***FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: KINDNESS***

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Texts: Galatians 5:22-23 and Luke 10:26-37

 KINDNESS MATTERS! You may have seen that message around town over the last several years. It appears on yard signs, t-shirts, and bumper stickers as part of a campaign by Staunton City Schools. According to the school’s website, “*The Staunton Kindness Challenge was launched in December 2021 to strengthen a culture of kindness in our schools and community.*” A host of pictures and videos offer visual responses to that challenge as together we seek to build a culture of kindness in our community. If those words – KINDNESS MATTERS – are to be more than just a slogan, then we must engage in the work of enacting kindness day to day beyond our schools across our lives and life together. Is that what you do? In your interactions with neighbors – whether they be kind, kooky, or cruel – do you return kindness, or do you simply treat them as they treat you? Do you extend kindness to the young man who takes your order at the restaurant and gets it wrong, and to the teenage girl who checks you out at the grocery store, and to the grizzled panhandler who asks for a buck for a cup of coffee and to the neighbor who is unhappy that your leaves sometimes blow onto his yard? Perhaps before asking those questions, I should ask a more basic question: do you believe that kindness really matters or is practicing kindness just a waste of time?

 Kindness is love in action, and as one writer suggests, “*A part of kindness consists in loving people more than they deserve.*”[[1]](#endnote-1) Kindness is thus not something that is earned, but something freely shared. Kindness is not offered with an ulterior motive or it ceases to be kindness. To build a *culture of kindness*, such loving action must become the default setting for all interactions in our community. It must be our first response, our expected behavior, not the rare exception that catches people by surprise. Perhaps an indication of how far we have to go on that count is the way in which simple acts of kindness – returning a lost wallet with all the dollar bills intact, helping someone across a busy street, making a stranger feel welcome – are lifted up as exceptional acts instead of the kind of action that might be practiced by all of us.

 In his novel *Good News from North Haven*, Michael Lindvall, a Presbyterian minister, speaks through the voice of one of his characters, the Rev. David Battles, who is reflecting on his ministry:

*“[S]itting there it came to me that of all the meetings I had attended in the last few days, of all the sermons I’d preached, of all the programs I’d introduced or tried to introduce, the most important things I had done in all my busy-ness were to touch Harry the barber’s hands and to read chapter six of Ramona the Pest. These were important things – not because the other things were unimportant. They were important because the mark a man or a woman makes on this world is most often a trail of faithful love, and quiet mercies, and unknown kindnesses.”[[2]](#endnote-2)*

What he suggests is that the marks we make on the world are some of that fruit of the Spirit of which Paul speaks in Galatians – love, kindness, and mercy, the same marks lifted up by Jesus in that familiar parable of the good Samaritan.

 The parable does not come out of nowhere. It is told by Jesus in response to a question which arose in response to another question posed by a lawyer (why does it always have to be the lawyer?) who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Embedded in his question is a clue as to his real motivation. He asks, “What must **I do** to inherit eternal life?” He wants to take control of his fate by getting a list of things that he can do, things he can control, in order to guarantee his place in heaven. When Jesus asks him what the Law says, the lawyer correctly quotes the Great Commandment: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself*.” Kudos to him, and Jesus commends him for his answer. But the lawyer wants more, and so he asks for further clarification, “*Who is my neighbor?*” We might think it is an apt question to assure that he has a clear understanding, but Luke suggests he asks it to justify himself. In other words, he wants to prove that he already has done all he has to do and is on his way to heaven. He wants to clarify the limits on the neighbor that he is to love, and in response he gets the parable.

 Do not judge this lawyer too harshly. He is trying to do the right thing, but he has a limited understanding of how far he must go. He is like that rich young man who comes to Jesus asking the same question, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” After assuring Jesus that he has done all that the Law asks of him, he is stunned to hear Jesus say, “*Then sell all you own, give it to the poor, and come and follow me.*” He goes away sorrowful for, says the text, “*he had many possessions*.” Jesus asked of him the one thing he could not give up – his possessions, his wealth, his security. He was looking for affirmation of what he had done, but ended up distraught because he was asked to do more. This lawyer too wants affirmation for the good life he has tried to live, but his idea of the neighbor he is to love is not nearly as expansive as the neighbor described in Jesus’ parable. And that is why we must cut him some slack, because we would probably prefer a narrower definition of “neighbor” to love too – perhaps the neighbor who is good, the neighbor who is righteous, the neighbor who is easy to love and grateful for our love. And instead, we get the parable of the Good Samaritan.

 You know the parable and I need not repeat it, except to say that for the lawyer and those hearing this parable the first time, the Samaritan is the least likely hero that could be imagined. The priest and Levite who passed by were respected figures in Jewish circles, and while they may have been expected to help the injured man, there were lots of reasons to excuse their actions. But when the Samaritan arrives on the scene, everyone hearing the parable would have no expectation that he would do anything to help. He is the MAGA Zealot helping out the illegal immigrant, the Hamas fighter helping out the bleeding Israelite, the Russian soldier coming to the aid of the injured Ukrainian woman. Choose the polar opposites that most strike your fancy; that is what the Jewish audience heard when Jesus says the Samaritan stopped. And not only did he stop and check on the injured man; he offered him first aid, then loaded him on his donkey and took him to an inn, the closest thing there was to a hospital then, and before leaving, paid the bill for his care. He didn’t do the least that he could do; he went above and beyond in showing kindness and compassion to this total stranger.

 “*Which of these was the neighbor to the injured man?*” asks Jesus. And it is the lawyer who replies, “*The one who showed him mercy*.” The Greek word there for *mercy* can also mean *compassion*. To be a neighbor is to show compassion toward others, and as the parable makes clear, there are no limits as to who is deserving of such compassion. One might well wonder what led the Samaritan to offer such kindness toward this injured stranger; Jesus does not say. Perhaps it is because he had been shown such kindness by others and was paying it forward, or perhaps it is because he was raised in a culture of kindness in which helping those in need was simply what you did! There is a French parable that says, “Write injuries in sand, kindnesses in marble.” For if kindnesses are written in marble, then they endure – as memories and as inspiration for compassionate living!

 “*Go and do likewise*,” Jesus tells the lawyer – and us. Go and show mercy toward others. Go and show compassion toward your neighbors. Go and show kindness toward those you know and those you don’t know, those you like and those you don’t like, for they are all your neighbors. And you are called – no, you are commanded – to love your neighbor as yourself. Luke does not record how the lawyer responded, but if he is anything like us, then it may have been with a sigh. For, it is a tall task to love ALL our neighbors.

 That is where the Spirit comes in, the Spirit of God that enables us to do what we cannot do alone. If left to us, we would be kind to those who were kind to us and those we liked and maybe even those we were decidedly neutral about, and leave it at that. But the Spirit inspires us to do more, to be kind toward more than just those who are kind and appreciative and offer us something in return, to be kind not because we expect anything back, but simply because that is who we are and how we live and how we show love to our neighbors. And the fruit of that Spirit is kindness, lived out day to day as an alternative to the culture of retribution, power, and hate that we see so vividly across our nation today.

In the little book *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse*, the boy is asked, “*What do you want to be when you grow up?*” “*Kind*,” said the boy.”[[3]](#endnote-3) And that is what God wants us to be when we grow up too – kind! And if that is what you want to be, who you want to be, when you grow up, then perhaps you might start being kind today – toward all your neighbors. For, kindness does matter. To God and to us, kindness matters! Amen

1. Joseph Joubert [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Lindvall, *Good News from North Haven*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York: 2002, p.37 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Charlie Mackesy, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox, and the Horse*, HarperOne:2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)