

THE CHARACTER OF GOD: LOYAL LOVE

Micah 6:8
Ephesians 2:4-10

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How about some good news? One social science researcher says that the untold story of 2021 is that people became kinder. Global rates of helping strangers, volunteering, and giving to charity are nearly 25% above pre-pandemic levels. The dominant response to suffering is not selfishness. It's compassion. The worst of times brings out the best in us.

My own experience validates this statistic. Over the past two years, I have received primarily two kinds of communications from people - first, people asking for help in coping with experiences of anxiety, depression, worry, and fear. And second, people asking HOW they could help others. Every one of our mission appeals was met with success - the food drives, the Christmas mission tree, and now our assistance with Afghan refugees. Every day at least one member of our church is involved with one of the families we are helping.

As we continue our journey through the season of Lent, we are exploring aspects of the character of God as described in Exodus 34. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

The Hebrew word for "steadfast love" or "loyal love" is the word "hesed". Perhaps the best translation of the Hebrew word is the phrase, "loving kindness." The word appears 245 times in the Hebrew Bible - the Old Testament - mostly describing God, but also describing, in aspirational terms, the relationships between people and

the relationship between people and God. We are called to act in loving kindness towards God and towards one another because we have first been loved. Having received God's love, we now are motivated to share loving kindness with one another, and respond to God in that same spirit of love.

One of the most beloved verses in the Old Testament that includes the word, "hesed," is this one - Micah 6:8 — "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

It's a beautiful passage of scripture which inspires us to act in loving merciful ways, just as God has been lovingly merciful to us. But let's face it. Real love in day to day life is hard. It's hard with people we know AND it's challenging to find ways to make a loving difference in the lives of people we don't know.

I am convinced that this is why so many people become complacent and stop focusing on the news altogether. It's overwhelming and depressing to hear about so much suffering and not be able to do much - if anything - about it.

I was out with some friends Thursday evening and the conversation turned to Ukraine, and the fact that nearly 4 million Ukrainian people have now fled their country. One of my friends said, "I have a spare bedroom; I'd like to help." Another friend said, "I have a vacation home; I'd like to help." There are plenty of extra beds and extra bedrooms in this country, and plenty of people striving to live with "hesed", with loving kindness, but the logistics are daunting. Is offering your vacation cottage or your guest room the right thing to do? How would we even accomplish all of that? We will be offered ways to help - I am part of a group learning how Lorain County can extend

hospitality to incoming Ukrainian refugees. And next month I have a meeting with our Mission Team about ways we can share more information about hands-on mission opportunities to our congregation. Showing loving kindness to those in need begins with the heart-felt desire, but it then requires organizational effort and structure, and many people working together.

Acting in loving kindness towards those we **know** can be equally difficult, in different ways. What if you have someone in your circle of family and friends who struggles with addiction? How do you love that person without enabling him or her in their harmful behaviors? It's not easy, even when you're aware of the dangers. The lines aren't clear-cut; there's no alarm bell that rings inside your home or your mind.

How do you love someone in your circle of family and friends when that person holds political views that are diametrically opposed to yours? What if you believe that your loved one's political views are actually dangerous? What if their beliefs rub up against every principle you hold dear?

These are not easy times in which to practice loving kindness, but these **are** times in which loving kindness is what the world **needs**.

It might be easier to develop the loving kindness muscle with people we don't know well. I read last week about a Canadian couple who has an admirable way of celebrating their wedding anniversary every year. They go out to dinner - nothing unusual about that. But as soon as they sit down, they begin to scope out the room, reading the body language of their fellow diners. Once they pick their target, they conspire with the waiter: "See that irritable couple over there, the ones not talking to each other at all? We want to pay for their meal, and this is to be totally anonymous."

The waiter sometimes says, “Do you do this often?” And the couple smiles. “It’s tradition.”

There is something about this type of kindness that reverberates. Not only is it something this couple looks forward to each year, but the waiters get in on it, and hopefully, the people on the receiving end find themselves surprised and delighted. Sometimes we call these “random acts of kindness.” You’ll be in the long drive-through line at Dunkin Donuts, thinking it will never be your turn, and then all of a sudden, you’re at the window, and the worker hands you your coffee and says, “The driver ahead of you paid for yours today.” Paying for someone’s coffee isn’t going to change the world, but it does have a kind of a ripple effect, and a strange magic. It feels good to be kind. Even when it’s done in secret. Even when no one says thank you. Even when it isn’t asked for or expected.

In a world where so many people are hurting, when it’s hard to know what to do to help, when it’s hard to even talk to our own relatives, there’s no such thing as too much random kindness.

We can worry about finding the best, most perfect ways to love, but that fretting will only frustrate us. Instead, we can have our antenna up and be aware of the opportunities around us to show kindness.

Kate Bowler is one of my current favorite authors. She’s a podcaster and a professor at Duke Divinity School, and she is also a wife and mother of a young child, and she is also a woman who is living with cancer. She was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer at age 35, six years ago, when her son was a toddler. She writes this about what it meant for her to be cared for when she was first in the hospital, so frightened

and so sick: “At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They...mirrored back to me the face of Jesus.”

I can tell you from my daily work, from the calls and emails I receive, that your acts of kindness to your fellow church members make a huge difference. When you send cards, deliver meals, pick up the phone, letting people know that you care, even and sometimes especially if you're not personally acquainted, it reminds people that God's love is real.

And it is love that has the power to create a new reality and a new narrative, to counteract the messages we hear all around us, messages that we know are damaging, but messages which are so pervasive we feel helpless in their power. Father Richard Rohr says it like this, “At this point, at least in the United States, it appears that our cultural meaning has pretty much shrunk down to this: It is all about winning. Then, once you win, it becomes all about consuming. That worldview cannot feed the soul very well or very long, much less provide meaning and encouragement, or engender love or community.”

This <https://images.app.goo.gl/FBuU7V3FumrsWm3cA> is actor Andrew Garfield, best known for his roles in *Spider Man* and *The Social Network*. He's been nominated for many acting awards both on stage and screen. He recently gave an interview in which he was asked to comment on the values he sees dominating our culture today. He said that our culture seems to celebrate immaturity, financial greed, power and

status. "I see people making decisions that may be great for their bank accounts, but their inner lives are suffering. We've forgotten how to make deep and meaningful connections with each other." He goes on to talk about what he learned from his mother, who died of pancreatic cancer a few years ago. "She was not a person with a big ego. She was just a person who wanted to serve others. She knew that life was short and uncertain and precious. She used to say, 'We are the actions and the kindnesses that we leave behind.' So she is still here. Her kindness lives in me and in my brother and my father and others she influenced. And I'm so grateful for it."

Our passage from Ephesians says that "God, rich in mercy and loving us so much, has brought us to life in Christ. How immense are the resources of God's grace and kindness. We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to do the good things God created us to do from the beginning."

God loves us by turning our mistakes into grace, by constantly giving us back to ourselves in a larger shape. God stands with us, and not against us, when we are tempted to shame or self-hatred.

Love is a flow of energy, willingly allowed and exchanges, without requiring payment in return.

When we are truly tapped into the source of loving kindness, we move out of our small, individual selves to unite with one another - in companionship, friendship, marriage, or any other kind of trustful relationship.

An eagerness and readiness to love is the ultimate freedom and future. It's impossible to imagine a larger and more spacious way to live. The Crucified and Risen Christ uses the mistakes of the past to create a positive future, a future of redemption

instead of retribution. God uses everything for transformative purposes. People who are formed and transformed by loving kindness are people who experience the deepest joy, the highest meaning. Thanks be to God.