

Try A Little Kindness
(Second in the series: Building Great Relationships)

Text: Colossians 3:1-4, 12-14

5/23/10

I

Love is kind. Could anything be much more obvious? Some years ago Robert Fulgham wrote a bestseller called *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. In it he celebrated some obvious truths about living a good life that were found not at the top of the graduate school mountain but in the sandpile at Sunday school. Among them were:

Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. When you go out in the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

In other words if you want to have great relationships, be nice!

Some folks believe that churches exist to help people “be nice”. There’s no shortage of people who drop their kids off for church – but feel no need to come themselves – because they’ve already had our short course in moral improvement. They just want to sure the next generation has the same opportunity.

Well they could be right, if all there is to practicing kindness toward other people is a little instruction.

Is that all there is? Some people see practicing kindness a little like applying wood veneer. In this age of pressed wood and particle board veneer is big business. It’s how we give beauty to materials that aren’t so beautiful. Just overlay the particle board with a thin layer of cherry or oak and it looks like the whole table is solid hardwood.

The problem with veneer is that it chips when it takes a serious blow, and you’re left looking at what’s really underneath. Which is what also happens when kindness – active goodness toward others – is a thin veneer applied to the surface of our lives. It doesn’t tend to hold up to the scratches and dents that come with relationships. And what’s revealed can be less than attractive.

II

Last week we said that one of the secrets to great relationships is realizing that “Love is patient...” But we have to know it is the truth about God before it can ever become the truth about us. And that holds for those of us who want to know what it means that “love is kind”.

Paul wants the Colossian Christians to dress themselves in a relational wardrobe:
...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.
Be nice!

But behind that is the discovery that kindness –practicing active goodness toward people - is the story of how God love us. God’s kindness is his desire to do good to us. The Bible celebrates God’s goodness to us in the creation of the world. God was kind in delivering his people Israel from slavery in Egypt and in giving them a Law to guide their lives. But Paul has discovered the supreme kindness of God is what he did in his Son Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians 2:7 we read that God raised us up with Christ and joined us to him:

...in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

The supreme act of God’s kindness toward us is the life, death, resurrection of Jesus on our behalf. It is that act, through no merit of our own, which forgives our sins and sets us by faith in relationship with God forever.

Do we believe in the kindness of God? Do we believe that God chose us before we chose him, and showed us the mercy we needed even before we wanted it? Do we believe in a God who is active goodness in the world? Or are more convinced of the indifference of God, wrath of God, or absence of God? Is Jesus Christ our story of amazing grace? Or is Jesus simply the way we teach our children to “be nice”?

It makes a huge difference what we believe at this point. Is Jesus Christ how God loves us to the core of our imperfect souls; or how he applies moral veneer to the surface of our lives? The kindness we show will be determined by the kindness we believe we have received.

III

That's the truth Paul brings to the church in Colosse. First he reminds them of the love they have received: *Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved...* And then he tells them the kind of life they were created to live: *clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility gentleness and patience.*

The Christian faith was never intended to be technique for laying down moral veneer on particle board lives. It is the way men and women are transformed into moral and spiritual hardwoods; as authentic at the center as they are at the surface. People whose kindness doesn't peel away when they are scratched and dinged by the unkindness that is so often a part of life.

The kindness of God toward us makes possible a different depth of kindness in our relationships with each other. On this Pentecost Sunday, when we celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we should remember that a Christ-like life is not the product of heroic effort. It is first the gift of God. Paul writes in Galatians 5:22:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

You don't get make fruit; you only get to pick what's already hanging on the tree. And that's not far from the truth of what it means to practice kindness of God in our lives toward other people.

But there's one more thing here we shouldn't miss. Kindness is not meant to be a virtue for you, and you, and you. It's meant to be the truth about us. God doesn't desire a random assortment of kind individuals. It is the work of the Spirit to create a community – a church – that manifests the kindness of God.

We need to be part of the kind community of God's people – partly because living a life marked by godly kindness isn't easy. Our kindness will not always be met with the kindness other people any more than the kindness of Jesus was. And we will be tempted to put it on the shelf without one another's encouragement to keep at loving as God loves.

The community that practices kindness – act of goodness toward each other – is also meant to be demonstration of the kind of world God intends. Kindness evangelizes in a world that is marked by coarseness, indifference, and outright cruelty between people.

Kindness is the alternative of people who are controlled by the Spirit of God and not the unholy spirits that are alive and well in the world.

IV

So let's try a little kindness. What would it look like if God's kindness in Christ was controlling the character of our relationships?

First wouldn't it begin with a question and not an answer? *"What good does God want done in this relationship, in this situation?"*

Some years ago I got to know the Christian writer Charlie Shedd, before he passed away. It was his kindness I remember. You might have gone to meet him, but by the end of the evening you were sure he came to meet you. His engagement was so authentic, his warmth so genuine, you wanted to tell where you'd been in this life and where you were going.

Years ago Mother Teresa wrote:

"Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile."

God loves us. Would anybody know that if they spent time with us?

But sometimes the good God wants done in our relationships is more costly. Jesus didn't just come to smile at people; the kindness of God meant he had to die for them. Sometimes kindness means we will sacrifice.

It may mean befriending the kid in the school everyone else has chosen to pick on. It may mean walking with someone through their personal problems, or confronting their substance abuse, or enduring the wreckage of their bad decisions.

And hardest of all it may mean being kind to someone who you know is unlikely to return the favor. Their response is likely to punch a hole right through any veneer of goodness. Only the hardwood of kindness that is the work of the Spirit in our lives will stand the test.

V

I know you've seen the bumper sticker:

“Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty.”

It's got that warm and fuzzy quality that it seems only a Scrooge could find fault with. What's not to like about someone running around tossing daisies to the crowds? But we can do better.

Practice pre-meditated acts of kindness. Kindness that happens not because we don't know people but because we do. Kindness that is the fruit asking “What good would God have done in this relationship?” And kindness that does not depend on what we might receive in return.