

KINDNESS:
MORE THAN NICENESS, LESS THAN GRACE
John 8:1-11; 3/26/17

Kindness is one crucial dimension of the Fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians chapter 5. “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

Thinking about kindness I came across a strange quote by Robert Nathan, the American novelist who wrote the famous novel *The Bishop's Wife*. His book was turned into a 1947 film with Cary Grant and Loretta Young. Nathan said this of kindness:

“Kindness, what a strange word to find on anybody’s lips these days. It is like a style in clothes which is no longer worn, or like a musty language no longer spoken. What can one do with such a word?...At best it is a feeble virtue; and it has had no part in history, for history is made by force. Nevertheless, it has a way of returning every now and then to earth, when one least expects it. The military bands stop a moment for breath, the hunters pause to sleep...and there is kindness again, nesting stubbornly in people’s hearts, lifting a small peaceful voice...”

I like that; but it doesn’t really get us any closer to an understanding of what kindness is. Nor does it tell us how to distinguish kindness from some of the other words like goodness and gentleness? Until we know what it is, how can we really ask the Holy Spirit to bear its fruit in us? We are left with a conglomerate of great-sounding words that give us a misty-eyed view of life that “hears no evil, sees no evil, and thinks no evil.” We might as well put on rose-colored glasses, and see the world the way my 5 year-old granddaughter does: in many shades of pink.

So, here’s my thesis for this morning’s message: Kindness is more than niceness, but less than grace. Kindness is more than niceness, but less than grace.

I do not mean to denigrate niceness. Niceness is a whole lot better than meanness, as we all know. The thank you note surprisingly received. The door held open when you’ve got bags of groceries in your arms. The smile from a stranger you pass in the street. The “Yes, sir... Yes, mam” from a teen-ager you might expect to give you a surly “Duh.” The person behind the checkout counter, or the parking lot attendant who greets you cheerfully. The coach who tells you that you played well. The nurse who says “Now just hold your breath; it won’t hurt too much.”

Niceness is one of the pleasant things that those of us who move here from other parts of the country experience. Charleston is not called the most hospitable city in the USA for nothing. Niceness transcends race, socio-economic barriers, and the sexes. People sometimes call it manners – but it goes beyond manners. Manners can be polite but restrained. Niceness is warm and contagious. But, back to my point, niceness is not kindness.

For one thing niceness is often shown to people who you expect will be nice in return. The cab driver who strikes up a friendly conversation may expect a handsome tip. The waiter who oozes charm may expect the same. The unsolicited smile you receive on the sidewalk may anticipate

that you will reciprocate. When people cite the Golden Rule they often mean: “Do unto others as you hope others will do unto you.” There’s a payback expected. Niceness you see doesn’t cost us very much – perhaps nothing at all.

So, my first point: kindness is not niceness. And my second point is that kindness is not Grace. Grace, “God’s riches at Christ’s expense”, is God’s one-way love for us, when we least deserve it. It’s God’s costly acceptance of us: we - who are his natural enemies... we - the errant prodigal sons who have wasted our lives in riotous living, we - the rebels who have shaken our fits at God and said: “We will not have this man to rule over us.” Grace is what the Gospel is all about: God’s welcome of the sinner, His bearing of our sins and dying in our place. Grace is knowing no condemnation but living as free sons and daughters in a relationship that has taken all our brokenness and all our sins and cast them in the depth of the sea. Kindness may open a person to Grace. But it is not yet Grace.

To get a picture of kindness, that quality of God’s own character he wants to plant in us, I invite you to think with me about a door – a sizeable door that separates two very different rooms. Try to imagine that door. On the one side is a room we’ll call the courtroom of the law, and on the other side of the door is another room, a room we’ll call the throne room of Grace. Kindness is one of the keys that opens the door from the courtroom of the law to the throne room of Grace.

Both rooms are part of God’s castle, if you will. Both reflect God’s character. “The Law is “holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good,” wrote St. Paul. We do not reject the Law, but we do not need to live under it, as if it were a Damocles sword hanging over us. God, who built both rooms, wants us to go through the door from the courtroom of the Law to the throne room of Grace. He wants us to leave behind the courtroom of the Law, and discover the throne room of Grace.

But I still haven’t defined kindness, have I? So let’s ponder our Scripture reading from the Old Testament book of Hosea. It put it so well:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away. They kept sacrificing to Baals, and burning offerings to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness with the bands of love.” Hosea was saying that God wasn’t going to give up on Israel despite its waywardness. Like a father who doesn’t give up on a prodigal son, God was going to treat Israel with cords of kindness and bands of love.

But note, God’s kindness to Israel was costly. As St. Paul wrote to Titus: “We were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another.” But then Paul writes: “when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us ... in virtue of his own mercy...” (Tit. 3:3-5)

Paul is saying that the kindness of God leads to his mercy. Kindness is the impetus in God’s character. It’s the blood running through God’s veins so to speak. Mercy and Grace are the

action that this inner dynamic leads to. They are what happens when God's kindness is stirred into action.

So, kindness is first of all something in God's character. It is not something you and I naturally have. Nor can we learn kindness the way we can learn niceness or manners. It is not naturally ours. It is the fruit of God's own Spirit dwelling in us. As we unite with the vine, to switch the metaphors, and God's sap runs through *our* inner being, we bear fruit from that inner life, and the fruit is kindness –along with all the other fruits of the Spirit.

To get a better glimpse of how God's costly kindness works let's think of our Gospel reading this morning. In it we see God's kindness expressed through a very controversial incident in the ministry of Jesus: the story of the woman taken in adultery.

I say the story was controversial, because many early manuscripts of the New Testament completely leave it out. Some of your Bibles leave it out, or put it in the margin. Why? Apparently, some early Christians misinterpreted it. A woman taken in adultery, deserving of condemnation by the Law, is dragged and thrown at the feet of Jesus. And Jesus does not condemn her. She is simply told to "go and sin no more." To some early Christian ears, that sounded frankly just too lenient.

St. Augustine in the Fourth Century wrote: "Certain persons of the faith, or rather enemies of the true faith... I suppose, lest their wives should be given impunity in sinning... removed from their manuscripts the Lord's act ... towards the adulteress." This dumfounded Augustine who said how is it that Jesus who said to the woman "sin no more" could be thought of as giving permission to sin? It made no sense to him. But there are always people who think if you refuse to condemn something, you are really giving permission for it.

So, let's look at the story a bit more closely.

A crowd had gathered and Jesus was teaching. A group of Pharisees and Scribes (who were known for their punctilious observance of the Law) dragged a woman caught *in flagrante delicto* – in the midst of adultery – and dropped her at the feet of Jesus like a piece of garbage. Their motives were clear. Either Jesus would agree with the Law and say that she is deserving of capital punishment right there and then, or Jesus would disagree with the Law and lose credibility with the crowd that believed God had originally given the Law. Of course, these Scribes and Pharisees couldn't have executed the woman anyway. No Jew had that right. Only Rome could authorize capital punishment. The aim of these men was to extract a judgment from Jesus that would either show him to be too hard-hearted or too lenient. Either way, he would lose.

Jesus then startles these men by throwing the judgment right back into their laps: "OK, go ahead. Whichever of you is without sin, you throw the first stone." Then Jesus sits down and writes with his finger in the sand.

A lot of ink has been spilled by scholars wondering what he wrote in the sand. Did he write the 7th. Commandment: "Thou shalt not commit adultery?" Did he write Jeremiah 17:3 "Those who

depart from me shall be written in the earth,” as if to say “You Scribes and Pharisees have forsaken my way of forgiveness and God will write your names in the sand. YOU shall be exposed to shame.” But one of the wisest commentators, John Calvin, simply said: “No, Jesus was just doodling.” In other words, Jesus was giving time for the men to ponder what he had said.

Well *now* it’s the Pharisees who are skewered. They fall silent. Which one of them can claim total purity in thought and deed? One by one they leave, from the eldest to the youngest (the youngest left at the end because presumably, having the hottest heads, they had the greatest indignation).

At this point Jesus looks up at the woman and says “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” The woman replies, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus says: “Neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again.”

What’s interesting about the passage is what it doesn’t say. It doesn’t say what you and I might expect it to say: “Jesus raises his hand and pronounces those all-important words “I forgive you.” Nor does the passage say that the woman jumps up, shouts with joy and instantly becomes a saint. The story ends with a word of non-condemnation. That’s all. The rest of the story is untold. The woman is temporarily set free from the spirit of judgment and condemnation and she has caught a glimpse of another world – a world of acceptance, freedom, and relief.

We do not know if the woman was forgiven. Her knowledge of forgiveness will depend on her really entering into the throne room of grace that Jesus’ kindness opened for her.

And here’s my point about kindness. Kindness is the key that unlocks the door to God’s Grace. Let’s think of ourselves for a minute.

You and I grow up living in the courtroom of the Law. If we grow up in a religious family, that Law will be laden with religious significance. “Do not touch, do not handle, do not sin.” But even if we do not grow up in a religious household, we are going to live in a world of judgment. The parent scolds us. The teacher grades us. The coach yells at us. The friend rejects us. The brother or sister bullies us. The employer criticizes us. Someone whose love we needed, didn’t love us.

The playwright Arthur Miller, an atheist, said that all his life he thought he was moving on an upward plane where he would be judged. Where there would be a verdict on his life. Although he didn’t believe in a heavenly judge, he was consumed by the fear of judgment nevertheless.

You and I grow up in a world where tapes of negativity play themselves over and over again in our minds. We are living in a courtroom of the law inside our heads. We can put on a happy face when needed, of course. But beneath the smiles there is a volcano of self-accusation that erupts in the criticisms we make of ourselves or of others. “Oh, wretched man that I am,” said St. Paul. “The good I would do, I do not. And the evil I would not do, I do.”

Some people never leave the courtroom of the Law. They are there till their dying day. Some, on the other hand, do go through the door, in a blinding conversion. They see the light and rush towards it, desperate to find a way to self-acceptance – to God-acceptance. Bless them. They are fewer than you think, and even though they now zealously proclaim God’s Grace, they may still have negative tapes playing inside their heads.

So, while a few dash into that other room, the throne room of Grace, most grope towards that other room, and need to hear again and again, that there is a way to live in that new room – to put behind them the courtroom of the Law and enter fully into the throne room of Grace. Kindness, the kindness of God that lives in those who are grafted into him, is often the key that unlocks that door for the one or two who are yearning for acceptance.

In preparation for this talk I reflected on the many acts of kindness I could recall in my own life. I actually made a list of them, wondering if any *one* would stand out. Actually, several did. But here’s one I want to share with you.

In 1948 I was 12 -- a 12 year-old pre-pubescent adolescent. I was chubby, had few friends, anesthetized the pain of growing up with too much chocolate. In addition to baby fat, I probably had pimples – from the chocolate! The War was over, World War II, and my uncle who had returned from the South Pacific with my aunt bought a peach ranch out West. It sounded amazingly romantic to my older brother and me who had grown up in the leafy suburbs of New York. Romantic, that is, until our Dad decided that his two “City slicker” sons needed a bit of toughening up. So, he packed us off in a four-engine propeller plane to spend the summer picking peaches in the blistering heat of Texas.

Our days were spent picking peaches, a process that covered us with unwelcome peach fuzz, and then we would sell them in the Dallas Farmer’s Market. One day, we were out in the peach orchards, far from the house, when we discovered that we had run out of water. That was a serious crisis. Rather than our aunt leaving us by ourselves, and rather than asking my older brother, who was all of 14, to hike back and get water, my aunt tossed the keys of her beat up old truck to me, and said: “Peter drive the truck back to the house and get us some water.”

I think she knew exactly what she was doing. She was giving me a chance to know that acceptance and love that I would never forget. I was 12 remember. Texas had no driving age, and the road was all on her property. Nevertheless, I had never been behind the wheel of a car, and had to ask where the gears were. She showed me the gears, and off I went – I think I drove the whole way in First.

She risked the destruction of her truck, and the devastation of her property, and the disapproval of our father, her brother. But she showed me kindness that lifted up the oppressive weight of self-judgment, that feeling that I would never be as good or as accomplished as my older brother, that doubt over whether I really had “what it takes” to be a grown up. She wasn’t being nice, or polite. She was risking something.

Nor was this Grace. That lay ahead for me – the dawning of belief that there really was a room where judgment didn’t hang over me and where God’s acceptance would shine in every corner

and bounce off every wall. But when I heard of Jesus, and when I pondered what he could mean in my life, I already had a taste of it – a small taste, but a real taste. I was able to recognize it when I saw it.

Brothers and sisters in the faith, this is what kindness does. It is those little costly acts that show another person the acceptance that erases years of negativity. It can be anything – throwing keys to a self-doubting kid and saying: “One day you’ll be a man. Here, take the first step.”

You and I can move from the courtroom of the Law into the throne room of Grace. But it may take someone, one of you perhaps, to do something kind, something that costs you a little (not money, but maybe reputation). An act of kindness that may open the door to a whole new world for that person.

I recall walking down a city street with the Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen, and suddenly he wasn’t there with me. I looked back, and he had crouched down by the curbstone to talk with a smelly homeless person who was sitting there in despair. I don’t know what he said. He may have prayed with the person. It was his body language that struck me. It didn’t convey any paternalism. It conveyed acceptance and welcome.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness...against such there is no law.”

I close with this personal reflection. I almost went to work years ago for a clergyman who penned a poem that summarized his own vision for life. He titled it: “So I stand by the door.” Here is just a part:

The most tremendous thing in the world
Is for [people] to find that door - the door to God.
The most important thing that any [one] can do
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands
And put it on the latch - the latch that only clicks
And opens to [one’s] own touch.

[People] die outside the door, as starving beggars die
On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter.
Die for want of what is within their grasp.
They live on the other side of it - live because they have not found it.

Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,
And open it, and walk in, and find Him.
So I stand by the door.

What if your Lenten prayer and mine were: “God help me to show costly kindness to someone who doesn’t know your love, but for whom my kindness may be a key to the door that opens to a whole new world.

Peter C. Moore, D.D. 3/16/17

