

July 20th: The Fruit of Kindness

Welcome, my friends, to our summer sermon series on the Fruits of the Spirit–this is a way for us to explore some big questions about what it means to be disciples of Jesus in our modern world. We’ve been looking at one fruit per Sunday, all with the goal of offering some practical ways for you to grow in your faith and respond to our broken world. Today we’re studying the fruit of kindness—including what it looks like to cultivate kindness inside of ourselves. So we’re glad you’ve joined us for these conversations, and we look forward to diving in deeper with you over the next couple of months.

Before we begin this meditation, let’s take a moment to pray together.

God of Loving Kindness, in your grace towards us, you have shown us how to care for each other. You have modeled for us a kind of compassion that is divine and holy, and now we seek to be your disciples by following in your footsteps. We know that true kindness in a world of animosity is a radical act, and so this morning, we are listening for your voice to lead us into this countercultural work. In this time of communal reflection and personal introspection, we await your presence, so that we might be filled with your Spirit as we enter a new week. Amen.

Out of all the Fruits of the Spirit, I was most looking forward to this week, and our topic of Kindness. There are so many great quotes about kindness that I’ve been collecting over the past few weeks, excited to share that wisdom with you all and inspire our community towards that particular virtue. I expected to write an uplifting sermon all about how to model our lives after the thoughtful and wise insights of people like Mark Twain, Maya Angelou, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, but I’ll have to save those for another time, because in the midst of writing, God taught me something different about kindness that I feel compelled to pass on to you. A lesson rooted in the action of kindness, and not just the idea of kindness.

And so I have a confession for you, a real one, not a funny one. A confession about kindness, or in my case, the lack thereof.

A few weeks ago, I was leaving church on my way to check in with one of our friends, and I was stopped at the light, waiting to turn left onto Kitsap Way. I was in a little bit of a time crunch, my to do list had gotten away from me, and I was a little flustered. It was hot, my car's air conditioning was struggling to keep up with the sun that was beating down, and I was trying to plug my phone in to charge because the battery was getting low. All that to say, I was distracted, not fully present, and mostly focused on myself.

But out of the corner of my eye, I saw a person, sitting in the shade underneath a tree in the corner of the Arnold's parking lot. It was a man, trying to cool down, but with no water or belongings with him. He looked like he had been in the sun for most of the day, his face was tired and worn. I noticed all these things, and I saw that he was alone. Just then, the light turned green, and I had a decision to make. I could have turned left, and entered the parking lot from the Kitsap Way side, and stopped for a minute to chat with him and see what I could do to help. But I confess that instead, I looked at the clock, calculated how much time I had left between my planned visit and my intended ferry departure, and I did not stop. I kept driving.

I'm not telling you this because I want you to tell me that I made the right decision—I don't think I did. You might be thinking that I didn't have enough information to judge whether or not it would have been a safe encounter—he could have been dangerous in some way—but there were ways to help him without risking my own safety. It would have taken less than ten minutes for me to head back to church, pick up a couple bottles of water and a snack, and drop them off to the man in the parking lot. I could have pulled into the McDonald's drive through and gotten him something to eat and drink in even less time, but I didn't.

And I'm not upset about this because I failed to cross off "give a blessing bag to someone" on my Fruit of the Spirit Bingo card, but because I missed an

opportunity to be kind. I missed it. It was right in front of me, and I made the wrong choice. Simply because it would have been slightly inconvenient. Kindness was an option, and I dismissed it, because I was more tied to my schedule than I was my character.

I've thought about this for a couple weeks, not to beat myself up, but to ask myself how I could have behaved differently. I've wondered, what would have happened if I did stop? And as I've reflected on this experience, it has brought to mind a story that Jesus tells in Luke 10, a parable that sparks a similar sense of introspection for his first century audience, and a story that the Apostle Paul no doubt heard as part of his spiritual journey and then incorporated into our passage from the Letter to the Galatians.

At the beginning of this chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus sends out 72 of his disciples to start their own ministry in the towns and cities around them. He instructs them to go from village to village, spreading the news of the coming Kingdom of God, and healing the sick. When they return, they have all these miracles to report, but there are some leaders who are not impressed by these accounts. In verse 25, Jesus enters a dialogue with an expert of the law, likely a Pharisee, who comes to him with a question about salvation. Jesus asks him to name the core message of the law, and the man responds with these quotes from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

But the Pharisee was not quite satisfied, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Instead of listing out all of the people that Jesus considered as this expert of the law's neighbor, he tells this parable:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he

traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"

When Jesus had finished telling this story, he asked the man, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" And the man responds, "The one who had mercy on him." And I think that's a good answer, but if he wanted to elaborate, the Pharisee could have said, "The one who stopped. The one who took notice of another person's suffering and decided to intervene. The one who saw an opportunity for kindness and took it. That's the person who is a neighbor."

Jesus concludes this encounter by instructing the man: "Go, and do likewise."

There's a lot to be said about this parable that we don't have the space to discuss this morning, so I'll just say this:

I think a lot of us hear this parable, and we understand it in the abstract. We understand that it's a good thing to help other people, and we understand that kindness towards our neighbors is what we are called to do as Christians. We might even agree that this Good Samaritan character is the kind of person that we'd like to be in our own lives. I know that I would like to be the kind of person who stops to care for someone in need. But where I think I failed, and where many of us struggle, is putting this desire into practice. Sometimes, we are so wrapped up in our own circumstances, that we barely even notice the people in front of us. Sometimes we notice, but we make excuses for why now is not a good time to help. Sometimes we think that someone else who is better equipped or better resourced will come along, so we convince ourselves that whatever we could do to help is not worth doing. Sometimes we worry that if we start to notice all of the needs in front of us, then we'll be completely

overwhelmed, and our little acts of kindness will feel so small in comparison to the depth of the problem.

But Jesus invites us into a different way of engaging each other, a way that involves truly seeing each other and offering what we can. Jesus invites us to think of a better world where neighbors help neighbors, and there aren't any distinctions or boundaries that prevent us from loving each other the way God has loved us. Jesus invites you and me to imagine a scenario where mercy isn't measured out by social class, or ethnicity, or gender identity, but by our ability to recognize the inherent dignity and value of our fellow human beings. In this new reality of Jesus, kindness is a radical act, not just an intention. It's not just something we can think about internally, but something we must do, and do as often as we can.

And here's what I mean about kindness being radical: kindness is radical because it disrupts the cultural narrative in our society that the most important thing should be our own needs and our own desires. Kindness is radical because it gets us out of the "me-me-me" mindset, and instead asks us to consider the greater good. Kindness is radical because it asks us to set aside our own priorities so that we can more clearly see the invitation in front of us. Kindness is radical because it takes us out of our normal routines or expectations, forcing us to stop and redirect our attention. Kindness is radical because it removes labels of who is deserving and who is not, leaving us only to connect to each other as another of God's beloved children.

Now, this doesn't mean in our own discipleship journey, we'll be asked to save everybody, or help every single person in need, or solve the world's systemic injustices by ourselves, but I do think it means that when God brings specific people to our attention, that is for a divine purpose. When the Holy Spirit gives us an opportunity to be kind to someone in particular, the Holy Spirit also gives us the tools to respond. You might discover that some days, you'll see opportunities for kindness everywhere, and some days, there will be only one or two moments that stand out. You might discover that you start to see opportunities for small acts of kindness in certain locations or places that you

frequent, or you might discover that God invites you into kindness when you are in unfamiliar spaces. You might discover that specific ways of expressing kindness are easier for you than others, or that a new form of kindness brings you unexpected joy.

Whatever you encounter on your own spiritual path, here's how you can be like the Good Samaritan and get started with incorporating intentional kindness into your life:

Step one: Open your eyes. And I don't just mean that literally. I mean it emotionally. Be emotionally and spiritually open to seeing opportunities for kindness, even if it's different than you might have anticipated. Train yourself to notice people or situations that could be chances to show care and compassion. Focus your attention on others, and trust that the opportunities that come to you are meant for you. Don't wait for others to step in, but take the initiative to see what God puts in front of you.

Step two: Practice stopping what you're doing and start to act on the invitations of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't have to be pulling into a parking lot to help someone by the side of the road—it could be taking a moment to help someone in the grocery store reach a product on a shelf they can't reach, or holding the door for someone who is carrying multiple bags. It could be calling a friend who comes to mind, or delivering a homemade meal to a neighbor who just had a baby. Those little things matter, but you have to pause what you're doing and be willing to experience disruption or be inconvenienced. It might change the course of your day, or it might not, but those moments are a time when God's love is being expressed through you and your actions, so acknowledge that they are worth stopping for.

Step three: Repeat. Keep doing the seeing and stopping until kindness isn't just an intention, or even an isolated act, but a consistent part of your character. Aristotle, in his ancient philosophical treatise on virtue ethics, claimed that we build our character over time, and I think the Apostle Paul would agree that these Fruits of the Spirit grow inside of us with continued effort and

encouragement. Both men would argue that “we are what we repeatedly do,” and so I challenge you this week to repeatedly focus on kindness. Like Jesus, I invite you to cultivate kindness as part of your habits and your worldview—seeing kindness as a central part of your personal discipleship and a new reality to be lived into.

My friends, I’ll close with this—I hope that you’ll learn from my mistakes. I know that I’m going to practice what I preach this week, and so I hope you’ll join me. Together, let’s make a commitment to not look away, not make excuses, not ignore the needs of people in our path. Let’s respond to these holy invitations with kindness that not only impacts the lives of others, but transforms us into the kind of people who see neighbors everywhere.

Amen.

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