

On Being Kind

Ephesians 4:30-5:2

A woman sued her husband for divorce. She told the judge she had nagged and nagged, but she couldn't get him to ever do things right, that is, her way.

The judge asked her if she had ever tried using kindness. Referring to the biblical passage, which says that when we show kindness to our enemy it is like heaping "burning coals on his head," he asked her if she had tried heaping coals on his head.

She answered, "No, but I don't think it will work. I already tried scalding water and that didn't do any good."

I'm not sure this woman understood the concept of showing kindness.

When I was a boy in Missouri in the US, I spent my fair share of time on a rock farm, that is, a farm that seemed to raise more rocks than anything else. A neighbor raised mules. Now there is a saying that goes, "As stubborn as a Missouri mule".

I remember him telling my dad that the trick to working with mules was you always had to treat them with kindness...sometimes you had to hit them over the head with a log to get their attention, but then you treated them with kindness.

Why is "kind" so hard? Why do we mistakenly see "kind" as the same as "weak" or "soft"? When did we forget that kindness can only come from strength?

The Bible teaches us in Proverbs that "a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1) That's a good lesson for anyone to learn. That will take you far in any area of your life.

In our lesson from Ephesians for today, Paul says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Let's talk for a few moments about kindness.

There are some people who are going to hear these words from the epistle about living a life of love and they are going to think to themselves, “What mush. That’s too soft, too effeminate. Don’t you know you have to be tough to survive in the real world? Kindness and compassion are for wimps, not for real life.”

Read the record and you will discover that Jesus was no wimp. Neither was Paul. These were men of courage. They knew how to stare both danger and death in the face. Yet they also knew that little is to be gained by escalating anger and malice into a more serious confrontation. They knew that it is far too easy to fall into a downward spiral of revenge and resentment.

The best way to defeat an enemy is to make them an ally. So, Jesus would teach in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for eye, and a tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

This is strategic kindness. It is not a justification for being a wimp. It is not a call to be soft. It is simply a recognition that violence breeds violence, whether it is physical or verbal. Hatred breeds hatred. We can turn a minor disagreement into a major conflict by the way we handle our anger.

I wish we could learn that in our world today. So many people are afraid of refugees or immigrants that they treat them with suspicion, contempt, fear and hatred. Really; what do you expect to be the result? Think about it...if, when YOU moved into a new country you were greeted ONLY with fear, loathing, contempt, how would YOU respond?

There is an East African saying that goes like this: “Me and Somalia against the world, me and my tribe against Somalia, me and my family against my tribe, me and my brother against my family, me against my brother.”

We can see this primitive ethic at work in many places in the world today, with tragic results. It is why we must be very careful how we respond to attacks on us, whether they are physical or verbal. Somebody has to break the cycle of violence and hatred. Someone has to be the adult in a world of children.

What is true of the world outside can be even more tragic within the family. As a pastor, you become aware of all the good and evil that happens in human life. In one congregation, a couple’s marriage was going through tumultuous times.

One night George passed a breaking point. He pounded the table and the floor. “I hate you!” he screamed at his wife. “I won’t take it anymore! I’ve had enough! I won’t go on. I won’t let it happen! No! No! No!”

Several months later George woke up in the middle of the night and heard strange sounds coming from the room where his two-year-old son slept. He padded down the hall, stood for a moment outside his son’s door, and shivers ran through his flesh. He could not draw a breath. In a soft voice, the two-year-old was repeating word for word with precise inflection the argument between his mother and father. “I hate you . . . I won’t take it anymore . . . No! No! No!”

George realized that in some awful way he had just bequeathed his pain and anger and unforgiveness to the next generation.

And so it is that we have children growing up filled with all kinds of rage, learned in the home. We have teenagers estranged from their parents, grown men and women estranged from their siblings, husbands and wives who once loved and supported one another torn by resentments that have built up over the years.

The most precious relationships we have can be destroyed if someone is not willing to play the adult and turn the other cheek.

Uncontrolled anger can destroy our relationships, but unresolved anger can also destroy us. That is critical, mark it down!

You’ve heard the term, “carrying a grudge”, right? So, just exactly who is doing the work?

Hatred and vindictiveness are likely to prove just as deadly to the person carrying them as they were supposed to be for their intended victim. That is why Paul writes, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you . . .”

Then Paul adds, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

What does he mean, “Be imitators of God . . . “? Just this. Think about it: All the anger and hatred of humanity were focused that day long ago when the innocent Son of God hung on Calvary’s tree.

What was God’s response--to wipe us off the globe? God could have done so and been totally justified. Instead God played the adult to humanity’s petulant child. God took that awful event and used it to save us from our sins. We hated, God loved. We struck out in blind fury; God responded with unconditional acceptance. We shut him out; God brought us in. If you want to imitate God, that is how it is done.

There are far too many people who cannot relate to Chris’ attitude, his willingness to forgive. But, in the long run of things, it is the only hope this world has:

We will never solve the problem of international terrorism with our bombs. We will never shout our way to nurturing family relationships within our homes.

We will never have peace in our own hearts until we understand the power of kindness--kindness that includes rather than excludes, kindness that welcomes instead of repulses, kindness that turns enemies into friends.

How does that happen? Jesus, of course, said it best: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

My guess is that right here in this church family there is some reconciling that needs to be done, some kindness shared.

For someone here, it is with an estranged brother or a sister. For someone else, it is about a barrier between a parent or a teenager. For yet another, it is a relationship with a colleague at work.

This is simple stuff...simple, but not easy: Unresolved anger and resentment destroys relationships. Unresolved anger and resentment can destroy our souls.

The solution? “Be imitators of God . . .” Lay down your anger here at the altar. Return love for hatred, kindness for hostility, acceptance for rejection. Be the adult to someone else’s child. Break the cycle. “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you . . .”

And, if you fail, no, WHEN you fail, try again. And again. And again. And again. Forgive, as you have been forgiven. Be strong. Be kind.