

Loving Kindness

February 5, 2017

The passage we heard from the book of the prophet Micah today includes a verse of scripture that I suspect could be our collective favorite as a congregation, “This is what the Lord requires of you: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.” (Micah 6:8) Of these three requirements that the prophet tells us that God has of us – doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God – I think that loving kindness gets short shrift.

I was triaging emails the other day – you know, going through trying to figure out what I’m going to answer and what I even have time to read and what just gets relegated to that unopened place somewhere in the bottom of the basket – and I saw a title of an email from a blog that I subscribe to. The title was “I Think I’ve Figured Out Why Sometimes I Hate People and Maybe How I Can Stop Doing It.” *That* I’ll open. The author starts by describing himself. He wrote:

“I like to think that I am someone who doesn’t judge. That I can always find compassion for anyone, no matter who they are or what they’ve done. That after this 45-year spiritual journey I’ve finally risen to a sort of monk-like zen-like stoicism, that my feathers are un-ruffle-able, that I can keep my head when all about me are losing theirs. That I calmly dwell above the petty human rivalry that plagues the ranks of the less-enlightened.”

In that description, I think the author is like most of us: integrated, mature, having grown beyond the passionate mood swings and lashing out of youth. But then he describes that, somehow, while watching his daughter’s middle school basketball game, his blood began to boil. The integrated, well-adjusted minister turned into Bobby Knight. He says he experienced levels of anger that he didn’t know that he still had. He made sweeping assumptions. He thought evil things about whole groups of people, and he gave himself permission to hate their blasted guts. He didn’t make a scene or anything. He just felt deep levels of private contempt with his whole person. And then he went on to say that’s not something that he does. Or is it?

What the opposing team’s families did isn’t important. What’s interesting here is that I think many, if not most of us, have this happen from time to time. You may be that calm, rational, well-educated woman, but for some reason you go to town on the clerk at the checkout. Sure, she may not be the most competent, but even as you’re taking her to task, inside your chastising yourself for your own behavior. Or maybe you’ve worked hard to create a workplace where people can speak their mind, where everyone’s voices are heard, and yet for some reason, there’s that one person who, whenever they share an idea, you just shut them down. They drive you crazy. Again, you may even realize that you’re doing it, and you may not like that you’re doing it, but you do it. Hopefully, this happens less and less as we do our own psychological and spiritual work. But it happens to most, if not all of us, on occasion.

Bear with me. We’re getting to the kindness part I swear.

Now most of us know enough armchair psychology to understand that often we dislike in others what we most dislike in ourselves, that when we get unusually knotted up over others’ behaviors,

it's often an unconscious reaction to the parts of ourselves that we would not like to see. In other words, if I really hate you it's likely because deep down I'm afraid that I might be like you in that way. I see something in you that I fear might be in myself, something that I've stuffed way down so that I don't have to deal with it. And now here you are flaunting in my face, and I resent you for making me look at it. In other words, when I'm hating on you, I'm most likely unconsciously hating on myself.

The trouble with that, of course, is that when we hate someone for reminding us of ourselves, we're hating both them and ourselves. We're beating up that part of ourselves that is already hiding in a dark corner, ashamed, maybe even terrified. We don't want to see it in others, we don't want others to see it, and we definitely don't want to see it in ourselves.

So this is actually where a lot of hatred begins, a lot of injustice begins, as hatred of self, as a refusal to accept and love the whole self – all of you – even the parts that you think are weak, and flawed, and unpresentable. Which means, then, that the key to compassion for others is learning compassion for yourself. The key to loving others is to first love yourself. The key to becoming nonjudgmental of others is first to figure out how to stop judging yourself. The key to forgiving others is first somehow forgiving yourself.

If you haven't figured it out by now, this is where we get to kindness. When the prophet lists love kindness as one of the three requirements that the Lord has of us, he's being radical. We are to steep ourselves in kindness, in compassion, both toward the other and toward ourselves because being kind is being just, just toward yourself, toward the broken fragile parts of yourself that need healing, toward the brokenness of the other.

Now, there is a difference between being kind and being nice. Nice is not making waves. Nice is saying what you think people want to hear or what is socially acceptable. Nice is small talk. Kind, kind is speaking the truth in love even when it's hard. Kind is being compassionate; that is, sharing in another's passion, sharing in another's sorrow, and grief, and hurt, and pain. Kind is believing in standards and expectations as well as mercy and grace.

In Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, Aibileen Clark shows more kindness and more virtue than one would think is humanly possible when she pauses after she's been fired to tell Mae Mobley one last time: "You is kind, you is smart, you is important." Aibileen could have let go a fire storm, but kindness coursed through her veins, and she was determined that that would be part of Mae Mobley's DNA as well.

It's interesting that the prophet says: "**Do** justice. **Walk** humbly." The prophet gives us two action verbs for the other two requirements, but the word paired with kindness is love. That suggests that love is intended to be an action verb here, too. We are not supposed to simply admire kindness; we are supposed to love it.

Now what do you do when you love something? You spend all of your waking moments engaged in it. You make it the center of your world. You rearrange your whole life around it. You delight in its flourishing. You weep when it's diminished. We are to love kindness,

rearrange our whole lives for it, make it the center of our world, spend all of our waking moments engaged in it.

My grandfather was an architect, and one of the first lessons that I remember learning from him is that the triangle is the most stable shape. The easiest and best way to keep something stable is to make a triangle to support it. So justice, kindness, and humility compose a triangle: three behaviors that are absolutely dependent on one another, that gain their strength and their stability from one another – justice, and kindness, and humility.

What justice really is is kindness and humility with teeth. What humility is is other-focused justice and kindness. What kindness is is that which animates our humility and are justice. So being deeply in love with the well-being of the other means that you work for their well-being from the very core of who you are. That is what our God says is required of us.

Today we lift up the power of kindness, both toward the other and toward ourselves because the prophet understood that the healing of the world, the redeeming of the world depends on it. Friends, love kindness and the rest will follow. Alleluia, and Amen.

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