

Do Unto Others: Kindness

Luke 6:31-36

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Some of you may already have heard that I had a car accident a couple of weeks ago. It wasn't much more than a fender-bender, but it was my fault and I knew it. We pulled off to the side of the road, and I realized I was feeling a bit anxious. In the world today, with so much animosity and, frankly, out of bounds behavior, I was nervous about who was going to get out of the other car and how they would behave. It could easily be some irate and aggressive person swearing at or threatening me.

What a relief when the young woman who stepped out was extraordinarily calm and kind. I apologized, and she was very gracious. We exchanged insurance information, called the police, and then chatted while we waited for them to come. It turned out she works for a local faith-based, non-profit organization helping people who are food or housing insecure. I told her I am a pastor at a local church. Soon, we were talking about the challenges of trying to help folks and how much the need has increased in the area. We quickly found we had a lot in common.

Ironically, while we were standing there, this lovely young black woman and middle-aged white pastor with peacenik bumper stickers on her car, a man rolled up in a pick up truck. Again, I felt a swell of anxiety. He was unshaven and seemed a little rough around the edges. The pick up was pretty beat up, too. He leaned out of his window and said something we couldn't hear. When he realized we hadn't heard him, he started getting out of the truck saying, "Is it something I can help with? I could change a flat for you if that's what you need". And there I stood, twice convicted. Two times in less than an hour, I went into an encounter with another person anticipating the worst and then was blessed by their simple kindness.

We are just over four weeks from the election. Anxiety is rising as we consider what may happen before and after November 5th. Here at FUMC, we just finished a sermon series looking at white Christian nationalism and how its practices and ideology conflict with the teachings of Jesus. We've become aware of the growing threat to both democracy and Christianity as those practices and ideas become more mainstream.

But, what do we do with that awareness? It is one thing to point fingers and say what "they" are doing is bad. It's another to ask "what am I going to do about it?" So, that is what our new sermon series is about. I hope that through this series, you will feel like you have some Christian ways to respond to the rancor in our world with kindness, humility, respect, and love.

This series has grown out of a movement that started at Resurrection, a United Methodist Church in Kansas City. Four years ago, their pastor, Adam Hamilton, started a campaign for kindness. Basically, in the midst of all of the hostility of the last presidential election season, he began encouraging his congregation to embody the scripture passage Micah 6:8, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God". The campaign caught on. People in his congregation were grateful to have something to unite them across their differences and to be challenged to embody the Christian witness. So, two years later, at the time of the midterm elections, he did something similar but also encouraged other United

Methodist churches to join in. This election, churches across the country are participating in the campaign for kindness with the theme of “do unto others”, and I decided we would join in because the more churches are involved, the stronger our witness is to what Christians really believe.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is something many of us have heard since childhood. Commonly called the Golden Rule, this idea exists in many different religions around the world. Yet, when we set aside its familiarity and really consider what it says, this is one of the most challenging of Jesus’ teachings. First of all, it’s difficult because it requires us to be deliberate, to stop our impulse to lash out or to objectify the other person, and consider how we would want to be treated or spoken to.

What makes it all the more challenging is that Jesus puts this in the context of our enemies. The people we fear, even hate. The ones who make our stomachs churn. Jesus points out that it’s easy to be good to your friends but your enemies? Yet, his instructions are clear. Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.

There are three things that stand out to me in those words when I consider where we are in our country right now. First of all, when Jesus says love your enemies, what does love mean? There are at least six different words in the Bible that we translate as love. Each has a different shade of meaning. In this case, the word Jesus uses is *agape*. *Agape* isn’t about sexual or romantic love or even familial or friendship love. C.S. Lewis defines *agape* as “a selfless love that is passionately committed to the well-being of others”. And *agape* is more about what you do than what you feel. So, Jesus is telling us to behave toward everyone - particularly our enemies - with loving kindness that will “create justice, kindness, mercy, and harmony for all of creation”. *Agape* love asks us to look beyond the particular disagreements and ideologies which separate us to work together to make the world a better place.

I’ll be honest and say that when I first saw the logo for the campaign for kindness - the heart with the blue and red sections brought together to create purple, I had mixed feelings about it. It seemed too simplistic, too idealistic, given the degree of division in our country. Then, I read Marcia McFee’s interpretation of that purple space. She refers to it as the “purple space of common good” and writes, “Our world seems to be consumed with division—often typified in the colors red and blue. Rather than stay in our monochromatic silos, the Golden Rule in scripture challenges us to engage in conversation and seek to create whatever common good we can with our relatives, friends, and neighbors who we might consider to be on the “other side” politically and ideologically”. She goes on to say that the purple space is where we come together to cultivate kindness, compassion, humility, respect, and love for one another and for the good of all the world, no matter what”.

The purple space is *agape* space and *agape* is our calling. As Christ-followers, our work is to grow the kin-dom of God. The kin-dom of God where all of humanity is in right relationship with God and with each other. Where goodness prevails and the common good is our shared goal and responsibility.

The only way I know for us to do that work is to be people who pour goodness out into the world. And that is the next thing Jesus says, “love your enemies and do good”. *Agape* love is active love. There are people whose extreme views and behaviors may leave you feeling helpless

or hopeless. Rather than give up or disconnect, *agape* love calls us to do something - do something good.

Adam Hamilton writes, “what if we all made a commitment to daily kindness? What if you wake up each morning and say to God ‘today I am intentionally going to do something that is kind.’” Your act of kindness might be for someone with whom you disagree or it might be assuming the best rather than the worst of people or it may just be a random bit of good juju you put into the world.

For inspiration, we put this list of 30 acts of kindness in the bulletin today. They are simple things that you can do easily. If you do one each day, you’ll finish the list right in time for election day. Of course, you can come up with your own list, too. Will they change the world? Will they diffuse the intensity of our political divisiveness? Individually, no - though even one act of kindness can bring joy to someone who is depressed, give hope to someone who is despairing, redirect anger into reconciliation.

But it is the accumulative effect of Christ-followers all over the country doing good that could change the mood in our country and be a witness to who Christians really are. Kindness spreads. Goodness is catchy. Plus, kindness is good for you. Research has shown that people who intentionally practice kindness are healthier, happier, less stressed, and more satisfied with their lives.

There is one more part to what Jesus says about loving our enemies. Do it without expecting anything in return. Your motivation to be kind may be that it makes you feel good. Hopefully, it is also that you are contributing to good in the world. But, it will be tainted if you expect something in return.

I’ve had so many conversations in recent years about “those people”, the ones on the other side in which we say things like “they don’t want to find common ground”, “they won’t have a civilized conversation”, “they don’t listen”. “Why should I try to be kind? They aren’t going to.” And in some cases, those statements are true. There are definitely people out there in our country who don’t want to seek the common good, who make no effort to be kind, who actively seek opportunities to be bullies. There are people who are closed-minded, who live lives fueled by hate and fear. Yet, we can’t base how we choose to behave on what they do. Our motivation for kindness can’t be that we expect kindness in return. We are kind because kindness builds up the kin-dom of God. We are kind because we want a kinder world. We are kind because kindness heals, restores, strengthens, connects.

And while there are some people who will never respond to kindness, there are some who will. And there are some who may not share our politics but who are willing to meet us in the purple space, the space of common good. And there are some who just need to see the human face of their enemy and be reminded that we are all children of God.

May it be so. Amen.