

Kindness
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My dictionary has three definitions for the word "kind." The first definition is from the Old English and means part of the same grouping as in a species or family. The second definition refers to a commodity exchanged in place of money. For example, a good or service. The third definition is the one we tend to think of more often, "affectionate, loving, concerned about the welfare of others." One person is kind to another person.

My sermon this morning is about the last definition, the value of kindness, affection, love and concern for the welfare of others. And although I did not spend the last month doing a detailed analysis of the word "kind," my guess is that the third definition of kind is informed by the first two. Animals and people of the same species, tribe, or family have an affinity, an understanding for or reliance upon one another. They are bound together, and in order to thrive must help one another. (We can all think of animals and people who don't help one another and then don't thrive). Family groupings exchange work and services "in kind," a flexible barter system that makes exceptions and benefits the group over time. This affinity and flexible, this support of the mutual survival and good is kind. It is affectionate and loving, concerned about the welfare of others.

When I began this sermon I thought I was interested in kindness in general. But as I asked people for their stories about kindness, I began to realize that my definition, and that of most of the people I asked, involves people with no affinity to one another who act in kind ways for no benefit (or almost no benefit). The benefits that exist are more altruistic - "Because it felt good," "It was the right thing to do." The moral value of this kindness is that it is not a societal or familial imperative. It is a choice. Society values this kindness, but it is still an optional kindness, a compassionate, altruistic choice that embraces a notion that we are one, equal human family.

Confucius wrote "Forget injuries, never forget kindness." Aesop wrote, "No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted." Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote, "Compassion is the basis of all morality." The Dalai Lama of Tibet writes, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

On the more insightful and disturbing side playwright Tennessee Williams has Blanche Dubois say in his classic *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "I have always relied on the kindness of strangers." And we who know this play know that Blanche will be victimized and betrayed by both strangers and family, as many of us have been. I don't mean to be pessimistic. It's just that not every family member, let alone stranger, is kind.

Which is why I have a mistrust of the phrase "Practice random acts of kindness." I agree with the principle, but somehow I wonder about the integrity of saying this. (My apologies to all of you who have this as a bumper sticker.) Does espousing this so succinctly and easily lead to good feelings and weakened moral reasoning under duress? I wonder perhaps if Blanche's sister, who will quietly betray her, would say the same thing if asked. Kindness is a challenge. Its practice might make us happy, but this dilemma or desire versus real practice is why there are so many of us and just one Dalai Lama, who, despite, his country's occupation, and his exile from his homeland, seemed, the last time I saw him in Bloomington, Indiana, genuinely happy.

It is also the reason I appreciate the merciless insight of William Shakespeare who has Lady Macbeth say of her husband in the play *Macbeth*, "What thou art promis'd, Yet do I fear they nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way." Lady Macbeth is afraid her husband lacks ambition enough to seize the crown. She fears he is too full of milk and not enough of curds and whey (WHEY) and way (WAY).

Lady Macbeth has no milk of human kindness, and her waffling husband will soon have none either. The milk of human kindness is an ideal much espoused, and too little evinced, or too easily forgotten. Which is why the new television show *Desperate Housewives* has been so successful. This show might be about many things, beautiful women, sex, relationships, but its crafty heart and soul is its parody of the founts of virtue and success (wealthy housewives) as conniving, flawed, desperate, self-centered individuals, while highlighting the burdensome expectations and self-sacrificial demands of parenthood, which still largely fall on women. It's a delicious commentary on society, gender power, families, and parenting (relating to both men and women).

Real kindness is a challenge, a choice and a challenge. I think it involves serious altruism where the only exchange of goods in kind is good feelings. When I asked people about their stories of kindness I noticed the stories all followed a pattern, someone was in need, and a stranger or acquaintance, with little affinity and no expectations (no bargaining chips, no leverage for later on), helped out. The stories I heard were amazing. I urge each of you to go home this evening, gather your friends or family, and tell your stories of kindness. They are inspirational and heartening.

One woman told me that her father periodically drives around her town with bags of toys and food. When he finds a house that looks like it has children, or needs basic items, he will quietly leave a bag at their doorstep when no one is looking. I thought this was very touching. And I have known this person's father for years, and I never knew he did this. His daughter tells me that it would ruin it for him if a family knew he did this because he doesn't want anyone to feel grateful to him. And the healthiest kindness involves low expectations about gratitude, because not everyone will be grateful or know how to say "thank you." So do a good kindness and let it go.

Another woman told me about a time when her marriage of twenty years was falling apart. She told me she would wake up every morning and think, "How am I going to make it through today?" One day a co-worker she barely knew came to her and said, "You don't seem well. What are you thinking?" She truthfully replied, "Last night my husband came home and told me I didn't measure up as a corporate wife." Her co-worker then told her that he wanted her to put on a one-woman art show, which, of course, demoralized and depressed, was the last thing this woman thought she could possibly do. But her co-worker helped her set deadlines, encouraged her to complete her projects, and by the time the show came she realized both that she could do a one-woman art show and that it was not healthy for her to stay in her marriage. Years later she has been stunned by this man's altruistic insight both into her struggle and how to help her find her way in a new life. She told me today that she likes to practice "secret kindnesses." She takes meals to people who are not well, and recently anonymously gave money to a college student whose books had been stolen.

I have shared with you the story about the couple who gave me \$800 to pay a tax bill I could not afford while in seminary, and about the unknown rabbi's wife who came to save my husband and I on Christmas Day when our son was three days old and would not stop crying. (And who exactly is going to help you on Christmas Day when there are no friends or family in town?) In writing this sermon I thought back to a time when I was an undergraduate and had business to do at the College Administration Building (Whitmore Hall, we called it Witless Hall).

I don't remember my business that day, but I do remember being rudely "cast out" by the woman at the business window, and afraid about remaining in school for the semester, I

remember crying uncontrollably in the women's restroom. So far this story is unremarkable. How many students go to public restrooms in colleges across the world and cry on a daily basis?

What is remarkable is that one woman, an administration official, of all people, came in, saw me crying, and wouldn't leave, actually kindly pestered me, until I told her why I was so upset. Then more miraculously she personally fixed my problem (which was not that hard to fix) and asked me to show her the woman who had been so rude to me so she could make sure it didn't happen again to another student. And no, I wasn't important, and I wasn't going to file a complaint. She was just being remarkably and unnecessarily kind and helpful. A lot of administration officials go out of their way to avoid students, and I don't entirely blame them.

I wonder what makes people kind like this. People who don't have to notice or act or help and who won't receive money, acclaim, or a promotion for their actions. In the Jewish tradition there is the idea of a *mitzvah*, or doing a good deed. It's a religious principle to encourage people to behave well towards one another, but also so that one's name is, according to tradition, written in the book of life.

But not everyone has a religious mandate for kindness (whether or not that is seriously followed). For some people it is a way to share. Others seem more sensitive to the plight of others and feel compelled to help. For others it is a way to ease personal grief. "I may have a loss, but I can give someone else something so they are happy." For some people it is a way of being because they see us as "all in this together." I asked the receptionist at my dentist's office why she was being so kind and she said in all sincerity "Well, I could be other ways. But what's the use in that. Why not try to make life a little easier?" Her sentiments seem to echo those of French nobleman and Quaker Etienne Grellet who wrote "I expect to pass through this world just once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

I once went to a therapist who made me wonder if I was "pathologically kind." Leave it to a therapist to encourage self-doubt. I went home to ask my husband his opinion on this. He said "Pathological kindness. Hmm. I don't know what that is. As long as you are not subjecting yourself to harm there is no pathology in kindness." I pressed on "What if I just want people to like me or I am trying to make myself look perfect." He gave me the look of "You need to let this one go, Sharon" and said "as long as you are not subjecting yourself to harm."

Kindness in the name of helping others does not include repeated, sacrificial subjugation of oneself to harm, neglect, exhaustion, physical, financial, or emotional distress or abuse, or ignoring a problem. Kindness begins at home. You can't be kind to other people if you're not being kind to and protective of yourself first. Perhaps some of us are kind so that we "look good" on the outside, but if this is mixed with feeling good on the inside, helping another, no harm, maybe kindness can just be. We could do a lot worse than to have a human economy of kindness.

At the same time it is not possible to help everyone (and not everyone views "kindness" the same way. One person's kindness can be another person's idea of intrusion). I'm sure you can think of your moments when you just couldn't, or didn't feel able to, or when your idea of kindness wasn't really going to be helpful. Realistically it's not always possible. As a single woman I don't stop to help stranded motorists. It's a safety reality. Likewise, I don't answer the letters I periodically receive from inmates looking for a "good Christian woman" to correspond with. ("Reverend I know you are the one . . .") I can't call my family and friends every day they are sad. Sometimes I don't have the energy to listen as well as I would like to people who need their minister. It happens. It happens, right? You know it happens. It happens to you.

And sometimes kindness means saying "No," making people angry. Raising a child it is obvious to me that if I continually said, "Yes" to my son's charming and insatiable toddler demands I would raise a man that no one would like. You can extrapolate this to adult situations as well. Sometimes we have to tell family, friends, co-workers, strangers, someone who is ill or vulnerable, "No." Sometimes "No" is an act of self-discipline, responsibility, and kindness. As a therapist my husband will tell you that some of the people who get in the worst trouble with

major mental illness are actually the people who have wealthy families who repeatedly bail them out of jail, who continually pay for their rent, who pay for their accidents, who don't help them "fall" into the social safety net where they are professionally treated, and held responsible for their actions and problems.

This week I went upstairs to speak to our Director of Religious Education, Carly Wise. She was cutting this Chinese character for 1st-6th grade religious education classes this week. I told her my sermon was on kindness and she said, "This is the symbol for kindness." Carly was preparing it for lessons on the Chinese New Year, which falls on February 12 this year. The Chinese New Year is a time for family, celebration, special feasts, parades; wishing "good luck" to loved ones. There is lots of noise (firecrackers to drive away evil spirits), new clothes, and much color, especially the color red that symbolizes good luck. The story of the Kitchen God is told during the Chinese New Year, and this is the story our children are learning this morning.

According to the story, a man named Chang Kung had a very large family. The strange thing was that no one in this large family quarreled (and we do know how strange this is). Stories about this unusual family spread so far that the Emperor heard about them and decided to go visit the family to discover their secret of harmony. Once there he asked Chang Kung for his secret, whereupon Chang Kung wrote one word one hundred times. This character, the character for kindness. According to the story Chang Kung is the Kitchen God, and he watches over all families to see whether or not they are kind to one another.

Our earliest lessons of kindness come from family, how we are taught to treat people, how we see other people treat one another. Our ancestors knew that the survival of kin groups depended on treatment of kind in kind, hence the legend of the Kitchen God. Few of us believe that a Kitchen God is watching, so kindness, to extend care and affection, compassion, particularly to people we don't know, who will not reward us, is a challenge and a choice.

I agree with Schopenhauer "Compassion is the basis of all morality." Seeing other people, particularly strangers, as part of one human family is an act of compassion that leads to better moral decision-making. This is the fundamental value of kindness. Most of all I agree with Grellet "I expect to pass through this world just once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now; let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again." And in doing so, may we honor ourselves, may we bring happiness to others and ourselves, may we do no harm, and may we experience ourselves as members of one human family.