

November 7, 2021 - 24th Sunday after Pentecost - A Reflection

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

“Kindness” - meeting real needs, in God's way, in His timing (fashion)

“Be kind to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Eph 4:32)

“You've got to try a little kindness: Yes, show a little kindness: Just shine your light for everyone to see: And if you try a little kindness: Then you'll overlook the blindness: Of narrow-minded people on the narrow-minded streets”. (Glen Campbell) Kindness is something that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are meant to offer to the world and to each other. Just like love, kindness comes from a decision more than it does a feeling. We sometimes need to choose to be kind because the situation in which we find ourselves does not lend itself to a feeling of kindness. In his letter to the Christians in Galatia St. Paul describes some qualities that grow out of a heart of faith in Jesus Christ - the fruit of God's Spirit (Gal 5:22). One of these fruits of the Spirit is 'kindness' from a word that refers to 'meeting real needs, in God's way and in God's timing or fashion'. What this says to me is that actions that communicate kindness have the power of God behind them and are able to bring God's blessings into a situation. I find that an awe inspiring and humbling thought. Our daily lives provide ample opportunities to express kindness toward strangers as well as toward people we know well. Whether the kindness is expressed to an overworked store clerk who is not to blame for the long line or a doctor who has the difficult task of delivering some unpleasant news the spiritual benefit will be felt when the kindness is received. Don't we all feel a lift in spirit when kindness is extended to us? This 'kindness' is something that is meant to be growing in all of us who call ourselves Christians and in the story of Ruth we see this fruit demonstrated within the relationships between Ruth and Naomi and later between Ruth and Boaz

The story of Ruth is a story of God's kindness and of the kindness of others. During the course of a famine in the land around Bethlehem families moved from the area of drought to other lands. Bordering on Israel the country of Moab was not experiencing the same sort of drought so even though the nations of Israel and Moab had been at war on many occasions the family of Naomi sought refuge in that foreign land. It would seem they were welcomed because Naomi's two sons married Moabite women. One could suppose that God had a hand in this development as a kindness to the family of Naomi. Sadly tragedy struck that family in that both sons died without children and so Naomi and the two widows sought to survive in difficult circumstances again. The news came to them that Bethlehem was once again a fertile land and so a plan was made for Naomi to return to the land of her birth. Ruth decided to stay with Naomi and so now Ruth was the foreigner as she sought refuge and protection in a strange land. She found a level of acceptance and the expression of kindness in this new land and was allowed to join the custom of harvesting in the fields. With no one to earn money for their household it was necessary for Naomi and Ruth to go into the neighbouring fields to gather grain. It was the custom for the harvesters to leave some stalks standing on the edge of the field for the poor to gather so that they

could have bread. Ruth worked tirelessly alongside the other women of the village who were engaged in the same task and her efforts drew the attention of the land owner, Boaz, who treated her with kindness. The full story of Ruth and Boaz is a story of love and some incredible acts of kindness. Eventually these acts of kindness turned into a desire for a marriage and at the end of the story we learn that an ancestor of King David was actually this Moabite woman who had been welcomed into the ‘fellowship of the saints’. The kindness expressed by Ruth toward Naomi when Ruth decided to accompany her mother-in-law was ‘meeting a real need, in God’s way (sacrifice), and in God’s timing.’ The kindness expressed by Boaz was doing the same thing and is a sign that the fruit of God’s Spirit was growing in these two people from Israel’s past.

Kindness grows from the heart of those who have been transformed by the Holy Spirit. It is like fruit growing out of a good tree and it is meant to be used to meet real needs in the people around us. Just as: love, joy, peace, patience etc are to be growing elements in our lives kindness is also to be growing. Jesus, of course, is example of a person in whom kindness is growing and well used as we see his actions meeting real needs, in God’s way, and in God’s timing. But Jesus also warns of some dangers in the process of being God’s instrument.

The scribes of Jesus day were people with a particular devotion to God’s revealed word and who studied and worked at interpreting the Bible. This was and is important work and in order for them to be able to dedicate themselves fully to the task they were supported by the community and granted some special status. White robes were given in order to mark themselves out as scribes and, sometimes private lodging was arranged. (This practice is akin to the practice of appointing clergy to a parish) It would seem, according to Jesus’ warning, that some scribes loved the trappings of their office and the ‘perks’ that came with it more than they loved the Lord who called them into this work. Like all members of God’s household they were encouraged to allow kindness to grow out of them through their relationship with God but some did not do this. Jesus contrasted the actions of self-absorbed scribes with actions of a God-centered life by warning people of the dangers of ‘scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets’. The kindness of God focuses on meeting real needs, in God’s way, and in God’s timing and God’s way is to deny self and treat others with dignity. The scribes whom Jesus was criticizing were doing the opposite. Jesus was not saying that all scribes were like this but he was warning his disciples to beware of the particular scribes who were not in it for the task of interpreting scripture but for what they could gain from that task for themselves. He was also warning his disciples to be aware of the temptation of falling into the same type of behaviour. You could say the scribes whom Jesus was criticizing weren’t behaving as servants but they were ‘lording it over others the way the Gentiles do’. This was also a warning of the danger of becoming like those scribes when

disciples of Jesus are honoured for something we have done.

God's kindness is expressed in so many ways it is impossible to count them all. Sometimes these acts of kindness are from individuals inspired by God to reach out and sometimes the acts of kindness are part of an institutional response to God's ways. When the nation of Israel was rescued from its bondage in Egypt a system of care was developed to express God's kindness to those who had lost the protection of family. Widows and orphans were to be cared for by the entire community through the work of the Temple. Some of the contributions people made in sacrifice were to be directed toward the care of those who had no one else to care. Kindness: meeting a real need in God's way and with God's timing. This practice continued in some way into Jesus' day and provides a background piece of information for the story of the widow featured in the Gospel passage. Like the scribes the widow was dependant on the generosity of others but her reaction to that reality was very different from the choices some scribes were making. The final part of the drama presented by St. Mark occurs when a poor widow put two small copper coins into the Temple treasury and Jesus interpreted this as an act of great sacrifice which I believe came about through an awareness on her part of the tremendous kindness poured out on her by God through the workers of Temple. She could have easily kept one of the coins for her own purpose but chose to contribute both of them. There was little regard for herself which also displayed a total dependance on God's provision for her needs. The contrast between the scribes who loved their position and the widow who humbly contributes all she had is meant as an illustration to all of us regarding how kindness is to be spread around. The fruit of the Spirit called kindness is meant to meet real needs, in God's way, and in God's timing.

Expressing kindness is one of the ways we can give testimony to our relationship with a loving and caring God. We do so most effectively by growing in our awareness and appreciation of the kindness of God toward us. As we grow in our appreciation for all that God does in our lives we will become more motivated to express the same sort of kindness to others and accept acts of kindness offered to us by others. This can be done even during this time of pandemic through telephone calls, politeness, and sacrificial acts toward those who are being cared for by the entire society. Those who have, for a variety of reasons, lost the protection of family are in need of our kindness. Let us look for ways in the coming week to exercise this Godly kindness in our homes, our neighbourhoods and in our community.

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