

“Empowered: Kindness Matters”

June 20, 2021

Summer series – Fruit of the Spirit

This week, someone gave me an article from a local paper with the headline: *Grads told to choose kindness*. It was an article about Fruitport’s commencement exercises, and both the student speaker and principal offered that call to “choose kindness.” It’s not a new suggestion, but it seems that we need to hear it over and over again. Kindness matters.

We talk about kindness early, and if you ask kids to tell you about kindness, they might talk about doing something that others want to do even when they don’t want to, or talking to a friend who’s sad, or making a card for a loved one. In a video, one young girl said that kindness was about an attitude, too - not being hard on someone or harsh with someone. She’s onto something.

Kindness falls right in the middle of the fruit of the Spirit. We’ve covered agape love that sacrifices for others. We spent some time on joy - not happiness, but a deep-down sense of God’s presence not based on our circumstances, but based on God’s presence with us. Peace that comes from God as we trust in God, when we pray, and when we seek justice in the world.

Last week, we took on patience - being long-tempered and bearing with each other - and remembering God’s patience with us. As we focus on each fruit, we notice that each one is tied first to God’s nature - who God is and what God is like. And it’s certainly true with kindness.

SHOW SLIDE: Greek word for KINDNESS – CHRESTOTES - **χρηστότης**

The word *chrestotes* means goodness, excellence, tenderness and uprightness. Some say it’s a sense of sympathy that goes beyond feeling and really seeks to help. Others describe kindness as an unselfish attitude of respect, tenderness, and concern expressed in concrete acts of service and compassion. Being kind and doing kindness - they go together.

But one note about kindness here is really notable: kindness is a quality that makes others feel at ease with us. I hope you can think of someone who offers that to you. That’s not what comes to my mind first when I think of kindness. I think of doing something nice for someone - an act of kindness, but kindness has to do with another’s comfort and ease in our presence. It’s more of a quality connected to who we are and how we are rather than simple what we do.

And it makes sense when we think about how unkindness makes us feel. We don’t want to be around people who are unkind, but we gravitate to those who show

true kindness because we feel comfort and ease. And it seems to be a reflection of how we feel in God's presence - finding comfort and ease in God's kindness. Kindness matters because we reflect what God is like to others. It's essential if we want to follow Christ.

As we move ahead through the fruit of the Spirit, I find myself more and more challenged. I'm guilty of reading from Galatians 5, then sitting back and thinking to myself, "what a great list!" without realizing the depth of each part of the fruit of the Spirit. It just gets tougher and tougher as we study more deeply, but there's also a clear call to allow the Holy Spirit to cultivate this fruit in us. As we think about each characteristic on the list, we know we need it!

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks similar words to what Matthew records in the Sermon on the Mount. These are some of the toughest words of Jesus because he addresses what we'd rather ignore. These are expectations for how we should get along with others. Jesus is clear that love is not a feeling, but a way of life that shows in how we treat others, whether friend or not. Love shows in our deeds, our words, and our prayers.

To live by these Kingdom rules takes nothing less than turning away from our very human desires. We're good at "If you're good to me, I'll be good to you." And the opposite is true: "If you're not good to me, I'll do the same to you." Retaliation and revenge: it feels good to get back at someone, to get even, to make them pay.

If we seek to live in the Kingdom of God, if we live by the Spirit, then we have to get past thinking that relationships are a simple transaction. Relationships are about transformation. Relationships are not transactional, but transformational. Those who follow Jesus must show clearly to whom we belong without restrictions - without limitations. It's easy to be just when it comes to those we get along with - to those who treat us well - but what about those who don't? What do we do?

Jesus' words here are some of the most admired and most resented words of Scripture. We love them, but we don't like because it's so hard. This is not simply a call to passive resistance, but instead a call to finding strength in self-control. Jesus doesn't say that injustice is okay (because it's not okay) or that it should stand (because it shouldn't stand), but he says that we have to renounce revenge.

I don't believe that Jesus calls anyone at any time to suffer abuse at the hands of another. He's calling us to show God's love in how we love, and he uses examples that folks would understand. It's when we show kindness as God does that we are called children of the Most High.

In Jesus' day, a backhanded blow was a serious insult. So to offer the other cheek (to turn the other cheek) would put you in control and show resistance with self-

respect. To offer your cloak if someone sued you for your tunic would mean that you were offering everything - potentially standing naked in front of others and showing them that you had suffered an injustice. To give to one who asks and lend to those who want to borrow from you - to give until there was nothing left to give - was a way to resist injustice with self-respect. It's a powerful concept when Jesus offers it - not weakness at all.

Jesus pushes love into another arena - love for our enemies and going beyond what's expected. When we talk about kindness this way, we see the cost. Love requires something of us. We see the demand. We see that it interferes with life - messy and difficult sometimes. All of it based on God's kindness and caring.

And just like God's patience is a gift to us, so is God's kindness. This is about how God works so that we can repent and turn back to God. **SHOW SLIDE:** Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? *Romans 2: 4*

I remember receiving this rock when I went to worship in Bergland, Michigan - way up at the west end of the U.P. - many years ago. I don't remember the purpose of the rock given out in worship. But I've kept it in my office since then, and the message on it is faded, but not less powerful: "Kindness begins with me." Now I know that kindness begins with God and continues through you and me, but the saying is true - that you and I are called to show God's loving-kindness just as we've received it.

Kindness matters. Kindness is about love, loyalty, and faithfulness. Consider how much God loves the world- enough to send Jesus to show us ultimate love and sacrifice. God's love is timeless and unconditional. Think about a close relationship that really matters to us, and how we receive and show kindness to another person. We show true kindness out of love, not out of duty or fear. We're called to be kind to others as God is kind to us.

When we read Paul's letter to the Galatians, we're reading someone else's mail. We're in on a conversation between Paul and the Christians in Galatia. There are troubled times - dissension in community over what salvation means, what faith in Jesus looks like, and disunity in the Body of Christ. That's why he writes and tells them to keep in step with the Spirit.

Again, as we read the list of the works of the flesh and then the fruit of the Spirit, we know that we can just as easily be caught in those places where we're disconnected from God and each other (anger, envy). We're focused on our own desires rather than allowing God to transform us by grace, walking in faith, and letting the Holy Spirit guide us and change us.

In a different letter, Paul uses another image to encourage Christ followers to reflect God's love to the world. **SHOW SLIDE:** As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Colossians 3: 12

We're empowered by the Holy Spirit to be kind - to make others feel comfort in your presence. How can we make others feel more comfortable in our presence - as a reflection of God's kindness? Where can you make the first move to show kindness? Who comes to mind when you think of someone who needs to feel comfort and ease? Who has been that person for you?

I was thinking of all the people who have offered that me - especially in the church. That's happened over many years, but it was so important when I was a child in the church. I don't know how different my experience would've been without those who showed God's kindness to me. I think about that as we offer Vacation Bible School this week - that we show God's kindness to every child and family.

What a blessing it is to know that God is kind - that we find comfort in God's presence. And what a gift we can share - to receive God's loving-kindness and to be empowered to reflect it.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.