness. He modeled a life and a religion grounded in values of radical honesty and regard.

Where have we seen this sort of kindness in our world? I have seen it in Minnesota, and Portland, and Vermont; on the streets of America where people are showing up in peace and power to protect honesty, dignity and well-being for their neighbors. Not among law enforcement officials who arrest children and drag parents out of their homes, even though those officials are supposed to stand for American

principles like fairness and the rule of law. I have seen it among ordinary citizens who have marched and witnessed and fought in the courts for their neighbors; ordinary citizens who knew that they were putting themselves in harm's way and could even be risking their lives, but did it anyway. Alex Pretti was bending down to render aid to a woman he didn't know when he was killed by ICE agents.

This week in South Burlington, Vermont, federal agents detained three people out of a home—trying first without a warrant, then returning. My colleague Karen Johnston, the minister of the UU Society of Burlington, wrote, "So many caring, brave people came to show up throughout the day. Come now, said some messages. Come when you can. Bring food. Bring warm things - rain jackets. I didn't get there til 4:30 - lots of food already had been brought, gathered. Bottles of water. Medical supplies just in case. Some people had been there since the 8am hour. Some had come and gone. Some were just arriving like me (RevKaren G Johnston Facebook post)." She wrote of being face to face with ICE agents, some of whom seemed to have no training, none of whom were wearing working body cameras. She wrote of the brutality of the tear gas used against the witnesses, and the forcible arrest of people from their home. She wrote of the steadfastness of the community, even when they were afraid.

Kindness doesn't mean being nice to ICE agents when they arrest your neighbors. Kindness is showing up for your values and standing up to those who try to knock them down. It means regarding the humanity of the agents—noticing that they are underprepared, or scared, or full of puffed-up bravado—while still seeking to hold them accountable to just actions. It means regarding the humanity of your neighbors,

whether or not they are citizens, whether or not they are documented. Kindness is clarity and truth. It is a useful regard, well-fit for the person before you.

I imagine this is how God sees us. This is the regard of the holy; seeing us in our complete humanity, loving without judgment, encouraging us toward what is best and most useful for us. This is the best we are called to in our regard for one another. Kindness is not niceness, although it may be comforting; it is not conflict avoidance, although we hope it is loving. Kindness is wanting for another the best and most useful thing, the same as you want for yourself. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I love you all. Amen.

Sources

Brown, Brené. *Rising Strong*. New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015.