

“Cultivating Kindness”

Introduction: Do you remember the slogan which made its appearance in the early 1990's: *Practice Random Acts of Kindness*? It was the tag line of a movement that arose in response to the “random acts of violence” that began to fill our news each day. A booklet entitled *Guerilla Kindness* offered some ways to practice such, like paying the toll for the cars behind you (pre e-z pass days!), or waving to kids on a school bus, or burying nickels in a playground sandbox, or buying a coffee for everyone at the diner.

Now, while these aren't bad things to do for people, these random acts are not the kind of kindness that Paul speaks about in his list of the fruit of the Spirit. These random acts may or may not be needed by those for whom they are done, they don't cost us a whole lot, and they are done just as much to help us feel good about ourselves as they are for others.

No, when we speak about the kindness that the Holy Spirit seeks to cultivate in us, we're speaking about a kindness that is not random but intentional and purposeful. As we saw last week with patience, now we see also with kindness: both are not only an aspect of the Spirit's fruit, but of the definition of love that Paul gives us in 1 Cor. 13:4 – “Love is patient, love is kind . . .” Scholar Gordon Fee observes that patience is the passive form of love—it holds back on what someone might deserve, then kindness is love's active form—it seeks to give what is needed. It is an “active goodness” on another's behalf, as Fee offers. Ultimately, it's a kindness that reveals the heart of Jesus who, in kindness, gave himself to us.

I. A Crippled Kid and a Kind King

A. Let's begin to think about this with the story of a crippled kid and a kind king, which helps us to see this kind of kindness in action. The kid's name was Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, the son of Saul. The king was a man named David, who had followed Saul onto the throne of Israel. Before he became king, David and Jonathan were fast friends. David had also achieved several military victories over the Philistines, including the defeat of the giant named Goliath. David's successes aroused Saul's jealousy, and Saul began to chase David all over the place. Before David fled, he and Jonathan made a covenant with each other, promising that they will care for the descendants of the other should one of them be killed. Well, not long after, both Jonathan and Saul were killed in battle.

B. Somewhere in the fighting between the Philistines and the Israelites, Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, became injured – crippled in both feet (2 Sam. 4:4). Author Eugene Peterson, as he ruminates on this episode, imagines that this boy would have become crippled emotionally as well. Sitting around the campfires, now lame in both feet and without both father and grandfather, one can imagine his servants celebrating the glory days of King Saul, and laying all the blame for all that had happened at the feet of David, who, it might have been suggested, tried to steal the throne from Saul.

C. One might well imagine, therefore, how shocked and even scared Mephibosheth would've been when he learned that David, now king, wanted to see him. Anyone knew that a top priority for a new king would be the elimination of any potential rivals for the throne, especially remaining descendants from the previous dynasty. But instead of a harsh word, or an “off with his head,” what David spoke was this: “Do not be afraid. I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan.” Such kindness included all of his grandfather Saul's land, servants to work the land, and most remarkably, a place at David's table.

Can this episode begin to give us a picture of what Spirit-produced kindness is all about? It is not just a random good deed, but an intentional, purposeful, active goodness undertaken to meet the real need of another.

II. Weeds to Be Aware of

A. What might be some of the barriers to offering such kindness, some of the weeds that we need to be aware that can choke out the cultivation of kindness? Here are two:

1. Our in-bred sense of self-sufficiency. Why is it far easier for us to say, “I can’t live without my cell phone,” than to acknowledge, “I can’t live without my neighbor?” This weed grows from our society instilling in us from an early age that to ask for help is to admit weakness and inadequacy; it’s the equivalent of admitting failure. Along these lines, we’re led to believe that our goal as parents is to help our children become independent as quickly as possible and to know that they have “made it” when they are able to enjoy economic self-sufficiency. There is a person in town who still kind of growls at me when we bump into each other on the street because she was offended by the offer of help the church provided to her family a number of years ago. “We’re not poor, you know.” So an act of kindness, of active goodness, runs the risk of offending the persons being helped, and may cause us to hold back, or even refuse to receive such help ourselves.

2. Our market-driven economy. Whether we recognize it or not, the buying and selling of goods is an integral feature of our daily lives. Economics influences the way we think and act. Everything, in one way or another, has a price tag. We’re taught to get the best value we can and to buy the product that brings the most benefit to our lives. Certainly, it’s a system with great efficiencies. But can we really be other-directed when so many of our daily interactions lead us to operate primarily according to what might enhance our own lives, what might be best for us? As Jesus describes it, the kingdom of God has an entirely different market system. The kindness that is to come out of the family of God means doing good even to your enemies, even when you can’t possibly expect to get anything back in return (Lk. 6:32-35).

B. Of course, there is a return, but it’s a different kind of return. I heard this on a couple of different occasions just this past week. One of you took part in towing a boat back to port that had experienced engine failure. Although it turned out to be a four-hour event, and took you away from your fishing, you mentioned how good it made you feel. Another of you shared the story of being led by God to give away one of your cars to a person in need. You didn’t have to tell me this but again I heard about how good it made you feel. Of course, the point is not about making you feel good; but it does highlight that when we engage in the kindness produced by the Spirit, it has it’s own kind of very rich rewards.

How might we then cultivate such kindness? What kind of fertilizer needs to be spread on the soils of our hearts?

III. Fertilizer to Be Spread

A. We begin by marinating in God’s kindness to us, for that is the source and model of the kindness we are to offer others. Note that this is where David began – he didn’t just want to do something randomly good for someone; he wanted to show “God’s kindness” (v. 3). A look through the prayers of David—the psalms—reveal how often, and in varying ways, David experienced the kindness

of God to him. For instance, Psalm 40: "I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard by cry He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on rock and gave me affirm place to stand." Or Psalm 34, "I sought the LORD and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears." Or, in the familiar Psalm 23, we hear that God had prepared a table before him in the presence of his enemies, and so it's interesting to note that so David offered a place at his table to Mephibosheth.

Now, after David, we see that we have been offered a place at God's table through the kindness of God that comes through Jesus. As Paul reminds a church leader named Titus: "Once we too were foolish and disobedient . . . But then God our Savior showed us his kindness and love. He saved us, not because of the good things we did, but because of his mercy. . . He declared us not guilty because of his great kindness." (Titus 3:3-7, NLT).

What has been God's kindness toward you? Certainly, his greatest, "kindest" act took place through Jesus on the cross. But it would be worth reflecting on your experience of God and identifying six or seven instances when God came alive for you and met you, in either quiet, or remarkable ways. How, and to whom, might you extend that kindness?

B. Second, it is helpful to remember, amid the weeds of self-sufficiency, that we are not self-made, that we did not get here on our own, that we are dependent creatures (Ps. 100). Further, our story is not about impressive accomplishments achieved by our own talents but a story about God's grace, about receiving what we do not deserve, about what we could in no way have secured for ourselves. And in the midst of all that we have been brought into a community of other such blessed people who are there to care for and encourage us and us them. We are a body which needs each other to function well, and we are free to offer and receive gifts without having our identity threatened.

C. Finally, if our kindness is to move beyond the random acts variety and into the actual needs of others, then to cultivate such we need to learn how to listen well, to fully set aside our agenda for the moment in order to be fully present to another. How will we know what they really need otherwise? In so doing, we offer ourselves to others as vehicles for God's grace, reflecting his love to the world as we do so. Careful listening is itself an act of kindness.

Random acts of kindness are not bad things, they just don't go far enough. They tend to operate without discerning a real need. They don't often involve going very far out of our way or costing us very much. They usually don't see to create nor sustain a long-term relationship. Typically, they simply just stroke our ego.

So may we be drawn to the kindness God has for us that the Spirit seeks to produce in us. May this intentional, purposeful kindness that is made possible through Jesus be the kind that we both enjoy and seek to offer to others.