The Fruit of the Spirit is… Kindness and Goodness

Galatians 6:7-10 Luke 6:27-35

The next two fruit of the Spirit are kindness and goodness and we're taking them together this morning. They overlap quite a bit and we'll hear both words & concepts in this teaching from Jesus in Luke, just as we heard in Galatians:

Luke 6:27–36

27 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to
those who hate you, [28]bless those who curse you, pray for those
who abuse you. [29]If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the
other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not
withhold even your shirt. [30]Give to everyone who begs from you;
and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them
again. [31]Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For
even sinners love those who love them. [33]If you do good to those
who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners
do the same. [34]If you lend to those from whom you hope to
receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners,
to receive as much again. [35]But love your enemies, do good, and
lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and
you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the
ungrateful and the wicked. [36]Be merciful, just as your Father is
merciful.

This is the word of the Lord.

There has been a lot of talk about *kindness* these past few years, about being kind and expressing kindness—and for good reason. We see it on signs, billboards, bumper stickers on cars. Be kind, commit random acts of kindness,

and all that. We even have a coffee mug at home with a picture of a bee on it, and below the bee is says "kind." Get it? Bee kind!

On the surface, kindness and goodness seem simple and straightforward. Maybe even boring. In some peoples' minds, they are actually considered weak—because… we're supposed to be tough. People who are kind and good are "snowflakes." Considered as weak.

But the Bible is clear, and Jesus is clear: Be kind. Do good. And it's clear that kindness and goodness aren't boring. And, they aren't weak. Kindness and goodness actually require great strength. Because…

The biblical word for "kindness," for starters (*chrestos* in Greek), is defined as "love toward those who are unkind." Love toward those who are unkind. Or, as we heard in our reading: love shown to enemies, to the ungrateful. Jesus says that God is kind, even to the wicked! And to that I say, "Good for you, God. You go for it!" But then I re-read this teaching, and take it in, and realize that Jesus says that he wants us to be kind in the same way, and do good to difficult people in the same way.

Given this teaching, and others like it, we might say that kindness and goodness are expressions of love toward those who don't deserve it—or at least *we believe* they don't deserve it.

Kindness toward those who *deserve* it, or whom we already love, Jesus says, is not really kindness—that's basic human instincts at work: we naturally love our family (the ones we get along with, at least), we naturally love our friends, we naturally love those who are good to us. And as we heard in our reading from Luke, Jesus said that if we love those who love us, or do good to those who are good to us, what's the big deal about that? That's easy, and everyone does that.

Kindness, rather—a God-like kindness—is love expressed toward those who don't deserve it; **yet**, *who need it*. That's what kindness is: love expressed toward those who don't deserve it, but who need it. The apostle Paul says this in Romans 2:4: *it's the kindness of God that leads to people repentance*. It's the *kindness of God* that leads people to repentance. Not, it's guilt-tripping from God that leads people to repentance. But kindness. Which means, kindness isn't showed exclusively to people who deserve it, but to those who need it. Even our commonly used phrase "kill them with kindness" assumes that the person we're extending kindness to is someone we'd like to, well, kill. We're just doing it with kindness. Which is ironic.

Parenthetically, kindness, as it appears in the Bible, almost always follows patience. It follows patience in the fruit of the Spirit list, and it follows patience in

the list of the attributes of love in 1Cor.13: love is patient, love is… kind. And in 2Tim 2:24 where Paul is discussing leadership in Christ's church, he says: "a leader must not be quarrelsome, but patient, and kind to *everyone*." Which is why one commentator defined chrestos (kindness) as, "the ability to act for the welfare of those who are taxing your patience." The ability to act for the welfare of those who are taxing your patience. That's pretty good.

So, there is something about kindness that flows from patience—when we can slow ourselves down, and take time to think clearly and not just react (that is, when we can be "long-tempered" and exercise patience), we will be more apt to act with kindness toward people who we have a difficult time loving.

Given this understanding of kindness then, as love expressed to the undeserving or those who are difficult for us to love… as a fruit of the Spirit, kindness is something we will need to pray for help with, because it is something that <u>probably doesn't come naturally to us</u>. Therefore, it *must* be a *fruit of the Spirit* in our lives that grows and ripens over time, and not just something we try to muster up enough willpower to do because we're supposed to. We simply can't muster up that kind of strength on our own. We need to pray for it, remembering that everything that Jesus *teaches* us to do, he also *supplies the strength to carry out*. What he's asking us to do in loving enemies isn't easy to do.

At least not right away. But it's something that, as we walk with Jesus and learn from Jesus, and as we practice it, kindness becomes a bit more reflexive over time because of the Spirit of God at work in us, growing us, and building our reservoir of inner goodness.

There is a wonderful book titled, *The War for Kindness*. It's kind of ironic that the author uses the word "War" in a book about kindness, but I'm sure his publisher wanted this excellent book to grab our attention. Mission accomplished! The title also suggests that we're in a battle for the soul of our society. What sets this book apart from other books that encourage kindness as simply a moral or spiritual imperative, is that the author, Jamil Zaki, has research and scientific data that prove that kindness and goodness can rewire peoples' brains, and that empathy can be learned, and that kindness can change the culture of organizations and communities.

He tells stories of people fighting for kindness in the most difficult of circumstances. For example, a former neo-Nazi now working to extract people from hate groups. Former inmates discussing novels with the judge who sentenced them. Washington State police officers changing their culture to decrease violence among their ranks. And hospital nurses working together to

find ways to increase empathy, not just with patients and families but with the corps of nurses, so they don't burn out.

And it won't surprise us to learn that this effort to build kindness and goodness and empathy into lives and systems comes from spiritual and religious principles. We heard it in our readings this morning from Galatians and from Luke. And just about every major religion in the world has kindness as a foundational practice. Remember what the Dalai Lama said, "Kindness *is* my religion." And for many in our society, kindness is their religion too. We just need more people to be religious in this way to create positive momentum and change.

A Catholic priest whose spiritual reflections have blessed me, in telling the story of his childhood years, said: "When I was growing up as a Catholic boy in Kansas, we viewed all Protestants as heretics who were going to hell. But then I met a few nice Methodists, and I found out they thought I was going to hell too! It's just laughable. We became friends, learned from each other, and helped each other change and grow."

And that's what kindness will do: help people change and grow. Remember, again, it's the kindness of God that leads to repentance. Not *the judgment of God* leads to repentance, or *the punishment of God* leads to repentance, or *a lecture from God* leads to repentance. But the *kindness* of God.

Kindness changes people. So, we don't *kill* people with kindness, we *bless* them with kindness. We honor them, we offer them the possibility of being changed and transformed, just like we—hopefully—have been changed and transformed by kindness. Jesus says (in a fairly startling statement if you think about it), God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, and somehow (with God's help) we are to learn to imitate that behavior. Because that's how people can be changed.

Again, Jesus teaches us to show kindness to the ungrateful and the wicked, not because he approves of their behavior and wants us to. But because it provides an opportunity for them to experience God's love, just like we have experienced his love, and for them to be changed as we have been changed by God's love. It reveals God the Father's heart and becomes a witness, whether or not someone responds positively to it. How others respond is not our main concern; we don't control outcomes. Our goal is to be kind and gracious and loving, with God's help, and let God settle the outcome and do the transforming work. But it's really the only way to provide the opportunity for someone to be changed. And, to make the world a better place.

When we talk about loving enemies and doing good to those who don't deserve it, the question will inevitably arise: Who is my enemy? Good question! It seems pretty clear from the Scripture that when Jesus talks about loving an

enemy and showing kindness to the difficult ones in our lives, he assumes it's someone we have human contact with, or have the ability to have contact with. Yes, there are enemies of *the state* around the world. Perhaps you feel like a certain elected politician is an enemy. But for the sake of initiating kindness, and doing it to someone who tests our patience, we're talking about someone we have contact with, or have the *ability* to have contact with.

And it needs to be said that sometimes, someone we *think* is an enemy isn't really an enemy at all. Our imaginations make them into an enemy because we make all kinds of assumptions without interacting with them, and we tell ourselves stories about them that creates an adversarial mindset. And that's another reason why initiating kindness is so important, and not labelling people. Because when we can take the time to interact with someone who taxes our patience, we might discover that they aren't as horrible as we thought they were. Or, maybe they are that horrible ☺. Love them anyway! Do good; be kind.

This is why, as the apostle Paul says in the reading from Galatians, let us not grow weary in doing what is right; and as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all." Because we never know how one small act of kindness can change someone.

In the weeks leading up to the midterm elections, I heard stories about conversations people were having with those of different political affiliation, and they found that they have a lot in common! Whether it's a hot ticket item like the war in Iran, or issues they are facing in their lives like health concerns, or just telling stories about their kids and grandkids. Sometimes kindness and goodness begin when people find common ground, and common concerns, and discover ways that they are more alike than unalike.

So the first question to ask a person when meeting them should not be, "Who did you vote for?" but "Tell me your story." Which isn't a question, but, you get the idea

One of my takes on the midterm results is that it revealed that people are hungry for goodness and kindness. They're tired of meanness and division and vanity and greed.

And, one of the things that's being talked about after the election is that so many of the people who were elected to office are good human beings, from a variety of walks of life: former teachers, doctors, social workers, former firefighters, and military veterans. And… 5 pastors! One of them Presbyterian, Rev. Lindsay James in Iowa. And a Lutheran pastor, Rev. Sarah Garriott, also in

Iowa. Something's brewing in Iowa.... Along with a Methodist pastor and two African American pastors.

So, there is a hunger for goodness and kindness and a desire for wellbeing in our communities. That's abundantly clear.

Here is a lovely piece, not about loving enemies, but how an encounter with another person brought a change of mind and heart. This is written by a younger woman writing an editorial piece, and she talks about going for a walk during a time when she was despairing about the state of the world. She sits down on a park bench and an older man sits down, and they begin to talk. Here is what she says about that encounter.

"Sometimes I just want it to stop. The talk of corruption, war, protests, brutality. I lose my way. I become convinced that this "new normal" is real life. Then I meet an 87-year-old who talks of living through a world war, depression, polio, Vietnam protests and yet is still enchanted with life. He seemed surprised when I said that this must be an especially challenging time for him. "No," he said slowly, "I learned a long time ago to not see the world through the headlines; I see the world through the people that surround me. I see the world with the realization that there is good in the world still. Therefore, I just choose to write my own headlines: "Husband loves wife today…" "Family drops everything to

come to Grandma's bedside." He looked at me and patted my hand… "Old man makes new friend."

His words collide with my worries, freeing them from the tether I had been holding tight. They float away. I am left with a renewed spirit. *My* headline now reads, "Young woman overwhelmed by the spirit of kindness and the reminder that our capacity to love is never-ending."

Isn't that beautiful? So, here is something you can do each day: write your own headlines. Perhaps at the end of each day we can sift through our experiences and encounters of the day and find the good and make that our headline. And find the times and places where *we* chose to express kindness in our day-to-day interactions.

Over the last few years, the concluding lines of Psalm 27 keep coming to mind, for both Heidi and me: "*I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord, be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!*"

The Gift of Love (based on 1Cor.13)