

## **DISCOVER THE POWER OF KINDNESS**

### Colossians 3: 12-17

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14 May 2017

There was a lot of serious news this week. Events in Washington have people across the political spectrum worried, and wondering what will happen next. I had a crash course in Hindu extremism which is sweeping India and causing turmoil at the mission hospital we support.

In light of these weighty matters, how should the church respond? You might think that it's time for a fist-pounding sermon about the forces of good and evil. Instead, I've chosen a topic some might consider "soft". Kindness. Does kindness have a place in a world where the threats are so real, the violence so pervasive, the uneasiness so profound? Does kindness have a power? A power that stands up to evil and injustice? Or is kindness just too soft, something that should wait for another day, another gentler time?

Our passage for today suggests to us that kindness is not an option for people who call themselves followers of Jesus. Kindness is something that we wear. Like a uniform - kindness identifies us as people who believe that love is the greatest commandment. Kindness is something we put on. Like armor - kindness doesn't keep us from being hurt, but kindness shields us from being ultimately affected by hurt. Kindness is a way of being. It was the way of Jesus. Kindness doesn't mean wimpy and weak. Whether you call it love or compassion or kindness, it means removing yourself from the center of existence and placing others in that spot. Kindness is related to empathy. Perhaps kindness starts with empathy - with being able to see the world from someone else's point of view.

Think of a relationship you struggle with, a person to whom it is very difficult to be kind. Sometimes it helps to think about why that person acts the way she does. What is in his background that causes him to do or say the things that annoy you?

A place as fraught with violence as the Middle East is experimenting with an exercise in kindness. A group called The Parent's Circle is a grassroots organization for Palestinians and Israelis who have lost loved ones due to the conflict. A colleague of mine was recently visiting Israel and Palestine and attended a meeting of this group. Here's what she witnessed:

"The representatives who spoke to us were two fathers, a Palestinian and an Israeli, who had both lost daughters because of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. We had a very honest discussion about the conflict and about life before and after the Separation Wall. They each went through their own moments of wondering how life could possibly carry on given the death of their children due to such senseless, mindless fighting. They could have chosen revenge to ease their pain but instead realized that the only way forward was to talk to each other.

In each other, they found the way to carry on because, in their words, "our blood is the same color, our tears are just as bitter." They found a way to carry on that chose peace instead of revenge, conversation instead of fear, life instead of death because "it is not our destiny to kill each other in this Holy Land." At stake for both fathers was peace. Simple as that. This is the gospel. This is love."

Is kindness really the wimpy option? Or is it the only option?

Los Angeles has been called the gang capital of the world. In the epicenter of its most gang-riddled neighborhood is a remarkable ministry led by Father Gregory Boyle. First he asked for his first assignment to be in the roughest parish in the diocese. Then he started to see first-hand what gang violence was like. He saw each young person as a person, not as a gang member. He emphatically rejects the notion that there should be lines that separate peo-

ple: us vs. them, gang member vs. non-gang member, the haves and the have-nots. He treated them with dignity and compassion. Then he started a gang intervention and re-entry program, teaching job skills and engaging in small business opportunities with some 10,000 people per year.

He tells the story of a former gang member named Luis, who had been a big-time, very savvy drug dealer. When his daughter was born, he decided he wanted to change his life so he asked for a job at the bakery Boyle runs. One day Boyle looked at Luis and said, "You . . . did . . . this. You've never had a home in your life — now you have one. You did this. You were the biggest drug dealer in town, and you stopped and baked bread instead. You did this. You've never had a father in your life — and now you are one . . . you're great."

Unfortunately, Boyle had to preside at Luis' funeral. He wasn't doing anything wrong on the Wednesday afternoon he was killed. He was loading the trunk of his car, in the projects, readying himself for a camping trip with friends. Two gang members, with their faces covered, entered their "enemy's" territory, looking for an easy target. They saw Luis and must have thought to themselves, He'll do. They walked up to him and executed him.

Boyle was repeatedly asked by Luis' friends during the week that spanned his death and his burial. "What's the point," they'd ask, "of doing good . . . If this can happen to ya?" He says, "It was a good question, worthy of a response. I told that packed church at his funeral that Luis was a human being who came to know the truth about himself and liked what he found there.

Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century female English mystic, saw the life struggle as coming to discover that we are "clothed in God's goodness." This became Luis's life's work. He embraced this goodness — his greatness — and nothing was the same again."

Kindness is changing the world for the better.

Karen Armstrong is a well-known writer and scholar of world religions. She says that religion, at its core, is not so much about belief as about behavior. Religion is about behaving differently. She has written a book called [Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life](#) which we discussed in one of our church book clubs.

She tells a story about the understanding of kindness in the Jewish religion. She says that Rabbi Hillel was asked a hostile question one time, the kind of question Jesus used to face from the Pharisees. Someone who was not Jewish said to him, "Explain the entirety of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, while standing on one foot." Rabbi Hillel was happy to do. Standing on one foot he said to the man, "Don't do anything hateful to another human being. Everything else is just commentary. Now go and learn."

Karen Armstrong may know more about the history of the world's religions than just about anyone else on the planet, and she believes that if we dedicate ourselves to emphasizing and living out the core of our religious beliefs, we will emerge from this hopeless cycle of conflict and intolerance.

It starts with how we behave towards one another, in our families, in our church, in our communities. Believing and living as if kindness can make a difference. Showing forth that kindness into the world. And expecting it of our leaders.

I know it sounds simplistic and naive, but isn't it worth a try?

After another week of so much bad news, let's start this week by listening to the voices of children calling us to kindness.

**VIDEO – "Why Be Kind" played here.**