

Kindness

Mark 9:38-50

September 30, 2012

I am standing here in this pulpit today because of kindness.

Eighteen and a half years ago, Lynne and I boarded a plane in Portland, Maine and flew to Waterloo, Iowa after changing plans in Chicago. We were brought here to meet with members of the pastoral search committee of the First Congregational Church of Waterloo. Mike Heath was chair of that committee. Sharon Holdiman was a member and Chuck Dalton, Diane Morris and Jo Tefft, Keith Jorgensen and Marian Greene and Diane Highnam.

We were greeted at the airport and taken to the Starlight Hotel (now Bridges) where a room had been reserved for us. It was June when we came, if I remember rightly, but I can't remember if we stayed two nights or just the one night.

I was interviewed by the committee in the lounge downstairs, and I preached a trial sermon here in the sanctuary to just that small group of folks with maybe a few spouses in attendance as well.

Diane Morris and Keith Jorgensen took us on a tour of the city, of Waterloo and Cedar Falls. They took us to lunch at Pepper's Grill and to dinner at the Broom Factory.

And early the next morning we were taken back to the airport to begin our return trip to Maine. I am sorry that I don't recall now who it was who drove us to the airport, but I do remember that Keith Jorgensen and Diane Highnam came to the airport that morning to see us off. Neither of them was the designated chauffeur, but they came to see us off! They hardly knew us, they certainly didn't have to come, but they came that morning to greet us once more before we left.

And that's why I'm here, because I was so impressed, because we were so impressed, by that gesture of friendship, by that act of kindness.

That's kindness ... not just being nice, not just doing what is expected, but doing more than what is expected, going out of your way to be generous, offering a gift that costs you something. I don't know what else was on Keith and Diane's schedules for that day, but they voluntarily gave up some of their own valuable time to see off two virtual strangers.

That's kindness, another one of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. When the Spirit of God is at work among us, kindness is one of the signs.

So it must be that the Spirit of God is at work among you! Kindness is why I came here, and kindness is why I have stayed: the continuing kindness you have shown to me and to my family, and the kindness I have watched you show to each other.

But isn't that to be expected? Don't you expect people, especially church people, to be kind? Well, no, and that's the point. Kindness is not doing what is expected, but going beyond what is expected. Kindness is surprising generosity.

Thursday morning, Lois Johnson dropped by my office, to let me know she would not be here this Sunday -- she is going up to her cabin in Minnesota with her daughter -- and to bring me some lemon cake! She had been at some kind of function that morning and brought me some of the cake that had been left over, four pieces of moist lemon cake! Lois didn't have to do that. She didn't have to think of me, but she did. She knows I like lemon cake and when she saw it, she thought of me and brought me some.

It was a simple gesture, just a little thing, a simple act of kindness, a simple act like giving someone a drink of water. "I assure you," Jesus said to his disciples, "that anyone who gives you a drink of water because you belong to me will certainly receive a reward." Lois will surely receive her reward!

Kindness is not about doing what is expected, not about doing what comes naturally. Kindness is a fruit of the Spirit's work in us. Kindness is a sign of the presence of God's Spirit among us. And it is the presence of genuine kindness that will make other people want to come here and stay here. It is kindness -- not creative programs, not powerful preaching, not great music, not exemplary community involvement, not charismatic leadership -- but kindness that will impress people and will convince them there is something important going on here, something that must come from God himself.

And so Jesus urged his followers: "Have the salt of friendship among yourselves." At least that's what we think he said! The various sayings grouped at the end of the eighth chapter of Mark are particularly difficult to decipher, including this one. A literal translation of the saying is this: "Have salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other." What does that mean, "Have salt among yourselves?"

Salt, of course, was at that time a valuable commodity for preserving, purifying, and adding flavor to foods, especially to meat. Salt is what makes it good and keeps it good, so Jesus seems to be saying with that metaphor that it is the quality of life among you that makes you good and keeps you good, that allows you to be what you are meant to be and do what you are meant to do.

I think, then, that “have the salt of friendship among yourselves,” is a fair translation. Friends care about friends, friends look out for friends, and it is our acts of generosity, our care for each other, our gestures of friendship, our acts of kindness, that spice up our life together and keep it from spoiling.

On the other hand, suspicion and jealousy, power struggles and dissension, petty rivalries and “putting on airs” ruin a church. Such things kill our witness and make the faith we profess seem bogus and worthless. Such things spoil our life together and make us the cause of other people turning away from faith. And what a travesty that is! Jesus said: “If anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose faith in me, it would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied around the neck and be thrown into the sea.” If you’re the cause of someone losing faith, that’s the better alternative!

Have the salt of friendship among yourselves. It means noticing each other, caring for each other, deferring to each other’s needs and concerns. Noticing, caring, deferring: kindness is very closely related to humility, isn’t it? Kindness begins with humility, with putting someone else’s needs before your own, putting someone else before you, putting yourself last.

Jesus has been talking with his disciples about humility, about self-denial, about giving yourself away. When they were arguing among themselves about who is the greatest, he reminded them that if they truly want to be first they must put themselves last, and that if they want to be truly great, they must be the servants of all.

And then when they voiced their concern about outsiders encroaching on their territory, he told them in essence: “It’s not just about you.”

“But Jesus,” they said, “we told him to stop driving out demons in your name, because he’s not part of our group!”

“Whoever is not against us is for us,” Jesus replied. They may not be part of your group, but they are doing the work of God’s kingdom, too. Humility understands it’s not just about me, and kindness acknowledges the gifts of strangers.

“Anyone who gives you a drink of water because you belong to me will certainly receive a reward.” You must show kindness among yourselves, but you must recognize too the value of the kindness that is shown you, even from unexpected places. The gift of a drink of water, that simple act of kindness, from whoever it comes, is always a sign of the work of God’s Spirit.

So my message to you this morning is simply this: keep up the good work! Your work is good, because it comes from God. Your kindness is a fruit of God’s Spirit. So keep it up! Keep on being kind to each other and keep on being kind to me! Keep on taking good care of each other. Keep on being generous with each other, and be just as generous with those who don’t happen to belong to our group.

In two weeks, after our morning worship service, we will be the first host site for this year’s Church Row Churches Prayer Walk. Music is the theme of this year’s Prayer Walk. People from other Church Row churches will gather in our sanctuary at 12:00 noon and after about twenty minutes of music, we will all cross the street to the sanctuary of Trinity Lutheran Church.

We are making plans for our part of the day. We want the music to be special, to showcase some of our talented musicians and to tell the story of the variety and richness of the musical heritage we enjoy here at First Congregational United Church of Christ. And yet, what will matter most that day will not be how well we sing or play our instruments. What will matter most that day is kindness, the kindness we share not just among ourselves, but with our neighbors too.

It is kindness that matters every day, wherever we may be, not just representing this church, but representing Jesus. Kindness is the sign by which people will see that there is something of God at work in us, and kindness is the sign that may well bring them to want to put their faith in that same God.