

“Be more kind.” That, at least, is what the lyrics to Frank Turner’s song, the one that Peter Fox just covered for us, suggest as a plan. What more is there to sing or say? I should be able to pack up the sermon, here, don’t you think, and just leave it at that? “Be more kind.” I mean, kindness is such sweet sentiment, like sugar on strawberries or an ice cream cones dipped in chocolate sprinkles. Kindness rocks.

In fact, I’m so “up,” on kindness, that I think it should become second nature to us, so that we are never satisfied with merely doing random acts of kindness anymore. I’d like to print a bumper sticker that says, “Do habitual acts of kindness!” Enough with scattershot kindness.

Well and kindness is very Biblical, too. “Love kindness,” says the prophet Micah. “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you,” says Paul. Kindness is listed among the fruits of the Spirit. Paul even says, in Colossians, “clothe yourselves with kindness.” And that just scratches the surface.

Almost everyone agrees. Be more kind. Like BC’s Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Greene, said, back on March 17. “This is our time to be kind, to be calm, and to be safe.” Kindness is a COVID-19 meme now.

And yet, if we’re honest, we also know that kindness is not enough, by itself. For example, listen to this little true story from a blog I sometimes read, called “The Mighty.” It is written by Jenn Kearns, who is the mother of a boy with Downs Syndrome.

Two years ago, Kearns wrote that she was noticing that “kindness is the new cool.” It must be, thought Kearns, because even her 11-year-old daughter adopted “kindness is the new cool,” as her motto. Even better, her Downs Syndrome son, Kearns reported, experienced lots of kindness at school. “He receives plenty of high fives in the school hallways, and he hears many enthusiastic “hellos” when he passes a familiar face in the grocery store. He is constantly met with kindness, and for that, we are very grateful.”

But what Alex really wants are friends. Jenn Kearns writes that Alex, “longs for the day when there will be a knock at the front door from one of his friends, asking him to play. He looks forward to the time when he’ll bring home a birthday party invitation. He dreams of having a group of friends that include him because he’s a loyal, fun, genuine kid.”

You see, as good and great as even habitual kindness is, kindness is not enough by itself to make the world everything that we’d like it to be. Personal kindness, in Alex’s case, needs something more that walk-by waves or high-fives just can’t accomplish. Besides experiencing kindness, Alex needs to belong, to be included, to be attached to other people. Alex needs a clique.

The truth is, even though individually we all want more kindness, there are actually many large, communal, society-wide problems which kindness cannot, by itself, fix—never mind Alex’s loneliness.

So, for example, kindness is never going to give us just banking regulations or a merciful prison system. Kindness is not going to get us a COVID-19 vaccine. Creating a vaccine is going to take the best minds working in the world's top labs, with both corporate and government financing, to accomplish.

And kindness is not going to keep our hospitals or nursing homes or grocery stores staffed. That is going to take pay incentives, and courage, and the institution of new precautionary procedures by the government to protect our front-line workers. Of course, we want our front-line workers to be kind, and we need to be kind to them, but it isn't enough, by itself.

That's why Dr. Henry didn't just say, "Be kind." She said, "be kind," and went on to add, "be calm and be safe." Or the prophet Micah . . . he didn't merely say, "be kind," he actually said, "do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." And Paul never says, "be kind" all by its lonesome. No, Paul always included "be kind" in longer lists—be kind, but also cultivate love, joy, peace, patience, generosity and faithfulness—all the fruits of the spirit!

My kindness or yours isn't enough, by itself, to heal the world's ills, whether poverty or discrimination or homelessness or global warming. Some problems require solutions that are larger than what we can accomplish by ourselves. Kindness needs something more, something the Hebrews called "*tsaddiq*," a word we usually translate "righteousness," though Hebrew *tsaddiq* is both deeper and broader than righteousness. Hebrew *tsaddiq* combines righteousness—keeping the law—with justice and a profound and luscious sweetness

According to this definition, then, kindness is to *tsaddiq* what a seed is to a whole field of ripened grain; kindness is to *tsaddiq* what an Eveready battery is to the entire power grid. Kindness is like vaccine; we all need it to stay healthy; but *tsaddiq* is the herd immunity that follows and makes the world safe when we've all received our shots.

*Tsaddiq* is not merely the righteousness that our leaders, our Pharisees and scribes, are able to bring to the table (as in our text); *tsaddiq* is much more than that—it is our collective kindness and righteousness combined, institutionalized, for all.

*Tsaddiq* is—in the words of our text from chapter 6 of Jonathan Sacks' *The Dignity of Difference*—*tsaddiq* is "a social state in which deep poverty and degrading want should be unknown." *Tsaddiq* is a social state—not rooted in individual actions, but in society-wide actions. *Tsaddiq* is systemic kindness flowering in all of society's laws, and institutions, religions and families, in its mores and agriculture and immigration and environmental customs and practices. *Tsaddiq* is a society that works for everyone.

Again, *tsaddiq* is a social state in which deep poverty and degrading want—want for jobs or safety or community or a home—should be unknown. *Tsaddiq* is a society wide safety net for

all. And this is exactly what the ancient Israelite laws found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy envisioned.

Of course, there is a lot in those ancient Israelite laws that we don't we no longer agree with, that we don't like, and that seem to us now to be downright misogynistic. The ancient laws of the Old Testament, after all, were written thousands of years ago in another culture. Since then, there has been an amazing and humane evolution on matters of punishment, sexuality, worship, and legalism.

But our changing opinions about what is right and good ought not blind us to something wonderful that lies at the heart of the Old Testament law. It is *tsaddiq*. It is the ancient Israelites trying to imagine and grasp an ideal society that was fair to all, where black lives mattered, where poverty was defeated, where the rich carried a burden for the poor on their hearts, and where the least and the last counted in the halls of power.

*Tsaddiq* led to all sorts of interesting Old Testament laws. *Tsaddiq* meant that if your family lost its land due to poor harvests or gambling or whatever, your children would get it back in 49 years. *Tsaddiq* involved laws that provided the poor with access to the rich person's harvest. *Tsaddiq* meant that if you were widowed without children, you had the right to marry your husband's brother as a kind of welfare. *Tsaddiq*. It meant that if you were a Jewish slave, you would eventually be freed, that if you had debts they would one day be forgiven, that if you were an orphan you would not starve.

Of course, the laws that ensured such outcomes might seem draconian to us, now. But the aim was perfect—the Israelites wanted a society where individual kindness was a communal, population-wide legal reality, where the social safety net was woven by all and experienced by any who had need of it.

*Tsaddiq*. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes it—more or less—this way: First, “The society the Israelites were to construct would stand as a living contrast to what they experienced in Egypt: poverty, persecution, and enslavement. Their release from bondage was only the first stage on their journey to freedom. The second involved collective responsibility to ensure that no one would be excluded from the shared graciousness of the community and its life.” There would be no Downs Syndrome Eric there who could not find friends to embrace; no homeless camps for the mentally ill who cannot fit in; no need for soup kitchens for those who were hungry.

*Tsaddiq* is kindness not limited by what you or I randomly choose to do; *tsaddiq* is kindness as good for us like a rising gross national product floats all boats; *tsaddiq* is the infrastructure for a truly just and equitable society. *Tsaddiq*, said the rabbis, was a society where even the poor could exercise individual kindness by having the goods, the time, and the security to exercise charity towards those even poorer than they.

*Tsaddiq*. Look, the concept is one that we, as Canadians, even if we don't have a word for it like the ancient Jews did, ought to embrace. In fact, it is one we do embrace, theoretically, with our vision for a social safety net. In our Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms we say, that, "Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination" . . . but furthermore, that this "does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups." *Tsaddiq* is any law or regulation that seeks to do away with any kind of discrimination and that aims to lighten the burdens of the disadvantaged or discriminated against.

Be more kind. That's good. But also *tsaddiq*—systemic kindness, a nation-wide effort to create the conditions where everyone, rather than a few, are privileged.