

Rev. Nicole Reilley, SMUMC

February 24, 2008

Your Kindness Quotient
A Love Worth Giving – Week 3

Video Introduction: *What is Love?*

Today we continue our message series on love. We are taking 1 Corinthians 13 as our jumping off text, and today we are focusing on the place of kindness in love. Let me start with reading 1 Cor. 13:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends.

Let us join in prayer:

Kindness. So important, so central, yet how often is it part of our relationships with one another? When I was working on my message, gathering illustrations, the first one that jumped into my mind was a fairly bad one—it was a time when kindness was missing and, in fact, got someone into some trouble.

It was years ago. I was at Annual Conference, which is the yearly meeting of clergy and representatives from all the local UM churches. We had just finished worship, and I was in a very long line to use the restroom. Quite a distance in front of me was a group discussing the sermon. They complained about the preaching as if the sermon was a product, and they had found it lacking and wanted to send it back. The comments were loud and the group was having a good time picking out what was wrong. I noticed that the line was suddenly quiet as a woman stood at the sink washing her hands. It seems she was the preacher's wife and had heard it all. I have never forgotten that moment. I think I will remember it as long as I live.

Kindness matters. All of us need kindness, and when we experience it, it gives us a different way of seeing and understanding life. Watch this clip from "Bella (A Beautiful Day)".

Bella received a kindness from that man. Here he was, seeming as if he would have little to give, but his kindness gave her an appreciation of her world that, without his kindness, she would not have experienced. Maybe that is a central piece of kindness: it helps us experience the world differently, more fully, more richly.

I am sure most of you have heard the phrase, *random acts of kindness*. It comes from a movement that has been around for a long time, a movement that encourages people to act in kind ways to strangers.

You may have experienced this. You went to a toll booth and the person before you paid for your toll, or someone paid your order at Starbucks. These little acts can set in motion a wave of care that reaches people far removed from where they began.

I have a friend who tells a story of how she had her toll paid one morning on her way into school. It touched her so much she looked for ways to share the kindness throughout her day. She bought donuts for the office. She smiled at those she walked by in the parking lot. And then, at the end of her day, as she was standing in line at the grocery store, she noticed a woman with a toddler who wasn't doing very well. So she asked if the woman wanted to go first.

The response to this simple gesture was surprising, the woman looked at her and burst out in tears. She shared how they had moved to the area a year ago but never felt they had fit in. Just that morning, the woman explained she and her husband prayed that God would send them a sign if it was time to leave and give up, returning home. The move would be hard, they wouldn't have a job, but they wondered how long they could hang on in place where no one noticed them. She finished by saying that my friend's act of kindness had let her know that they have to stay and that things will turn around.

Here is one writer's reflection on the importance of a kindness movement:

"Random acts of kindness are a wonderful way to reach across time and space to touch the life of another being. Publicizing and raising awareness of the significance of human kindness undoubtedly makes the world a better place. At every step along the path of expanding awareness there is the opportunity to go deeper; to explore more of the potential of our divine humanness. So it is with kindness. Acts of kindness are really not difficult. An intention is formed, and you carry it out. It makes you feel good. Holding kindness and compassion in our hearts, and integrating them into the complexity and stresses of daily life, every day -- now there is a deep challenge!

"Allowing a spirit of kindness to permeate our collective lives would be a quantum leap, from an evolutionary standpoint. Eliminating meanness, pettiness, gossip, criticism, judgment, polarity, and blame would be a superb act of kindness. It is also a fundamental step along any spiritual path. Those negative qualities reflect a very dense, heavy energy, vested solidly in ego, and they block the light of the spirit. Random acts of kindness amidst the darker energies are certainly a positive start. We can do more. Much more. We can resolve to be kinder, gentler beings. All day, every day. We can treat those closest to us with the same respect and politeness that we reserve for friends and colleagues. We can refuse

to litter the lives of others with negative energy. If we do this, we will be doing our part to create a world in which kindness is never a random act, but rather a way of life.” (Gwen Randall-Young)

Our model for kindness comes from Jesus. The way he lived his life clearly shows that kindness motivated him and flowed through him. We often think of Jesus’ power or passion or devotion. “But those near him knew and know God comes cloaked in kindness.”

Jesus’ kindness speaks to our hearts and calls us to kindness. Hear his words from Luke 6:27-36 (The Message version).

"But if you are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Pray for the happiness of those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn the other cheek. If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also. Give what you have to anyone who asks you for it; and when things are taken away from you, don't try to get them back. Do for others as you would like them to do for you.

"Do you think you deserve credit merely for loving those who love you? Even the sinners do that! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, is that so wonderful? Even sinners do that much! And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, what good is that? Even sinners will lend to their own kind for a full return.

"Love your enemies! Do good to them! Lend to them! And don't be concerned that they might not repay. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to the unthankful and to those who are wicked. You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate."

Our scripture is filled with references to God's kindness, both in the First Testament and in the New Testament. Hear these words:

"You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness." (Nehemiah 9:17)

"Your loving kindness is better than life." (Psalm 63:3)

And from Titus 3:3-7:

"For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But then God our Savior showed us his kindness and love. He saved us, not because of the good things we did, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins and gave us a new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us because of what Jesus Christ our Savior did. He declared us not guilty because of his great kindness. And now we know that we will inherit eternal life."

But here is an important piece: I understand that, when we speak of God's 'kindness', it conveys more than what we commonly understand it to mean. *Kindness*, as we use the word, refers to an act of grace, that is, God's unmerited love for us. God's kindness to us isn't based on who we are, but on who God is.

But from a biblical perspective, kindness also refers to a deed or person who is 'useful, serviceable, adapted to its purpose' (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*). What that means is that kindness was "even employed to describe food that was tasty as well as healthy (so we might say 'Hey, honey, what a great meal. The salad was especially *kind* tonight.')." "

What??? Well, think of it this way. Kindness isn't just good and pleasant; it is also good for us and practical. This is an example: "Kindness not only says good morning, kindness makes the coffee," to put it in practical terms. And, as someone whose husband brings her a cup of coffee in bed every morning, I would have to say I agree.

This is how Jesus acts. He not only goes to the wedding, he saves it. He just doesn't say hello to Zacchaeus, he goes to his home. Jesus not only heals, he lifts people up and gives them back their self-esteem.

And this is how God in Christ is with us. He doesn't just meet us; he comes in and speaks to us, letting us know we are loved. He comes to our homes. He listens to our stories. He lifts us up with good things.

We all need to experience this. We all need to know that God's loving kindness is showered upon us. And when we do know this, know this for ourselves, we can easily and often be kind to others.

Again, we are learning (as we have learned these last three weeks) that we must receive before we can give. We have to acknowledge the kindness God has given us, and when we come face to face with the truth of God's kindness toward us we can be kind toward others.

Now I know sometimes being kind is viewed as being weak and wimpy. But Jesus thinks differently and wants to get our priorities straight. He says, "Go and learn what this means, I want kindness more than I want animal sacrifices." (Matthew 9:13)

God calls us to receive kindness at his hand and to be people who act kindly to others. Leo Buscaglia wrote: "Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around." Or to put in more bluntly, "any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain, and most fools do." (Benjamin Franklin)

Let me tell you a story I read. A woman wrote, explaining a lesson her family experienced. She wrote, "During one of our family Bible readings as new Christians, we ran across the verse, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him.' (Romans 12:20 RSV).

"Ours sons, seven and ten at the time, were especially puzzled. 'Why should you feed your enemy?' they wondered.

"My husband and I wondered too, but the only answer John could think of to give the boys was, 'We're supposed to because God says so.' It never occurred to us that we would soon learn why.

“Day after day, John Jr. came home from school complaining about a classmate who sat behind him in 5th grade. ‘Bob keeps jabbing me when Miss Smith isn’t looking. One of these days, when we’re out on the playground, I’m going to jab him back.’

“I was ready to go down to the school and jab Bob myself. I was still fuming over this injustice to John, Jr. when his seven-year-old brother spoke up: ‘Maybe he should feed his enemy.’ The 3 of us were startled.

“None of us was sure about this ‘enemy’ business. It didn’t seem that an enemy would be in the 5th grade. An enemy was someone who was way off... well, somewhere.

“‘Well,’ I asked John, Jr., ‘do you know what Bob likes to eat? If you’re going to feed him, you may as well get something he likes.’

“‘Jelly beans,’ he almost shouted. ‘Bob just loves jelly beans.’

“So we bought a bag of jellybeans for him to take to school the next day, and decided that the next time Bob jabbed John, Jr., John was simply to turn around and deposit the bag on his ‘enemy’s’ desk. We would see whether this enemy feeding worked.

“The next afternoon, the boys rushed home from the school bus and John, Jr. called ahead, ‘It worked, Mom! It worked.’

“I wanted the details: ‘What did Bob do? What did he say?’

“‘He was so surprised he didn’t say anything - he just took the jelly beans. But he didn’t jab me the rest of the day!’ In time, John, Jr. and Bob became the best of friends - all because of a little bag of Jelly Beans.”

Now, of course, it doesn’t always go that way, but you’d be surprised at how often it does. Kindness brings enemies together, offers undeserved grace to others, and shakes up the world because kindness is so unexpected.

May you know the kindness of God.

May you share kindness with others

And may it change the world.

I want to end with a text from Colossians 3:12-14:

“Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other’s faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony.”